

# Toby Bolsen

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## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

A liberal arts education should produce students who are strong critical thinkers and capable problem-solvers. Students should graduate with the skills necessary to be engaged citizens. To achieve these three goals, I provide a relevant knowledge base, create activities to encourage critical thinking, and guide students to know how to ask important questions.

In my teaching thus far, I have developed and used assignments to achieve these goals. For instance, in a course I assisted Dr. Dennis Chong in designing and instructing, *Public Opinion and Voting Behavior*, I developed an assignment in which each student was asked to write a 500 word op-ed article connecting an event in the presidential election campaign to research encountered in the assigned readings, lectures, and discussion sections. Students were asked to take the perspective of a scholar who is submitting the article to a newspaper because he or she wants to show how research is relevant for understanding a recent event in the campaign. This challenged students to think critically about how to apply theories from class to real politics.

A second sample activity is one I plan on using in an interdisciplinary course on Public Opinion toward Energy and the Environment that I have been invited to teach for the Environmental Policy Center at Northwestern in the spring of 2010. Students will develop problem solving skills by working in teams to develop a “bill” to alter some aspect of the U.S.’s configuration of energy resources (e.g., through tax policies, regulations/mandates, or both). Each team (consisting of 2 or 3 individuals) will produce a document similar to an actual piece of legislation – e.g., including a title and sections with provisions toward specific energy sources (modeled on recent energy bills but shorter and absent policy jargon). In addition to submitting a written piece of “legislation,” each team will submit a 500 word “impact statement” addressing the benefits and costs of enacting the bill. Each team will offer a brief oral summary of their proposal and explain how they would “market” it to garner public support. Finally, each proposal will be evaluated by class members and a prize awarded to the top team.

A final sample course component that would achieve my goal of fostering citizenship skills involves having students evaluate relevant theories explaining participation in a democracy. Students will write an opinion piece defending a position opposite of their own views on mandatory voter laws, comparing the U.S. to other countries. Next, assigned readings will posit theories of the causes of individual variation in participation and my lectures will clarify important concepts in these readings, particularly how scholars define participation, theorize on the causes of participation, and test their theories. To engage actively in political science theory and practice, students will develop a plan to increase voter turnout. Students will be assessed on their ability to evaluate critically democratic theory and political science research.

Prior to attending graduate school, I gained valuable classroom experience teaching high school social studies. Over the course of my graduate career, I have actively sought to broaden my repertoire of teaching techniques. I have given a number of guest lectures relating my research to undergraduate students. I am trained in quantitative research methods (minor field), and have been invited to teach Introduction to Quantitative Methods for undergraduates in the Department of Political Science at Northwestern University in the spring of 2010. Thus, I am willing and prepared to teach undergraduate methods courses. My evaluations from undergraduate students provide clear evidence that I am passionate about teaching and effective

at motivating and engaging students. I hope to grow as a teacher by contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning by continually making political and social science relevant to student learning and life goals. I plan on developing courses that incorporate current events, popular culture, and film.

I look forward to a faculty position where I can contribute to a college community. In graduate school, I have a record of service to my department and the profession. For instance, I have assisted with admissions to the undergraduate Honors Program in my department. In addition to presenting my own research at numerous academic conferences, I have served as a discussant and panel chair at many conferences, as well as an anonymous peer reviewer for five professional academic journals. I believe that my experiences in service will be an asset to any institution. Because of these positive learning experiences, I hope to be a professor who is an engaged advisor and scholar, participating in university and community service projects with peers and students in that college community.

Teaching and motivating students to think critically are key factors in my desire to become a faculty member. I believe strongly in creating active citizens and thoughtful social scientists. I am devoted to strengthening undergraduate education by creating a learning community comprised of undergraduates and faculty.