A Question for Our Recent PhD Alums: How did you adapt to teaching remotely this semester?

Ndifreke Ette (2018)

Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science
Amherst College

My fall semester was a success. That is, when compared to spring. The switch to an online, hybrid mode in March caught me, and everyone else, by surprise. One week a classroom; the next week, Zoom. It was an untenable situation and I did a poor job.

Amherst College prepared faculty to do a better job for the fall. Faculty attended a comprehensive one-month crash course on online pedagogy. Beyond the bells and whistles, I found the most useful lesson to be the simplest: Classrooms and the Internet are different environments. Thus, it is foolhardy to demand similar results, whether with regard to student expectations, teaching objectives or assessments. The medium transforms the delivery of information. The most significant change to my teaching is class discussions. Lectures are now considerably shorter. When students read the assigned materials, generating conversation about significant concepts becomes easy. Occasionally, I step in to return discussions to pertinent ideas that may go overlooked. However, I miss analyzing texts with students in real-time. When the laptop screens used for Zooming are simultaneously used for reading—most students don't have printers at home—my technique became inefficient.

Thankfully, there is always a new semester to work on that.

Kenicia Wright (2018)

Assistant Professor, School of Politics, Security, and International Affairs
University of Central Florida

Both of my courses are online this semester; I’ve missed seeing students for lectures and learning more about them during my office hours. The parking at UCF is almost as stressful as UH, so not having to deal with that has been great. There have been two major benefits to transitioning to Zoom: (1) I’ve updated the decorating of the walls in my place, so no one worries if I’m in a holding cell and (2) Purchased new shirts - especially those that pair with pajama pants! :)

Matthew Ward (2018)

Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science
University of Louisiana

I have had the great fortune of being able to teach my three courses fully online this semester and in the spring. I have been very lenient about due dates and makeup work, as long as students alert me to the completed back-work. We’ve also had a number of hurricanes in Louisiana, which has added to the student stress and inability to complete work on time. Hopefully things will be back to normal more or less by the fall semester of 2021.
GRADUATE STUDENT NEWS

Phillip Pinell (BA/MA Program, 2020) began his PhD in Political Science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in Fall 2020.

Douglas Van (MA, 2020) began his PhD in Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley in Fall 2020.

Daniella Mascarenhas (PhD 2018) began as Assistant Professor of Political Science at Xavier University of Louisiana in Fall 2020.

Ndifreke Ette (PhD 2018) began as Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science at Amherst College in Fall 2020.

GRADUATE PLACEMENTS

I think Zoom has been extremely useful for online delivery while traditional classroom experiences are not available. But, I definitely miss the in-class interactions and more dynamic discussions that come with face-to-face delivery. Reading non-verbal cues is extremely hard on Zoom, especially when cameras are muted. I rely a lot on nonverbal communication and responses to gauge understanding and reactions when something is said. I hope that the new normal for higher education includes a return to traditional course delivery.

*Congratulations to Robert on recently getting tenure!

**Markie McBrayer (2017)**
Assistant Professor of Political Science University of Idaho

We as educators are all trying to adapt to online learning, but online platforms also need to adapt to us. There have been some serious shortcomings in platforms and technology. For instance, in HyFlex, even in the best circumstances, the students who are participating online oftentimes can’t hear the in-person students, and it’s very difficult to be engaged with both the Zoom and in-person students at the same time. As professors and educators, we are all used to learning and experimenting with what works and what doesn’t with teaching. Sometimes a class or lesson falls flat, and you reflect on and learn how you might be able to alter that moving forward. But this year really puts our ability to respond and adapt to the test because we’re oftentimes having to deliver in multiple novel modalities. I’ve taught a 4-4 before, and the 2-2 this year is far more time consuming on our end when delivering a quality and consistent class in three different formats.

**Robert Ross (2013)**
Associate Professor of Political Science
and Director of Graduate Studies Utah State University

As a newly hired professor in a department with less than 100 majors, there is already a strong expectation to build mentorship/advisor relationships with students. This expectation was especially apparent this semester when faculty across the nation were instructed to exhibit a higher level of care for students’ well-being. Achieving this level of care was complicated in many ways. Online classes force us into an unnatural rhythm of discussion. Even in-person classes create face blindness since we all wear masks and socially distance in auditorium-sized classrooms. To try and mitigate this, I spend 2 minutes at the top of class (online and in-person) asking students to share positive things in their lives. It can be as big as a new internship or as small as a TV show recommendation. These little moments of brightness help build student-to-student relationships and professor-to-student relationships which is vital during this semester when many feel isolated.
This year political science senior Wasiq Javed was only one of 20 undergraduates in the country to win Phi Beta Kappa’s new award, the Key into Public Service. Phi Beta Kappa, the nation’s oldest academic honors society, recognizes select undergraduates for exceptional public service and provides them with a $5000 scholarship and “training, mentoring, and reflection on pathways into active citizenship in the tradition of Phi Beta Kappa’s founders.”

Javed has indeed done a tremendous amount of public service already. He was a member of the Mayor’s Commission Against Gun Violence and was an intern with Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, Council on American-Islamic Relations, Raj Salhotra Campaign for Houston City Council, and Battleground Texas. He is active in UH student government, and has done extensive organizing in his local community. He delivers sermons in the Houston Muslim community, and is passionate about increasing civic involvement in the Muslim community.

Mr. Javed is also talented academically, having won several awards, including the U.S. State Department Critical Language Scholarship, which he used to study Urdu abroad in Lucknow, India. He was selected as a 2021 Hobby Fellow, so he will intern in the Texas Capitol during the upcoming legislative session. He plans to pursue a JD degree and concentrate in civil rights law to prepare him for a career as a public interest lawyer in advocating for and mobilizing marginalized populations.

His political science major has helped him achieve success. As he puts it, “I believe my Political Science classes helped solidify my foundation in learning about the history and development of political systems and thought both in the U.S. and abroad. This combined with a practical application of modern theories and service-learning opportunities have allowed me to have a holistic understanding of my generation’s role in public service, civic engagement, and politics today.”
The Summer Workshop on Applying to Graduate School (SWAGS) finished its 4th year by going virtual. Professor Elizabeth Simas met with five of our best undergraduate students to mentor them on how to polish their applications for graduate school. Professor Simas described the process of going virtual: “It was more challenging to switch to an online format. When we have done this in person, it’s very question-driven. But online, I think students were more hesitant to speak up. I think there’s something about the face to face environment that makes people more comfortable and builds more of a sense of cohort. Online, I think they were more worried about asking the silly question or something that they “should” know. But overall, I think it went well and we hopefully helped these students.”

All five students completed the workshop, and will receive a scholarship to help offset the costs of applying. Congratulations to Salomon Huerta, Forum Shelat, Nickolas Rios, Maurice Straub, and Patrick Etcheverry.

Taylor Hall, a senior majoring in Political Science, has won the Peek Family Scholarship for this academic year. The Scholarship, supported by alums Kathryn and Howard Peek, honors stellar undergraduate academic achievement, especially in Political Science. Ms. Hall, currently earning a 4.0 GPA in her major, is “one of the most promising undergraduate students I had the chance to work with,” says Alin Fumurescu, who wrote her recommendation letter. Because of Ms. Hall’s exemplary performance in Professor Fumurescu’s Introduction to Political Theory course, he invited her to join his graduate class on Modern Political Thought. He writes, “As an undergraduate student, being “thrown” in the midst of graduate students, while required to perform all the tasks as well as them, might be a frightening prospect. Nevertheless, I am happy to report that Taylor not only did raise to the challenge, but surpassed my expectations. Her overall performance was not just at a pair with that of her fellow graduate students, but in many cases significantly better.”

Ms. Hall aims first to become a human rights lawyer and then to pursue a career in politics. As a lawyer, she hopes to better the lives of those seeking justice and help. She has a passion to protect and assist victims of human and sex trafficking, and would like to provide justice for these victims. Later in her career, she intends to run for Senate and to represent the state of Texas. Her overall interest is to advocate for causes concerning immigration, public health, education, and disaster relief.

Her political science education has helped her along the way. As she puts it, “what I find most fulfilling studying Political Science at UH is that I have learned how to think, not what to think. The courses I have taken have developed my ability to think critically about what I study and the world I live in. In consequence, my understanding of the role of government can go beyond my limited perspective.”
Professor Jason Casellas has been elected by unanimous vote to preside over the Western Political Science Association (WPSA). He will serve as Vice-President in 2022-2023, and then President 2023-2024. Founded in 1948, the WPSA is an association of more than 1250 political scientists.

Professor Casellas is also active in his service to the community. In July, he co-authored a report USC Schwarzenegger Institute on the California Redistricting Commission. The report evaluated the diversity of the 2020 Redistricting Commission, and made several recommendations on how future commissions can increase racial and ethnic diversity. That report can be found here.

Professor Zachary Zwald Wins Bernard Brodie Prize

NTT Instructional Assistant Professor Zachary Zwald has won the Bernard Brodie Prize for his co-authored article “Why Language Matters: Shaping Public Risk Tolerance During Deterrence Crises,” published in the journal Contemporary Security Policy. The prize is given annually to the most outstanding article published by this journal. Professor Zwald’s article argues that the public’s tolerance for risk during a conflict is not stable over time but depends on how the risks are framed by elites.

Associate Professor Patrick Shea has just had a co-authored paper accepted at one of the top three Political Science journals, the Journal of Politics. His article, “U.S. Patronage, State Capacity, and Civil Conflict,” argues that external support from the U.S. can help countries build state power, thereby alleviating grievances against the state or deterring rebels from mounting a military challenge.

Associate Professor Elizabeth Simas and Assistant Professor Alex Badas co-authored a post that appeared on the Monkey Cage, a Political Science blog published by the Washington Post. In their post, they argue that voters punish their Senators if their Senators do not vote to confirm their preferred Supreme Court nominee. The article was published during the Amy Coney Barrett hearings. Their article can be found here.
DEPARTMENT EVENTS

This Fall, the department’s regular brownbag series went virtual. Associate Professor Niki Marinov chaired a committee that lined up a series of research talks nearly every Wednesday of the semester. Even though the department faculty and graduate students could not meet in person, we were able to make use of Zoom to connect with one another and continue to discuss research.

Political Science teamed up with Hobby for a webinar after the election on “the perils and possibilities” of polling. It drew on faculty at UH as well as noted scholar Andrew Gelman and polling expert Natalie Jackson.

Associate Professor Jeronimo Cortina and Professor Brandon Rottinghaus discussed the 2020 election in a well-attended webinar, co-sponsored by the UH Alumni Association and Houston Public Media. The event was recorded and can be found here.

ALUMNI: Please send us updates about notable things in your career and life! We will include them in the newsletter.