The Role That Universities Can Play in Political Education

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The creation of a formal curriculum in politics, taught at a university and leading to a degree, can be the subject of some considerable controversy. In the united states, a number of prominent individuals have been dubious about the creation of a professional school of politics. For example, Bill Clinton's close personal adviser, George Stephanopolus, has been quoted as saying that you can't teach politics in a classroom.

That was before he joined the faculty of Columbia University to teach politics.

At the other end of a spectrum, academics have sometimes disparaged the applied curriculum as less respectable than scholarship aimed at theory-building. In the United States, political science has become increasingly abstract and theory oriented over the past three decades and a curriculum of practical politics seems a step backward to those pushing this trend.

Finally, any number of journalists have criticized the idea of a school devoted to training more spin doctors, media manipulators and opinion chasers. Hostility to politics and politicians translates into disdain for the process of educating more of the same.

Nonetheless, despite all the criticism, over the last 15 years, the Graduate School of Political Management has grown and prospered, students have come in increasing numbers, been educated, and moved on as alumni into promising and productive careers. And, we believe, they are practicing politics with greater skill earlier in their careers and with a more enhanced sense of ethics in their work.

The School was founded in the belief that democratic politics have changed greatly in the last thirty years, becoming ever more specialized and ever more dominated by technical knowledge and expertise. The "new politics" is increasingly reliant upon television, computers, telecommunications, management, legal regulations, and statistical research skills.

While these developments may be more observable in the United States, I think it is possible to observe the technologies of communication changing politics in many areas of the world. To mention examples of which you are well aware, both the British labor party and the

German Social Democrats have patterned their election strategies, their techniques and messages after Bill Clinton's victories.

And, as Profess Fritz Plasser has documented in his research, American political consultants frequently work overseas and have stimulated the development of home grown political consultants in many countries. I trust that many of you also are aware that in two weeks, the International Association of Political Consultants (IAP) will meet in Prague.

Stepping back from this development, let me reflect on why and how this trends is proceeding. In many areas of politics — in lobbying, campaigning, and issues management — the old personalistic networks of yesterday are being supplemented by technical means of building support, means that can be taught and learned. The skills and power of yesterday's politicians were rooted in a elaborate network of individual contacts. While "people skills" are still tremendously important in political life, one is struck by how different is today's politics. Contemporary politicians build their support, constituencies and power through adroit use of cable television, focus group research, video and audiotapes, computer-driven mail lists, Internet websites, e-mail programs, and fundraising. They maneuver in a world in which congressional legislation is influenced as much by public opinion polls and 30 second advocacy ads, as by the schmoozing and backslapping of lobbyists in the capitol corridors.

It is clear that the changes discussed above have produced the **commercialization of politics**. As technical knowledge breeds specialization, and specialized knowledge generates proprietary expertise, individuals and companies are able to charge for their services. And in some case, charge a great deal of money. As the governor of a province in Spain recently said to one of our alums who advised his successful re-election campaign, "I'm really not sure what it is that you do, but it seems to work!"

As a result, we have seen a resulting proliferation of political consultants. Although some in academia and journalism may bemoan this trend, it is, nonetheless, irreversible. An inescapable fact of modern political life is that success in politics, and even access to those in power, now depends increasingly on the acquisition of the expertise taught at such places as the GSPM.

I will return to this point about the merits of this development at a later point, but, for the moment, let me pursue this argument without considering the positive and negative aspects of this change.

The heart of the matter before us today is to consider the role that universities can play in training young people for careers in politics. In addition we want to debate, how does their role may differ from that played by parties and other organizations that conduct training programs in campaign management? I will suggest five answers.

First, degree programs afford an opportunity to learn comprehensively. I believe that a university education can magnify practical experience because of the breath of exposure that one can acquire through study. In one year, our students learn how to read and use poll data;

How to create, film and edit tv ads; How to set up a field organization to contact voters; How to design an effective website and email campaign; How to develop and use a political database; How to raise money; How to manage people in the hectic environment of an election campaign; and so on.

It would take a number of years working in a variety of positions to learn all of these things, particularly as one tends to specialize in the same area. So, in addition to bringing our students to the forefront of these expanding areas of expertise, the curriculum allows them to become informed consumers across a whole range of applications that are effective and indeed necessary. Since the skills and techniques used in politics all tend to reinforce each other, I am a strong believer in the value of breadth that learning politics at a university allows. Many of our alumni will never become pollsters but they do know what to expect from a pollster and how to differentiate a good question from a poor one.

The faculty at my school does not think that the degree program is a substitute for practical experience in the field. Rather we believe that <u>both</u> are necessary for a successful career in politics. Field experience is essential to insure that a sense of practical reality gives meaning to the lessons we teach. Experience also adds judgment and perspective to the application of proficiencies learned in theory. On the other hand, we have found that studying politics systematically in a university setting can accelerate the gains of experience. Our students and alumni move up the ladder of success <u>more rapidly</u> than they would without this education.

A second important and fortunate benefit of creating a formal curriculum in politics and of offering a university degree is that – in contrast to the way that personal politics inherently excludes – a curriculum in politics can be broadly shared. At the GSPM this year, more than half of our students are women. We have in addition a strong group of students from minority groups and an increasing flow of applicants from the world's emerging democracies, including many from Latin America.

We view the expanding access to political proficiencies by these groups as a major benefit of the social role that professional schools can play.

A third strength of formal political education is the importance of separating knowledge about how politics works, from partisan preferences as to the outcomes of politics. I have to be careful here because I happen believe that, ultimately, ideas are more powerful than techniques. Partisan politics and strong advocacy of policy preferences matter greatly to the workings of democracy.

But, highly charged partisanship and increased skill in message development can become intoxicating, leading practitioners to believe that, if they advance rhetoric skillfully, loudly and repeatedly, they can create reality. The antidote to this tendency is found in direct contact with peers and faculty who hold opposing views.

It is equally true that partisan politics often distorts one's thinking as to how the political system **should** function, and that leads to the temptation to change the political institutions in an effort to achieve partisan goals. However, such efforts to change (or distort) the political process in order to predetermine policy outcomes only serves to de-legitimize political institutions and weaken democracy.

Rather, I suggest that learning political skills in a university setting allows sharing of knowledge across party lines, facilitates respect and cordiality between those who disagree politically, and creates a greater sense of professionalism among those who work in politics. We have seen numerous examples in which students who will spend their professional lives working against each other have become close personal friends during their time at the school. And, these friendships persist after they leave and serve to strengthen a feeling of professional community

that transcends partisan differences.

I should also admit frankly that here is an area in which a school of politics cannot fulfill all the needs of training young people in politics. I firmly believe that to be successful young leaders need to have a strong sense of purpose. They need to know **why** they are working in politics. But, at the GSPM, partisan ideas divide us, while the study of the political process unites us. Therefore, we tend to concentrate on the latter and ignore the former. We have yet to solve the problem of how to think through, discuss and teach the ideas and ideologies that drive politics.

On the other hand, universities can play a role to the degree they emphasize an **analysis** of why political techniques work. This is **my 4th argument** on behalf of political education. Because in a year of study we can cover subjects in great depth, our students learn more than what was done in a given situation. As faculty, we hope that they can do more than merely copy what they have observed others doing. We want them to know <u>why</u> things are done one way and not another. We want them to be able to analyze situations so that they will be able to innovate as well as replicate. When conditions change, we hope that they have learned the reasons behind the use of different techniques, so they will be better able to adapt to change.

Fifth, finally and most importantly, we believe that a university education can give greater attention to the teaching of ethics and professional responsibilities that go along with the use of political skills. As noted above, politics in the united states has become more commercialized in the last two decades. Many consider this to be a dangerous trend. Too often short term calculations of victory drive out longer term considerations of the health of democratic institutions. One antidote to lessen the worst aspects of this change would be to create a sense of professionalism among the practitioners of the new politics. Professionalism should marry responsibility to influence and behavior.

A profession in politics does not have to mean a tightly closed guild of licensed practitioners, as in lawyers or doctors. Rather a profession can be open-ended but based upon a community that shares norms and a set of ethical propositions and responsibilities. These norms provide boundaries for the applications of political skills and a sense of propriety within which the technologies of politics can be applied.

Through self-examination and debate, our students and alumni and, hopefully, political consultants will eventually come to see themselves as managers of democratic practices with obligations that transcend their duties to their clients. Though some may scoff at the naivete of this suggestion, in fact standards have already begun to emerge in the polling end of the business where norms of public disclosure have been accepted and where practitioners have advanced a strong stand against so-called "push polling."

How can we make our politics more ethical? The question has become increasingly important to Americans as larger and larger percentages of us have come to accept a wholly cynical view of our politics. Many of our citizens – far too many – now view contemporary politicians as both corrupt and fundamentally self-serving, laboring only on behalf of the wealthy and organized interests, engaging in synthetic rhetoric that is manufactured solely for the purpose of preserving their own power and perks of office, and, once in office, altogether too willing to sacrifice commitments made during the campaign in order to earn votes.

Many of the alienated would agree with Sir Winston Churchill that "Democracy is the

worst form of government, except for all the rest." Yet, we must also recognize that the gap between theory and practice looms larger and larger to more and more citizens. Certainly, most American hold that, in theory, democracy constitutes the only rightful means of government. But, so many American now believe that the actual practice of politics has become an abomination as to be reminiscent of the popular attitudes in the soviet union just before the fall of collapse of the regimes to the east.   If our political system is in severe trouble, what can be done about it?

Seen from the other side, those who work in politics today perceive the popular view as wildly inaccurate and unrealistic. In the first place, they argue that modern disdain is not all that unique, politics has always been thus. Certainly evidence abounds that the American democracy has been filled with vitriol, distortion, and self-interest. In fact, at its inception in Philadelphia in 1787, a cynical view of "political man" led the founders to enshrine in our governmental machinery an overlapping and extensive sharing of powers, precisely because they worried about the tendency for ambition to drive out propriety, prudence and responsibility. By this view, our political view is churning along as planned, perhaps not as it *ought to be,* but as it *must*. What has changed is that, since the mid-1970's, a post-Watergate cynicism has pervaded news coverage of politics, spreading a popular disdain to the citizenry.

It can also be cogently argued that the modern era has been markedly transformed not so much by changes in political man but because of the rise of communications technologies. Many observers may bemoan this trend; yearning for a return to simpler times when networks of personal contacts produced a politics that was, supposedly, more vital and less subject to manipulation. Our idealism about the past should not, however, blind us to the fact that politics based on direct, person engagement also produced the urban machines with their rampant corruption of the public purse and their imperviousness to challenge.

Moreover, even if we dismiss the pathology off strong party politics by noting that all systems have some shortcomings, a simple fact of contemporary politics life is that the trends toward a politics mediated by communications technology is irreversible. We had better learn how to conduct a genuine politics of civil debate, educative advocacy, responsible choice, and accountability within the confines of communications technology.

The caustic cynicism of journalists has not worked to keep politicians in line. Those in politics have learned that they can largely ignore media criticism precisely because it has become so omnipresent and knee-jerk, and because the public has become almost as unhappy with the press as it is with the politicians.

We should also recognize that American citizens do not wholly fulfill their part of the bargain. As is widely lamented, rates of knowledge about and interest in public life are low; all measures of participation are far below what one would hope for a robust democracy. Even so, casting blame on citizens is relatively fruitless. Clearly we would all prefer a citizenry that is interested, engaged, rational, and demanding. The fact that we fall so short of the ideal of democratic citizenship, however, will remain just that: a fact.

We need to think, therefore, about leveraging political leadership into behaving more appropriately.

Abstractly, we can think in terms of a progression of measures from mild up to strong means, means that might serve to move toward this end.

Mild forms of reform would rely upon candidates and their consultants to establish for

themselves the bounds of propriety which should circumscribe their conduct. There are, in fact, some efforts to achieve self-regulation by those involved professionally in politics. Some candidates have signed agreements with their opponents not to spend more than an agreed figure; other have pledged publicly to keep their rhetoric and campaign commercials within specified bounds.

The American Association of Political Consultants has adopted a code of ethics that all members sign, but the code has been invoked only in a very few instances. But they did recent expel one of their members for unethical conduct.

Stronger actions would include efforts to certify political consultants on the basis of knowledge and appropriate behavior. Acceptance of a code of conduct and continuing education would be necessary to maintain certification. Cases of inappropriate conduct would be sanctionable by the loss of certification. Peer review would lead to a growing body of precedent, slowly elaborating a sense of ethical behavior as defined collectively by political consultants.

Licensing would constitute an even tougher form of regulation. An agency designated by the government would determine who could provide consulting services to candidates for public office. Presumably, adherence to a code of conduct would be essential to preserving one's license, and such requirements would constrain behavior more vigorously than self-policing by the industry itself.

There are, of course, some major problems with these approaches.

The dividing line between the content of speech and the conduct of one engaged in political advocacy is exceedingly difficult to draw. That should make us concerns that licencing or registration would serve to curtail free speech. If speech is constitutionally protected anywhere, surely politics lies at the heart of the matter.

Secondly, the experience of the U.S. government agency that regulates campaign finance, the Federal Election Commission, should give pause to anyone who believes that government agencies can effectively regulate political life. The congress has been exceedingly cautious in granting authority over the conduct of elections to a government agency. Specifically, the Commission is evenly divided along partisan lines, which has significantly weakened effective action. Especially in instances which carry significant implications for one or both of the two major political parties.

A third reason why the stronger versions of enforcement might be less successful is that codifying moral or ethical principles can be very tricky. Laws, regulations and codes reach only to the level of behavior, yet our real objective should be to hold those in politics to higher standards; we want them to behave with prudence and judgment.

Again, our experience with campaign finance regulations provides a useful example. For many of those engaged in campaign politics, the laws that were passed since 1974 were viewed mostly as inconveniences that could be eroded and by-passed by having smart lawyers perpetually raise tough legal questions that gradually expanded the margins of permissible behavior.

It is a particularly American response to respond to problems by passing laws. For many, the instinctive reaction is to try to legislate ethical behavior. Actually, we have tried this approach for at least 120 years – that is since the passage of the Pendleton Act of civil service reform – Congress has endeavored to regulate political activity, providing civil service protections and conflict of interest statutes that apply to both elected and appointed officials of the executive

branch. There are also laws that regulate the interaction between lobbyists, on the one hand, and members of congress and their staff on the other; legislation that specifies the legitimate bounds of political activity of tax exempt organizations; laws which circumscribe the efforts of foreign interests to influence our political decision making; provisions of the broadcast law that determine the ground rules under which candidates for federal office can access the airwaves; and the voting rights act which defines the limits of state election law in certain jurisdiction. All of these fit under a broad definition of efforts to define ethics in politics through legislation.

Any objective analysis would have to conclude that this approach has achieved mixed results at best. But perhaps the more significant conclusion is that these laws do not reach to the significant dimension of personal comportment that we mean when we speak of ethics. We want public servants – candidates, their advisors and staff, interest group representatives, government officials and all those in the fight over public policy to know the difference between right and wrong, not just between legal and illegal. In addition to instituting a system of laws, our need is to create a **culture of politics** that will lead politicians to self-enforcement of moral codes rather than grudging acceptance or subtle sabotage of laws regulating their conduct.

The attack must be made by giving those who enter public life an appreciation of their professional responsibilities to preserve and defend democratic principles. That is a role for a long term strategy of political education.

All academic institutions have a dual mission: they teach tomorrow's leaders and they generate knowledge. To these tasks, professional schools add a third: an obligation to engage the related profession in a critical examination of its values, mores, and consequences. The GSPM attempts to stimulate self-examination within the profession of politics by advancing knowledge in the field, lauding appropriate professional conduct, encouraging the discussion of ethics and the development of professional standards, and striving to advance societal imperatives over the narrower agendas of individual practitioners.

Of course, recognition and acceptance of a set of professional responsibilities in politics will take decades to achieve. My own belief is that, when it comes to engaging those already practicing politics, we should move slowly. Instead of tackling the most delicate and complicated topics of professional ethics, those in politics should begin by discussing more mundane business practices. Not only do these go to the heart of commercialization, but also it is very likely that their business practices are more routine and less fraught with grand issues of public morality. The progress and confidence achieved in that limited sphere might then translate to a willingness to address larger questions.

In any case, the existence of schools educating the next generation of politicians has the prospect of nurturing and teaching more than "on-the-job" skills. Formal teaching inherently subjects an area of human activity to broader debate than does the unquestioning mentorship implicit in the old boy network. If there is a central justification for the ivory tower, it should at least be that we provide a haven for those political professionals – budding and fully formed – to think about the obligations, principles and balancing tests that ought to constrain the exercise of the technologies and skills we teach. In creating a new field of study, we hope to establish the foundation for long-term solutions to the problems of American democracy. As we see it, a major question is whether commercialization can be replaced by professionalization.