

**POLITICAL SCIENCE AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA,
PAST AND PRESENT**

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During the past twenty-five years, the University of Central Oklahoma has experienced tremendous growth in the diversity and size of its student population. With these developments have come significant challenges, none greater than the demands brought on by UCO's transformation from a "Normal" school, to a "University", with five colleges and a mission spanning the local-global continuum. The changes in the Political Science Department over this time have responded to these demographic and institutional dynamics

Twenty-five years ago, the Political Science Department at UCO had recently emerged as a self-standing academic department, from what had been a Division of Social Sciences. Its teaching energies were primarily focused on subjects closely associated with American political behavior and public law. Its faculty was of varied credentials, some possessing Masters degrees, some JDs, and some with PhDs in either political science or history. The primary mission of the department was clearly understood to be teaching, with little emphasis on, or support for, research. Gradually, during the 1970s, the department began to expand its course offerings to encompass the other sub-fields of the discipline, notably international and comparative politics.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the department began to experience the foreseeable turnover of its tenured faculty. This "new blood" began to change the character of the department in a number of significant ways. First, they all held PhDs in Political Science, representing the commitment the department made to becoming more professionally oriented to the discipline of political science. Secondly, these new hires brought to the department greater diversity of educational backgrounds and experiences. Rather than the regional credentials of our recently retired colleagues, incoming faculty brought with them degrees from Virginia, Purdue, Washington, Missouri, Maryland, Cornell, Ohio State, and Cincinnati. Not to slight our only in-state PhD granting institution, our most recent hire hails from the University of Oklahoma. The third recent development has been the increased research activity of our faculty. Our faculty has authored several books and journal articles, and presented numerous papers at state, regional, national, and international conferences within the past ten years. These activities have helped to solidify the professional reputation of our faculty, not only in our discipline, but also more broadly within the larger academic community.

Reflecting these changes, the department revised its undergraduate curriculum in the mid-1990s to correspond more closely with the traditional sub-fields of the discipline. Enrollment in the B.A. major has fluctuated between one fifty and two hundred, with the majority of our majors choosing either pre-law or international relations.

Our M.A. program, the largest in the state granting a Master of Arts in Political Science, has experienced stable enrollments. Most of the students in this program select the International Affairs option as their primary field of study, while our recently revised Public Affairs option is experiencing renewed interest. Graduates of our Masters program have gone on to other careers, such as law, major positions in Oklahoma State Government, the private sector, and the military. Some have gone on to pursue PhDs in Political Science (at Denver, OU, Texas, Texas A&M, and Georgetown), and one student recently was elected to the Oklahoma State Legislature.

The department today remains dedicated to the mission of teaching. With strong administrative support, the department continues a commitment to maintaining small classes, and to assigning its entire faculty to teaching lower as well as upper division courses. Our instructional efforts in American National Government have

reemphasized our commitment to improving its civic education objective, paralleling our redirection towards assisting the service-learning component of the institutional mission. An example of our efforts in this area is the recent establishment of the Reherman Internship Program, a joint effort with the City of Edmond honoring Carl Reherman, a long time member of our department who also served for twelve years as the Major of Edmond. We have also, where appropriate, integrated information technologies into the instructional effort, and have redoubled our commitment to writing across our entire curriculum. In the final analysis, the efforts of the department remain committed to assisting our students in developing their critical thinking and communication skills, and preparing them to become contributing citizens in our democracy.

Back in 1998, the department took on the responsibility of becoming the host institution for the Oklahoma Political Science Association. Members of our department are actively engaged in editing the OPSA journal, *Oklahoma Politics*, maintaining its web-site, and supporting its yearly membership efforts. This is a responsibility we welcome, and which has complemented our efforts to promote the Oklahoma League of Political Scientists, and the Oklahoma Policy Research Center and its journal, *Oklahoma Policy Studies Review*, both joint efforts with UCO's Department of Economics.

Like many of the other regional institutions in the state that have undergone these transformations, UCO remains, above all, a gateway to higher education for many Oklahomans. Unlike the two comprehensive universities in our state, UCO serves a much more diverse, and challenging, undergraduate student body. Our "average" undergraduate student is not average. He/she tends to be older than the traditional student, is less prepared for university coursework, and may contend with the concurrent pressures of work and family. One of the other, less well-known, features of our diversity is the large number of foreign students studying at UCO. The number of foreign students enrolled at UCO places it in the top ten of foreign student populations in the United States, in terms of their percentage of the total student body. These factors place a premium on devoting our energies and resources to the teaching effort. This is a mission we knowingly and gladly accept.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not mention the inadequate support our institution, in particular, receives from our state government. Even though UCO's position in the educational architecture of Oklahoma

is unique, its per capita support ranks at the lower end of the scale. This lack of funding has hindered the ability of the department to implement its strategic plan, and to take maximum advantage of the fine faculty it has assembled. Given these limitations, the Political Science Department at the University of Central Oklahoma has come a long way within the past decade. We are professionally stronger, more diverse, more active in the discipline, but still committed to devoting the greater part of our energies to teaching. We pride ourselves in being part of an institution that is striving to provide the best public undergraduate education in the state of Oklahoma.