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Teaching Statement

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When I walked into the first classroom that I ever taught in I was scared, and I was tired. I had spent so many hours preparing materials for class so that *I* could lecture without awkward moments, so that *I* would be able to correctly answer every potential question, so that *I* could be what I thought good professors were supposed to be. In my naivety, I quickly learned through negative student evaluations and my own exhaustion that teaching was not about me; it was not about me being perfect, or me knowing everything. I learned that teaching is about the students. Since that first semester teaching, I have adopted a teaching approach that is student-centered, and student driven.

I believe having a student-centered teaching approach is especially important in a field such as Political Science. In most courses, such as Introduction to Political Science and American Politics as well as research methods, many students are not Political Science majors but instead are taking the course to fulfill general graduation requirements or prepare for law school. More importantly those students who are majors usually come from underserved populations with a strong desire to create change. This means that every class make-up is different, and I believe the course work and material should allow for flexibility to increase student's interest and the applicability to what they are learning. This flexibility is evident in how I present material, but more importantly, it is a central feature of many of my assignments. For example, in my Law and Politics course, the main assignment is to write an evaluation essay on a popular media portrayal of the legal world. This assignment fulfills a learning objective for the students to understand the process of the legal field and be able to evaluate the effects of that process. This assignment is student-centered because I ask each student to pick music or a movie or podcast of their choice. The students are tasked with identifying common myths of the legal system found in the media based on what they learned in the course. Each student then has the option to write about the real-world implications of these myths. This assignment increases student's interest because they have a personal or professional investment in the primary source. It also increases the students' ability to retain and apply the information learned throughout the course as they evaluate misconceptions about the legal system. For instance, one student surveyed how the policing and subsequent entrance into the legal system is portrayed by the rap community. The student made the conclusion that many of the portrayals of the legal system by the black community are present in rap music and demonstrate many of the inequalities and injustices within the legal system. I believe this type of assignment would be effective for other introductory courses as our political system is often fictionalized and portrayed in popular media by underserved populations. This is just one example of how I believe and try to implement student-centered teaching in my classes.

After spending so much time in my first teaching experience trying to be an amazing lecturer, I have since reevaluated what values and practices my past professors most effectively utilized in my education. Most of these values and practices did not revolve around amazing lecturers. One such value I have transitioned to was for class time to be student-driven, that I believe means the students are responsible for most of their own learning and for contributing to class discussions. One practice I implemented while teaching Introduction to American Government is to have each student come to class with one question. The idea is for a participation

grade in the course, each student would bring one question that was sparked by the readings, current events in American politics, or material covered as homework. These questions could be a clarification of terms or concepts, questions about the effects of certain processes or events, or applicability of the material in their lives and communities. The questions were a way to start discussion for the day, as well as propel the discussion in areas that were applicable to the students' wants and needs. Each question asked was first queried to fellow students before I attempted to fill in blanks. This assignment worked not only to increase participation, but also to assess how well students understood the information and whether they completed the work at home. For my students, this practice increased investment in the material, helped them feel connected to fellow students with similar questions and struggles, and helped them feel like they were responsible for their own education. When I implemented this in my Intro to American Government Course, students have commented on it being the "most helpful aspect of instruction."

I strongly believe that a class can be neither student-driven nor student-centered unless the class is accessible and open to the uniqueness and diversity of each student. As a rural first-generation student, I felt keenly certain disadvantages when in the college classroom; however, in other courses I also felt included, empowered, and valued due to the learning environment despite my background. I believe that one way to increase a feeling of inclusion in the classroom is for the instructor to know the students. In smaller courses, I spend time learning each of my student's names. When I taught Intro to Law and Politics, students mentioned that they felt "seen in class because she took the time to learn our names." While this practice is very difficult in large lecture courses, there are other ways to get to know my students.

For both small and large courses, the very first day of class I have all students send me an email with their name, a brief statement about why it is important for them to be getting an education, their starting comfort level with the material, and anything else I should know that would help them succeed in the course. I have found that this small email allows me to open communication and set the tone for the rest of the semester by signaling to them that I care about their success, I value their experiences, and I strive to create an environment where they matter. For example, one student in an upper division course let me know she was very nervous because she had absolutely no background with the material. As a result of giving her the opportunity to share those feelings, I was able to respond to her initial concerns. Furthermore, I checked in with the student periodically throughout the semester and she even came to office hours to communicate any time she felt at a disadvantage due to her lack of prior knowledge. The student passed the class with flying colors. I will continue this practice as it has been supported through further positive student evaluations such as, "she was good at communicating with her students on an individual level when help was needed" and "She also did not make me feel bad for not knowing something and instead helped me understand."

This type of teaching has led to many mentoring opportunities. I have been asked to write letters of recommendations for students for internship opportunities as well as something as simple as a summer job application. The students know that I care about their success inside and outside of the classroom. I believe mentoring opportunities can be formal, though informal opportunities are often just as meaningful. Some of these opportunities for me have involved helping students explore future job opportunities using their degree in political science, helping them learn valuable study skills, and even helping them navigate scheduling classes for graduation. These opportunities have been fulfilled in office hours, being willing to meet with students before and after class, and even taking time in a lesson to really see where the students are struggling and addressing those struggles. I find both individual and group instruction to be meaningful and fulfilling.

Maya Angelou perfectly penned what my goals are as an instructor and what I hope for my students. She

wrote, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” I believe my role as an instructor is to do *my* best and help my students not only know better but inspire them to then do better. I believe that having an inclusive, student-driven, and student-centered class most powerfully allows *all* participants to be better and do better.