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Gender Mainstreaming in Political Science Experiential Learning Programs

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In her piece on experiential learning in a Gender and Politics course, Cynthia Daniels (1997) discusses the ways students' democratic ideals are expanded and enforced through work outside the classroom. She describes the intersection of the classroom with service-learning activities as a way to tackle questions such as, how does gender equity require us to rethink the distinction between public and private life, and what might be the risks of using state power to regulate private relations of power in the home and the workplace (120)? Accomplishing gender mainstreaming through experiential learning serves the purpose of reemphasizing different group perspectives in all types of student learning while demonstrating the "uniqueness" of the effects of policy on women.

The lens of analysis in Daniels' discussion is on the site where the service learning — and the services it provides — occurs, but what if the experiential learning program was specifically designed to enhance gender mainstreaming outside the classroom? In other words, what if its goals were to change the gender composition of our political system or to enhance self-awareness of college-aged women? Would this, too, fall under the recommendations of the Wahlke (1991) report? One of the recommendations of the report, to enhance capstone experiences, could achieve various goals of a comprehensive educational experience. Or is this overstepping the bounds of a discipline already somewhat uncomfortable with discussing the role of marginalized groups in its research and teaching? To that end, this piece will briefly discuss the

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role of experiential learning in the political science discipline and explore the opportunities for systemic gender mainstreaming it offers.

A decade or so before gender mainstreaming became part of a discussion in the political science curriculum, experiential and service learning began to be a part of conversations about a student's true understanding of democracy, participation, and social justice (Barber 1991; Delli Carpini and Keeter 2000; Ehrlich 1999; Eyler and Halteman 1981; Frantzich and Mann 1997; Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapma 2000). After the American Political Science Association Task Force on Civic Education report (1997) called for increased use of experiential learning, political science departments began expanding the scope and range of their experiential programs, placing increasing numbers of students into situations where the classroom and the "real world" of policy intersected. The call was an urgent one, as APSA (1997, 744) had determined that political apathy was at a dangerous level in the country and "that we who have chosen to teach politics as our profession bear major responsibility for addressing the problem."

Although the literature is not unanimous in its verdict on increased civic engagement through service learning, it is encouraging to note that most find students more informed about the political process and engaged in some way that was not demonstrated in their classroom experience alone after participation in experiential learning (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; 2000; Galston 2001; 2004; Hunter and Brisbin 2000; Kirlin 2002). One must be careful, however, as the majority of service learning projects are not found in formal political offices and may have the reverse effect on a student's willingness to participate. Students now have a broader sense of what political activities are and, therefore, often feel more engaged (Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapman 2000, 619).

It is not surprising to find similar positive language used to describe the importance of gender mainstreaming in the political science curriculum of the twenty-first century. It should also not be surprising that arguments for gender mainstreaming follow a logic similar to those for a robust experiential learning experience for political science majors. Longstanding to those who, like myself, teach and research within the parameters of gender and politics is the belief that to have a genuine democracy, women must be participatory and included in all political discussions (O'Connor and Yanus 2009). If gender is only presented in political science classes with an "add and stir" approach, then it is not an effective tool for demonstrating the importance of gender in political theory and practice. This also holds true for experiential learning

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programs: if you create an environment in which the student is dropped into the situation without clear structure, guidelines, and assessable outcomes, then the experience will not result in a change in perceptions of democracy and/or civics or the role women can play therein. It is imperative — in both situations — to make goals and outcomes clear in the beginning.

Another similarity between the two curricular innovations is that both must be spread out across all classes within the department in order to have a maximum effect on students. Experiential learning and gender need to be part of various levels of a student's academic experience and should be taught by more than one member of a department in order to prevent students from opting out of these course offerings, especially at large institutions where the number of courses is large.[1] When both gender and experiential learning are infused into the curriculum, students get the full depth and breadth of a political science major along with perspectives that may have been ignored in the past. As a result, it seems that there are easy ways to justify both gender mainstreaming and comprehensive experiential learning programs, but could these two ideas come together in order to gender mainstream outside the classroom in society as a whole? I argue that the answer is yes. The following ideas come to mind:

1. Place students with female office holders at the local and state levels. In previous work (Doherty 2011), I discuss how female students, when placed with female legislators, change their perception and see themselves as future elected officials. These young women, after completing the program, have a much stronger sense of a political system in which they could be successful, unlike the frustration they feel after taking a course like Gender and Politics. Lawless and Fox (2005) provide evidence that women do not perceive themselves as viable candidates for office, no matter how many social eligibility characteristics they have. A gender-focused experiential learning program could change the political perception of 18-to-24-year-old women, thereby increasing the number of women in the political pipeline and encouraging more women to run for office. As a result, mainstreaming in society can produce mainstreaming in public institutions.

2. Place students with female mentors in social service agencies that deal with policy issues important for women (e.g., domestic violence, poverty, etc.).

1. See Cassese, Bos, and Duncan (2012) for a broader discussion of students' ability to opt out of gender-related courses.

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> This will bring students into contact with two types of women: women working in these service agencies who are tasked with implementation (in a sense) and women who use the services. This also would allow students to track how policies are made and, more importantly for this discussion, who makes them.

Could this integration of a gender focus on experiential learning reach beyond the traditional scope of an internship at the statehouse? In other words, if it truly is the role of the political science discipline to expand the political efficacy of all its students, then could we create a program in which the sole objective is to discuss, analyze, and debate the role of gender on the American political system through participation in that system? It would be interesting to see if departments could expand their definitions of experiential learning in order to bring about social change.

In this volume, my colleagues have clearly demonstrated that gender mainstreaming benefits women who major and pursue academic careers in the discipline. I would like to expand this idea to include using the discipline of political science to mainstream a focus on gender in society. One way to do this is through experiential and service learning programs. Here is an opportunity for a discussion about gender in the political science major to do more than count numbers: it could make a difference in participation and equity in the political system. My own experience bears this out. Young women, when placed in offices of female legislators, come out of the experience with a heightened sense of self. They now believe they can run for political office successfully and will do so in the near future with a higher frequency than their counterparts who do not participate in such a program (Doherty 2011).

This idea may give some professors pause: Does this cross the line into a partisan curriculum? Don't we already focus a disproportionate amount on underrepresented groups? Do we even need a program like this, as we live in a postsexist society? In response to these concerns, I would argue that now is the perfect time to expand our understanding of what teaching gender in political science means by creating programs outside the classroom that draw on the tough questions presented in classes. Women are still considerably underrepresented in federal government positions. Women of color hold even fewer political seats, and the data indicate that these numbers are stagnating, rather than getting better. As debates rage on about the government's role in legislating issues that have important effects on women's lives, it is the duty of the political science discipline to take the lead.

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