

Political Science at Rutgers, New Brunswick, 1968 - 2006

In 1968, the year that I arrived at Rutgers, I was 35 years old. Prior to that date I had worked on Wall Street, been Vice President of a management-consulting firm and served as an officer in the United States Navy. I had been teaching at Princeton where I had earned my Ph.D., and had turned down an offer to stay there in order to help build a new, experimental college at Rutgers called Livingston College. When I arrived at my new place of employment I was an Assistant Professor in Political Science and also an Assistant Dean tasked primarily with academic development. This bifurcated commitment to academic and administrative responsibilities led over subsequent years to an association with Political Science that varied from tenuous to deep involvement in critical decision-making.

Over the span of the next 38 years (I retired in 2006) I observed Political Science evolve from a collection of small, loosely integrated collegiate departments into a unified university department with an altered structure and a vastly expanded mission. As I might have expected (but didn't) the process was neither even nor smooth.

In the first years the Livingston Political Science Department shared offices with other departments in the old Headquarters building of Camp Kilmer. It was an exciting time when the entire College faculty sat in one room debating how to build a new institution. At that time the Livingston Department consisted of Gerald Pomper and Gordon Schochet, both still attached to Rutgers College. When I joined shortly thereafter I was the first member on the Livingston College payroll. The Livingston campus, such as it was, was largely on paper for the Headquarters Building was surrounded by a sea of empty barracks left over from earlier days. These forlorn structures on the grounds of what had formerly been Camp Kilmer had served as temporary housing for refugees from the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and, earlier, as quarters for troops heading to Europe in WWII.

The Livingston Department was founded on the premise that it would accommodate important but less conventional areas of the discipline (African-American studies, Chinese studies, etc.). In this regard it was only partially successful. As the Department rapidly grew in size it inevitably came to embrace more traditional areas of the discipline similar to those in the other colleges. This was, perhaps, inevitable as the desire for uniqueness clashed with the need to provide students with training in the core areas of the discipline.

After approximately three years I moved from Livingston to the International Center on the College Avenue campus, first as Director of Asian Studies and then as University Director of International Programs. Except for minimal teaching duties, this led me away from direct involvement with Political Science. Over the next ten years, when I was largely absent from the Department, Political Science in New Brunswick changed little from the loosely coordinated system that had existed when I arrived. Transformation to a consolidated university system had not yet occurred and efforts to move in this direction were often hotly contested.

All successful universities transform over time, however, and Rutgers is no exception. When the Rutgers and Douglas colleges (the two major units in the "old" system) changed from small, independent colleges into components of a full-fledged university (after 1955, although state university status had been conferred a decade earlier), there was not a complete break with the

past. Although the colleges were nominally integrated the original idea had been to maintain distinctive collegiate units along the lines of Oxford and Cambridge. To some degree this made sense as Douglas had traditionally been a women's college while Rutgers College was male. This distinction broke down, however, when Rutgers College began to admit women and when classes were integrated. Douglas continued as an all women's college. Despite modest changes toward full integration there were still significant numbers of faculty who were wedded to the older system of independent colleges. As might be expected, change for these faculty was threatening and was resisted. The "section" system that was devised to accommodate these opposing tendencies was an effort to bridge these differences. It was conceived as a way to maintain significant autonomy for the colleges while fashioning a hybrid organizational structure that would accommodate the push toward greater consolidation.

The various disparate faculties were thus coordinated by membership in "sections" that included all members of a discipline from various units of the university. For Political Science this meant a loose amalgam of faculty from the Rutgers, Douglas, and Livingston Colleges, as well as the Eagleton Institute and the small number of faculty from the continuing education unit. This last was called University College; it had no fixed locale and catered largely to the needs of older students. Thrown into the mix were faculty from the geographically separate departments in Newark and Camden plus a few others in tiny, independent units. The section met periodically to discuss disciplinary priorities and, crucially, promotions, among other matters.

The Political Science section was not a workable arrangement for fissures quickly developed regarding issues such as research emphases and promotion standards. In addition to all the usual disputes about such things as methodology, debates, frequently heated, were often intertwined with turf wars among the various units. Guests to the university, notably speakers and job candidates, were often bewildered. Nevertheless, although the system was overly complex and increasingly dysfunctional, it remained in existence for well over a decade. In the end, however, negative sentiments about the section system became predominant among an increasing number of faculty and administrators.

Finally, against strenuous opposition from an "old guard," the university abolished the sections and created unified departments with faculty brought together in one location (Hickman Hall in the case of Political Science -- the Newark and Camden departments were spun off). There was not, however, a clean break with the past for the separate colleges were maintained although with diminished curricular responsibilities. Students were still admitted to colleges with differing academic requirements and graduated with degrees certified by that college. This continued fragmentation led, inevitably, to overlap and confusion.

The change to a single, unified Department occurred at about the time when I returned to the Department full time. Within several years I became Vice Chair for Graduate Studies (1990) and then three terms as Chairman (1991-97 and 2003-06 with a six year hiatus during the chairmanship of Milton Heumann). Although I was asked to become Dean of the Social Sciences and Dean of Rutgers College, I turned these offers down in order to help in the development of the Department. This entire period lasted for approximately fifteen years (1991-2006). Finally, at the time of my retirement, the collegiate system was abolished (the colleges became residence units only, with minor exceptions for Douglas College). Then, with the appointment of President Barcchi, the university began the monumental task of reintegrating the Medical School into the

University, a split that had occurred when I first arrived at Rutgers. Since I was at Rutgers for almost four decades, I witnessed a long journey from old to new and it is not over yet.

As this brief rendition of the evolution of the Department suggests, Rutgers was beset by a deeply ingrained culture of fragmentation that constantly impeded movement to a more consolidated university. The hurdles were not minor. At the highest level the issue was how to coordinate the New Brunswick, Newark and Camden campuses that competed for resources and often replicated programs and facilities, i.e., three separate university libraries with duplicate collections, two law schools, etc. Within New Brunswick the problem – initially -- had been how to coordinate departments at the different colleges, each with different requirements. And finally, within the newly consolidated disciplines, one serious difficulty, among many, was how to amalgamate faculty members with differing individual strengths and weaknesses. For Political Science this had both negative and beneficial consequences. On the negative side there was very quickly a bifurcation between those faculty members who emphasized the practice of politics (for instance, those at the Eagleton Institute who stressed the study of state and local politics with a focus at the M.A. level) versus those who wished to develop a Ph.D. program with a theoretical orientation. Ultimately this led to a significant number of faculty moving to the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy and to a newly independent Eagleton Institute of Politics.

On the positive side there was an over abundance of scholars in particular fields, most notably in the Political Theory field which became larger than normal when theorists from each of the collegiate departments were brought together. Collectively they became a critical mass that helped propel the Department to national prominence. The subsequent loss of key faculty in Political Theory by death or departure has not been compensated for by the rise of alternate centers of excellence, despite the existence of individual faculty with international reputations.

At Rutgers in New Brunswick there is, overall, a sizeable body of faculty with advanced degrees in Political Science. As noted, however, not all of these individuals are in the Political Science Department. As of the time when I retired coordination among these separate faculties was ad hoc, depriving political science in New Brunswick of a unified voice and the opportunity for faculty and students to explore the possibilities inherent in cross-fertilization. Although faculty at other units often expressed an interest in closer affiliation with the Department, this had not occurred to any significant degree by 2006. As a consequence, government studies at Rutgers, writ large, failed to make an imprint on the discipline at the national level commensurate with the faculty resources that actually existed.

As of the time when I retired fragmentation within the Department (i.e., too many fields which left some perpetually understaffed and under enrolled) remained a persistent problem. In addition, a related difficulty was an on-again off-again failure to prioritize among the various fields. Overall, there was uneven growth in the size of the Department relative to its teaching responsibilities. As of 2006 the Department had approximately 30 full time faculty (plus a variable number of co-adjutant faculty) responsible for 100 graduate students, 1,000 undergraduate majors and 8,000 students (some duplicates) who were enrolled in the Department's courses. Within the university Political Science was one of the four largest teaching departments. In my view there was clearly an imbalance between the Department's responsibilities and funding by the administration. One obvious solution was/is to pare away organizational impediments.

Let me be clear what I mean. When a department functions in an environment where resources are scarce and options limited there are only a few strategies available to improve the Department's standing nationally. The key is to focus resources on the one hand and to magnify the impact of these resources on the other. Clearly, I am no longer in the Department and, hence, not in a position to do more than suggest possible avenues forward. But the lesson of Political Theory should be obvious. The total number of fields should be pared to a minimum with several current fields incorporated into other, enlarged fields. For instance, Public Law and Women and Politics should become programs within American Politics and the Comparative and International fields should be merged as programs within a unified global politics field. Recruitment of faculty and graduate students should proceed based on decisions made within the new fields in terms of priorities established within that field itself (not as a kind of lottery among fields). Now...you don't have to tell me how much opposition this would generate. But isn't it about time that the Department did some rethinking about the foci of fields? And why would such rethinking be a bad thing?

However, and this is the important point, at this juncture in its history Political Science at Rutgers should strive to become a major player in one (reconfigured) field only. I fully realize this is a highly contentious issue with many faculty unwilling to take a subordinate role within the Department. However, building up resources in one field is the only way I can see to enhance the Department's reputation without a very large (and improbable) infusion of resources.

My candidate of choice in this regard is American Politics and within American Politics a program on Women and Politics. In the United States there are two major areas in the discipline of Political Science -- American Politics and International Relations. To have an impact on the discipline nationally a concentration on American Politics makes sense but not if it simply replicates the leading programs in other Universities. If the Rutgers Department did this it would be a late-starter with all the disadvantages that implies. This is why concentrating on Women and Politics would give Rutgers a distinctive and important niche within the broader framework of American Politics.

Last, emphasizing American Politics fits nicely with the need noted above to more fully utilize political science resources located outside of the Department. I pointed out above that there are faculty outside of the Department with degrees in Political Science who lack an organizational structure that allows them to affiliate with the Department. Almost all of these individuals are in American Politics writ large and ought to be recognized as important, indeed essential, components of an American field. I do not by any means suggest a return to the dysfunctional aspects of the old section system but rather a rethinking of American Politics as a broad and inclusive field that offers untapped possibilities for cross-fertilization.

Please think about it. Or put on your thinking caps and come up with better ideas for enhancing the Department's visibility and reputation. After all, restructuring has been a decades-long process at Rutgers that has challenged both the University and the Department. There's no reason it should stop at this point.

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