

Teaching Evaluations

Nicholas F. Jacobs

Faculty Fellow

Colby College

Contents

(Clickable)

My Overarching Motivation

Summative Comments and Evaluations

Planning, Preparation, and Productive Use of Class time

Student Involvement

Communication Skills

Feedback and Assessment

Student Engagement Outside of the Classroom

Specific Course Evaluations

The American Presidency

American Political Development

Research Methods

My Overarching Motivation

The greatest impediment to teaching political science is not students' ignorance, but a pervasive sense of "knowingness" – what Mark Edmundson has called the feeling "that you're on top of things and in charge." It is easy to see why students would be wracked by a false sense of knowingness, especially those who are actually interested in politics. They encounter political discussion all over the place - in news reports, on social media, from Hollywood. Their minds are already made up of who is right, what side is wrong, and what we need to do about it.

Given this pervasive knowingness, educating students in political science requires us to expose students to the counter-intuitive position, in the hope that they develop a self-effacing mindset in thinking about politics. My courses disrupt the conventional wisdom because disruption teaches students to ask questions and defend their answers with evidence. Courses that take a "developmental" approach are particularly important in advancing students' understanding of competing political ends and institutional arrangements. In particular, studying American political development helps students recover a sense of "political imagination," or the ability to think about alternative ways of being governed and the costs and benefits of any institutional design. By situating our current political practices in broad historical context, we can imagine alternative modes of governance and challenge the idea that what we inherit is necessarily what we should be forced to keep. On the other hand, a developmental approach helps dispel students of a pervasive tendency to challenge whatever came before as inferior or inadequate to the dilemmas of modern life.

Knowingness also means that students – even the best academically prepared – are often ill equipped in the skills of deliberation. Politics is about controversy, and a guiding principle of my teaching is to reinforce this central idea. We each have different experiences and perspectives that we simply cannot shed when we enter the classroom. To help students develop a habit of deliberation, I rarely lecture, and choose instead to have students pose the questions they found most intriguing or problematic from the readings. I want students to talk and listen; few truly know how to do it. Students learn more from this way of teaching than alternative practices, and so do I. Deliberation allows us to subject every viewpoint to scientific critique and to raise new pieces of evidence that come from all corners of our political world.

My greatest reward as a teacher has been observing students, both shy and outgoing, listening to their peers and recognizing the common problems that each faces, but might understand differently. Deliberation and disruption produces active engagement and confidence, which encourages students to apply their new sense of political imagination beyond the classroom.

Summative Comments and Evaluations

What Students Have to Say:

"Professor Jacobs was an extremely effective teacher and mentor for me throughout this semester. He is passionate about the material and always excited to guide students along the research process. I leave this class with full intention to continue to use Professor Jacobs as a resource for my Government education at Colby, as he has had an enormous impact on my academic development within this major." (Colby)

"Really, truly interested in what every student has to say – a quality maybe a little rarer than you might think. I hope I get to take another course with him in my time here.... He is a gem of a professor." (Colby)

"He is fantastic - please tenure him. This is a large ask from a student, but he has had an incredible impact on my academic ability and growth. Through the time he has spent with me to the way he runs the class, he has made this class the most engaging and rewarding class that I am taking this semester." (Colby)

"I really enjoyed Professor Jacobs' ability to meet with students outside of class to discuss course materials or answer any questions we may have had. I also really enjoyed his thorough comments on project or exam evaluations; the step-by-step analysis helped me to grow as a political scientist and understand both the reasoning of the evaluation and any areas of my work that need more particular attention." (Colby)

"Professor Jacobs is a very good Professor and for a class that I wasn't too excited to take, he made me have a vested interest in it because of the way he pushed me and how hard he worked." (Colby)

"Compared to my past twenty instructors at the University of Virginia, Mr. Jacobs far exceeds the ability of the average instructor to motivate, guide, and even challenge his students. Firstly, I have found that most up and coming professors struggle with the ability to communicate with their student in regards to conveying both basic instructions and deeper understanding. However, Mr. Jacobs more than surpasses that standard, in which I have witnessed some experienced professors still grappling with because Mr. Jacobs has an uncanny skill to push my peers and me to change our analytical lens in order to re-evaluate past understands with new concepts from our my current readings. And more than anything, Mr. Jacobs does not shy away from constructively cross-examining our analysis of the readings and our connections to modern politics. To put it another way, if you take Mr. Jacobs' course, expect that the remarks that he gives in and outside of class to make you constantly question your initial assumptions, but to ultimately lead you to a profound political epiphany. And finally, just to put it out there, Mr. Jacobs has an awesome faculty to reinvigorate discussions and debates with his sudden burst of extra - energy and passion whenever the class begins to uncover new ideas and thinking." (UVa)

"Where to begin with Professor Jacobs. For starters, I have one massive, huge regret, and that is the fact that I was never able to have him as an instructor before this course--his last one [at the University of Virginia]. Not only is he clearly an intelligent man, but he presents it so subtly and in a way that inspires your engagement in the subject matter. He offers some of the most probing, yet answerable, questions I've encountered in my American Gov't concentration, and I only hope that I can one day have a professor like him again. I feel that my opinions are incredibly respected and regarded by him, and that absolutely encourages my active and vocal participation. Moreover, his mediation of the Socratic seminar is not only confident, but decisive and almost planned. Perhaps it's all that beard rubbing he does when he thinks. When I first began the course, I often felt that my comments were shut down by Jacobs due to their irrelevance or lack of development--I instantly took offense. He would move on to the next student and gloss over a point made by myself, which was initially bothersome. After my first week with him, I realized how things were going to be. He taught me a new form of academic tough love: your opinion doesn't always matter and it isn't always going to be regarded well. Perhaps he didn't intend for this, but I responded accordingly by essentially thinking before I spoke and remembering to always connect what pervades my thoughts in class back to the subject at hand. I cannot recommend Professor Jacobs as an educator more. I only hope that his future pupils appreciate him as much as I do, especially now that the course is coming to a close. I look forward to other professors like himself." (UVa)

"Nicholas Jacobs is an exemplary professor. Discussions and papers are given thoughtful responses, he's very knowledgeable, and he makes himself very available to students. I'd highly recommend the course and professor to others." (UVa)

Planning, Preparation, and Productive Use of Class Time

I design every course in reverse. I think about what I want students to know and be able to do, and work backwards to make sure that each class is purposeful and directed towards a common goal. I share these goals with my students, and begin each class with a clear set of statements as to what I expect them to better understand by the day's end. In selecting readings for each class, I want students to see that we, as academics, are engaged in a set of conversations about what we know. I assign articles and chapters that disagree with one another. Rarely is my goal to have students walk away with a sense of what is "true," but rather where there is tension, and how their own thoughts and future engagement can contribute to our broader understanding.

What Students Have to Say:

"Every class was structured well in the sense that each class was centered around readings that drove discussions." (Colby)

"Professor Jacobs always started on time and ended on time (thank you for that!!). He respected our time and we respected his. We never got off-topic in class and he kept the discussion engaging for literally EVERY SINGLE CLASS. That is no small feat. He is clearly a very, very smart guy and his passion for the subject was more than evident. His passion certainly rubbed off on our class and I would say I had the most valuable and enlightening discussions of my Colby career thus far." (Colby)

"Class was always productive and a minute was never wasted. While it was discussion based, Jacobs always had hold over the direction of each class." (Colby)

"There was not a single pair of readings that did not play well between each other." (Colby)

" Yes, absolutely. Professor always sent out an email at the beginning of the week outlining what the week would look like. This was extremely helpful, and allowed me to organize before the week began." (Colby)

"Incredibly thorough organization. Every week, an email with the content we will cover, what to prepare, what to read. Syllabus was detailed and useful." (Colby)

"Very organized, always a focused directive for the day." (Colby)

"I feel like class time ran quicker in your class. I mean this in the best way possible. I looked forward to attending your class each and every day." (Colby)

Student Involvement

I strive to give students collective ownership of my classroom. Whether it is in my introductory courses or more advanced seminars, I make sure that students know that they must come to class prepared to talk and advocate for themselves. I tell my students that the easiest way to earn participation points is to ask questions, and they realize that I mean it. Students learn on the first day that I do not lecture. I require them to converse. Politics requires persuasion, and I view my classroom as a safe environment for students to practice the art of listening and respective argumentation. My favorite days in the classroom are when students forget that I am there (for a while), and engage with one another directly about the day's objective. To foster that community, I often require students to share thoughts with one another at the start of class, or work together in small groups to tackle a problem before we address it as an entire group.

What Students Have to Say:

"Professor Jacobs did an excellent job with this course, consistently fostering thoughtful, intellectually stimulating discussion. He was unafraid to challenge students assertions in a kind yet provocative way which made class discussion better and forced students to be more contemplative." (Colby)

"I found that the structure and approach to both the work and in-class discussion were awesome. Specifically, the in-class discussion was something that I hadn't experienced yet at Colby. I enjoyed getting to digest the reading independently then coming to class to get a more collective understanding." (Colby)

"I really enjoyed this class and enjoyed getting to know Professor Jacobs. He really helped me come out of my shell a bit and validated my ideas in a way that no other professors really have at Colby."

"Jacobs was an excellent professor that drew students to engage in intellectual discussion in a positive and safe manner. My thought of many political ideals have been expanded by this course." (UVa)

"I think Prof. Jacobs is an excellent educator, who really knows how to zero-in on key issues and to bring out students' understanding. He doesn't tell students to memorize theory or force them to think a certain way, he uses questioning to guide students towards understanding." (UVa)

"His class was well structured and engaging. He did a wonderful job creating an environment where I felt comfortable to share my ideas."(UVa)

Communication Skills

Transparency is my *modus operandi*. I justify everything to my students. I tell them why I weight certain assignments the way I do, and why I structure the syllabus in a particular order. Each week I send out an email to all my classes telling them what our collective goals are. First, this saves me time in class, opening up more opportunity to talk with students, not at them. Second, it creates a written, unequivocal record of expectations and check-points as we progress throughout the semester. When I am in my office, my door is always open. Additionally, I make myself available outside of normal school hours; it is not uncommon for me to Skype with students after their sports practices, or to engage in a lengthy email exchange early in the morning (end of the night for some students, I imagine).

What Students Have to Say:

"Coming to Colby, I was worried that the discussion based classes would be dominated by a couple students or the professor and meander aimlessly throughout the realm of tangentially-related topics. Professor Jacobs carefully allowed the more verbose students to speak more often but would still keep the quieter students engaged and sharing their ideas. Not only did he effectively balance speaking, but he successfully steered discussion towards an end idea or theory while not railroading us. There were multiple times during the year where I could feel him realize that some part of his "end-goal" might actually not be end-goal worthy, if you will, and backoff to let the class develop their own end."

"Professor always sent out an email at the beginning of the week outlining what the week would look like. He responds extremely promptly to email questions, and is always always willing to chat about classwork or any other material." (Colby)

"Professor Jacobs was always willing to find a way to meet if you needed to talk to him. Often I came in with a vague question or problem and he helped me narrow down what I was thinking and sort out a plan for my writing or presentation." (Colby)

"Always helpful over email and during office hours."

"Very open to helping students outside of class; offered to Facetime from home if you could not attend office hours."

"My favorite aspect of the course was that Professor Jacobs was very open to meeting with students whether or not he had scheduled office hours. My research group met with Professor Jacobs on many occasions to discuss our research, and Professor Jacobs also meet with me to review various Stata concepts" (Colby)

"He was available through video or in person based on our schedules. Had multiple meetings that lasted well over an hour that were super helpful" (Colby)

"VERY willing to help and meet with students outside of class." (Colby)

"Definitely. I had several long and productive conversations with Professor outside of class time, and left each one feeling academically stimulated. Professor has an innate ability to draw in students into his passion for the discipline of political science. Not to mention, he has an absolutely outstanding vocabulary." (Colby)

"He's deeply knowledgeable, teases new insights out of his students, and leads you to some answers instead of dryly lecturing us all the time." (UVa)

"He was enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the material, consistent and fair with course policies, regularly available to offer assistance, support, and feedback, and a good facilitator of discussion." (UVa)

Feedback and Assessment

I think I am proudest of what I have learned about giving good feedback. I start with the belief that to get students writing well, they have to learn how to rewrite. As each of my students learn, I think we write for two reasons: to figure out what we want to say, and then to tell people what we have figured out. Most college assignments only help students master the first aspect of good writing; students then turn their paper in for a grade and never think about it again. They often do not even look at comments. I require students to rewrite, but set high expectations in having them receive credit for first submissions, which comprise a longer work due at the end of the semester. Additionally, I have an open policy of reading any work one-week prior to submission and subject to a writing conference. I provide exemplars and models for every assessment so that students can maintain focus on their own ideas, not issues of style or form. And, I have written into my courses opportunities for students to provide genuine peer-feedback on work in progress

What Students Have to Say:

"One of the things I most appreciate about Professor Jacobs is his clear and careful feedback. He read and appreciated every piece of writing I gave him. He listened intently to every presentation given. And his feedback was invaluable. He gave long, encompassing feedback that helped me realize things I had never thought about, critiqued without harshly criticizing, and offered sources and advice for future improvement. He cares and it shows." (Colby)

"The area where I learned most in this class was often from his comments on my writing. It helped me think through my own ideas. You could tell that he was not grading just to grade, but rather that he was helping you develop your thoughts in better ways. Always given back within day or two which was great considering the speed at which this class moved." (Colby)

"Professor Jacobs was an excellent grader, tough, but gave feedback to help me better my work. He also turned assignments around ridiculously fast, I legitimately do not understand how he graded things so quickly. Although they were quickly graded there was appropriate and helpful feedback on each assignment." (Colby)

"I have never had comments on my paper that both made me go, "hmm I guess so, yeah," while still allowing me to feel like I wrote a good paper." (Colby)

"On a scale from 0-10, an 11. Prof. Jacobs gave substantial feedback on every assignment, breaking down the grade for every question and addressing the mistakes specifically. Definitely an example worth replicating in the department." (Colby)

"Very clear what was lacking or what was done well in the assessment." (Colby)

"Yes. Again, Professor responded to questions and gave us feedback on assignments as promptly as any Professor that I have ever had. The feedback was elaborate and carefully thought-out. It challenged me not only to rethink concepts and responses, but to ask further questions about relevant material." (Colby)

"I really liked that you proposed potential ideas for future papers as part of your comments. It helped me to weave the papers together into some sense of a final draft." (Colby)

"The response papers gave me a chance to put my initial thoughts down on paper with an opportunity to build some smaller arguments. From there, the comments and discussion in office hours helped me build stronger arguments for my final paper. As much as this class was about the Presidency, it was the most beneficial writing class I have ever had." (Colby)

Student Engagement Outside of the Classroom

At Colby College and the University of Virginia, I have taken an avid interest in getting students to conduct original research. I am an active participant in Colby's Honors program, not only overseeing individual projects, but in helping to provide a common set of resources for all our thesis-writers. I have developed a number of tools used by my colleagues to help facilitate the design and implementation of those projects, including instructional workbooks, videos, and exemplars. Recognizing that students who designed experiments had the most difficulty in conducting their research, I wrote a case study of my own research, published by *SAGE*, that explains both the theoretical and practical elements of survey experiments. I make active use of research assistants, and bring them into my own work, co-authoring with undergraduates when appropriate.

The American Presidency
Colby College and the University of Virginia

This course interrogates the constitutionalizing of executive power in American political development. We examine what power presidents have gained and lost in the country's 230-plus years of constitutional history, and we pay particular attention to the expectations and problems confronting modern presidents. Students learn to think historically (or temporally) about presidential politics, and the presidency's relationship to other governing institutions. We explore some of the leading works that place the presidency in historical context. Additionally, we read some of the classical tracts of American political science, which helped to transform the institution, making the president a more public, and potentially divisive figure.

Throughout the semester, students give a set of presentations on the day's readings, and formulate those into a set of response papers. Those papers are then used for the final paper, which can take one of three forms: a critical review of multiple assigned works, a research proposal, or an extended response to a question of the students own choosing.

What Students Have to Say:

"This class epitomizes the reasons why I came to a liberal arts school. It truly made me a better student in every aspect of the word." (Colby)

"The only question that I have now is when is a second, more advanced American Presidency class (the next level) being offered??" (Colby)

"The American Presidency is the best course I have taken at Colby because it was the most challenging. Professor Jacobs consistently fostered deep thought and reflection on the American Presidency. When I signed up for the course I wasn't exactly sure what we would talk about, and even after the first two weeks I remained confused, but as we got into the meat of the semester the class quickly became my favorite because of the kind of discussion we participated in."

"I learned more in this class than in any other at Colby. It made me question my fundamental thoughts and opinions. Not only did I learn a lot from Jacobs, but also so much from my classmates. I looked forward to coming to class every Tuesday and Thursday!" (Colby)

"I learned a lot more than just the American Presidency - I learned about the American government as a whole." (Colby)

"Thank you for offering this course" (Colby)

"This class made my brain hurt after every class. Professor Jacobs is a very smart individual and challenges his students to engage in very challenging ideas and concepts." (Colby)

"I loved this class. Professor Jacobs was really helpful and kind throughout the whole class. He was really adept at leading our discussions, and he was always able to guide us towards the main ideas. Really knowledgeable teacher." (UVa)

American Political Development

The University of Virginia

This is a course about change and continuity in American politics. This course emphasizes how politics progresses through time, and how contemporary political processes and problems can be understood as a consequence of both deliberate *and* unintentional decisions made in the past. Those who wish to change our political system must account for this country's traditional political commitments and its past and that set of possibilities is structured by decisions, attitudes, and theories made in the past. Our ultimate goal, therefore, is to address these issues of change and continuity, and make sense of the limits and possibilities of political development in the United States.

First, as an initial foray into studying APD, students will to think historically (or temporally) about politics and policy development. We explore some of the leading contemporary works in the APD subfield and consider what an historical perspective adds to our study of American politics. Additionally, we practice APD by considering relevant political debates and policy problems that exist outside of class; students have the option to research and write on one of these pressing topics. Finally, we consider the role that ideas, institutions, the economy, and *mores* had in producing new politics, and what that politics portends for the future.

What Students Have to Say:

"I really enjoyed this course and the Professor's enthusiasm pertaining to the topics we covered. The reading material was selected with great consideration to enhance the diverse topics we were covering. It was by far one of the most informative courses I've taken at UVA and I believe it's contributed a great deal to the value of my major requirements." (UVA)

"I start policy school tomorrow and I'm really glad I took your class before starting because I think your class teaches a really important way to think about politics and policy that is missing from other classes. We often don't think, or don't know how to answer questions like, 'How did we get here? Why is policy/politics the way it is now, and how does that affect what policy changes we can enact in the future?' I have already found myself asking these questions or trying to think about development when I come upon articles and think to myself 'how the hell could this be happening?'" (UVA)

"The fact that Professor Jacobs was passionate about this course as well as allowing students to talk about what they think made the class very intriguing to me. I really enjoyed learning what we went through this semester and I give a lot of credit to Professor Jacobs on his way of teaching and his format of the class." (UVA)

"Great course for a someone new to politics like myself. Mr. Jacobs was a very effective teacher and I thought the way he led the class discussion made for very productive discussion on the material." (UVA)

Research Methods

Colby College

This course introduces students to the foundational theories and methodological approaches that make political science, scientific. Students learn how rational inquiry into political phenomena differs from the ways in which we often discuss politics, and students will engage in a reasoned critique of that rational process to better cope with the limits of social science research. The course covers a number of techniques that practitioners use to apply that process to theoretical problems, including: qualitative case studies, historical institutionalism, experimentation, survey research, content analysis, and statistical modeling. It is not expected that students will have experience with statistical modeling. This course begins with the fundamentals, and stresses how statistics and quantitative observation contributes to the many ways we scientifically study politics.

The course is primarily designed to help students better understand and evaluate political science scholarship, which they will encounter in advanced seminars and courses in the department. We anchor or abstract considerations of political science methodology in cutting-edge scholarship. Most important, students gain practical experience in conducting scientific research on social behavior, and this will prepare many students for more sophisticated research projects, including a senior thesis. Students design their own research study, and work collaboratively to test an original hypothesis. Students will demonstrate mastery of each of the methods introduced in this class through an engaged critique of published material, and efforts to replicate their findings.

What Students Have to Say:

"Going into this course, "Concepts / Methods of Political Science Research," naturally, I expected it to be a very dry class. The name did not exactly excite me. Now at the end of the semester, I feel that the work I have done and the questions that this course has prompted could not be less dry. This class, thanks to Professor Jacobs, has truly stimulated a new line of thought for me, and has encouraged me to ask even more questions about the ways things are and the ways things ought to be."

"I seriously feel that I am now more equipped to draw my own conclusions from the classes that I take while independently analyzing the material laid out by my Professors. I very much appreciate the design of this course within the government major, as well as the specific structure that Professor Jacobs used to guide our growth throughout the semester."

"I feel that I can better read an academic piece of work and think about its validity, its construct, and its ability to be interpreted. Basically, I don't just take the abstract or the title at face value. Instead, I can challenge authors points of view and be more critical in how I approach what experts say."

"After taking this class, I do feel as though I have a better understanding of political science as a discipline. I feel like I am better able to make my own conclusions as to the internal or external validity of a study, and feel more confident in my ability to undertake research projects in the

future. I particularly enjoyed the data presentations, as they allowed us to share our findings in a conversational manner; this helped me to more fully grasp the methods of political science research."

"This course added a lot of value to my studies in government. Even if I don't go on to do political science research, I can be a more informed reader when I inevitably have to evaluate the work of others. I had reservations about taking this course because of the math/Stata component but I ended up loving it and feeling much more confident in those areas."

"This course definitely forced me to view political science in a more scientific way. While I am used to reading political science articles for many classes, I did not understand the scientific method that went into the research. The sections that most helped me view political science in a more scientific way were the sections on designing experiments and the statistics section."

"This course made me significantly more aware of the many nuances and complications that come with trying to make scientific inferences within the social sciences. Our work with our own research projects made this point clear, as even seemingly simple relationships were made much more complex when considering confounders, controls, and other issues with validity."

"After taking this class, I have a much better "non-numerical" understanding of how political science is "scientific." The emphasis on theory and the scientific approach to building an argument / writing a paper was superb. It was really helpful to look at the different types of qualitative and quantitative ways to approach an issue being applied in familiar ways. The annotated STATA work was very helpful."

"Although I remain just as skeptical as I did at the beginning of the course, I feel that I have a better grasp on what questions to ask and when. This class, more than anything else, taught me how to independently scrutinize political science and generate my own. The research project allowed me to process while receiving helpful feedback each step of the way."

"This class helped me understand political science as a discipline and how to go about conducting valid political science research. I learned that political science, like natural science, can allow us to make generalizable claims to important world issues. The final paper assignments (defense, lit review, proposal, presentation, etc) were so helpful in breaking this down, rather than just saying "Write a research paper at the end of the semester"."