

Teaching Research Inside and Outside the Classroom

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Teaching Political Science and International Relations for Early Career Instructors (accepted version)

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Introduction

The near-exclusive focus on research in PhD training often leaves new graduates under-prepared for the professorate (Becker and Zvobgo, 2020; Ishiyama, Miles, and Balarezo, 2010; Jahanbani, Willis, and Lee, 2018). While research is highly valued in hiring, tenure, and promotion processes at major research universities and elite liberal arts colleges, teaching and service are also important (Rothgeb and Burger, 2009). At some colleges and universities, teaching and service are just as important as research, if not more important. In this chapter, I discuss how I teach research inside and outside the classroom – to develop a pipeline of new researchers, some of whom assist me in my research and collaborate with me on research. I work with students from across the social sciences and at all levels, from first- to final-year students. I learned to do this through mentorship I received in graduate school, and through trial and error. These experiences combined have enabled me to teach and mentor students while maintaining a high research output. My experiences at three different institutions – as an undergraduate student at a small liberal arts college, as a graduate student at a major research university, and as a professor at a comprehensive (research and teaching) university – also help me speak to research and teaching across institutional settings.

Institutional Context and Personal Background

I received my undergraduate training at Pomona College, a small liberal arts college where the exclusive teaching and mentoring focus is on undergraduates. Students enjoy small class sizes, with an 8:1 student-faculty ratio, and have access to a number of opportunities for faculty-mentored research – including in labs attached to courses, independent studies, and senior theses – while they earn their bachelor’s degrees. Some students also collaborate with professors on research. This means undergraduates can develop close mentoring relationships with professors like they would if they were graduate students at a research university.

I earned my PhD from the University of Southern California (USC), a private university designated

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as an “R1” under the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.¹ Faculty maintain very high research activity and many departments offer doctoral degrees. There are also several professional schools, including a medical school and an engineering school. Most students at USC are graduate students. My former department, Political Science and International Relations, offers bachelor’s degrees and PhDs. Most tenured and tenure-track professors’ focus is on research and graduate training. Faculty on the “teaching track” contribute more to undergraduate education and some publish on pedagogy (Becker, 2020; Božović, 2024; Rathbun and Božović, 2020).

I was recently awarded tenure and promotion to the rank of Associate Professor of Government at William & Mary (W&M), a public university designated as an “R2” under the Carnegie Classification. This means that though faculty across the university maintain high research activity, only some departments offer doctoral degrees. There are some professional schools, too, including a law school and a business school. Most W&M students are undergraduates. My department offers a Bachelor of Arts degree and some of our faculty contribute to the Master’s in Public Policy program (Zvobgo et al., 2023a). In general, tenured and tenure-track faculty are expected to divide their effort into research, teaching, and service. Research and teaching are given equal weight, 40 percent each, while service accounts for 20 percent.

Juggling Responsibilities

My undergraduate training at a small liberal arts college and my graduate training at an R1 help me connect with my undergraduate students at W&M: they expect world-class teaching like I found at Pomona, and they desire first-rate research experiences resulting in publications like I found at USC. But this can entail a difficult balancing act: being an excellent teacher is hard and being an excellent scholar is hard. Being an excellent teacher-scholar who can effectively train subject-matter novices to produce academic research is hardest still, and not something R1 institutions generally prepare their graduates to do.

As I indicated above, tenured and tenure-track faculty at W&M are evaluated on research, teaching, and service – in annual merit reviews, in interim reviews, and for tenure and promotion – with research and teaching each accounting for 40 percent and service accounting for 20 percent. Assuming a five-day work week, this would suggest faculty on average divide their time as follows: two days per week on research, two days on teaching, and one day on service. While this division of time is possible in theory, it is difficult to maintain in practice: it is easy for a given faculty member to be pulled toward either research, teaching, or service, thus disrupting balance across the categories.

In my first year of teaching, I struggled to maintain this balance, spending a lot of time preparing for my classes and grading assignments. (I had no prior experience as an instructor of record, only as a teaching assistant my second year of graduate school.) Thankfully, with a growing portfolio of materials and “repeat preps,” I have started to save time.² I have also picked up some tips and tricks. For example, I grade longer student papers across sections (i.e., introduction sections for all papers, then literature review sections for all papers, and so on). This has proved much more efficient than reading and grading each paper from top to bottom, then the next, and then the next. I think this has also helped me grade more evenly and reduced the time I spend revisiting papers I read first in a given grading session.

Even with more experience, prepared materials, and time-saving tools, striking the right balance between research, teaching, and service is challenging. From time to time, teaching and service have thrown me off balance. It is not easy to “just say, ‘No.’” and protect one’s research time from the many demands

¹ For more information on the Carnegie Classification, visit carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu.

² A “repeat prep” is a subsequent offering of a class one has already taught, with modest modifications to syllabi and assignments.

one faces as a faculty member. And when one does say, “No.” or “Can this wait?” or “How about next week?” it is not always well received. This is where I would say I have sometimes been alienated from some of my students, who do not know that teaching represents a minority share of my overall job and, therefore, I cannot be “on call” for them all day, every day, including on weekends.

Students may also compare me to more senior colleagues who are well established at the institution and in their careers, and who have enjoyed academic tenure for years. If they wish to do so, these colleagues can “afford” to reallocate time from research to teaching and service. The opportunity cost of allocating, for example, five more hours a week to student appointments, advising clubs, and offering extra review sessions is much lower for tenured faculty than for untenured faculty. And even among tenured faculty, the opportunity cost is greater for associate professors than it is for full professors. As a young Black woman in a predominantly white institution, students may also hold implicit biases, feeling more entitled to my time than to some of my other colleagues’ time.

The onus has been on me, then, to explain to students how the university operates. Talking to students about these things is far from easy or intuitive. But here is what has worked for me: I have drawn a few pie charts on the white board, asked students what percentage of professors’ jobs they think teaching accounts for, and marked the percentages they guess. (Invariably, students overestimate the share of teaching.) I have then drawn a final pie chart, with the actual 40-40-20 division on which we are evaluated. Naturally, students are surprised that teaching for tenured and tenure-track professors technically accounts for a minority share of our overall job.

Our students are smart and kind. When they learn more about the inner workings of the institution and academia, they are generally understanding and gracious. When they also learn about gender and race disparities in academia through in-class professionalization discussions that I facilitate (Hancock Alfaro and Mendez, 2021; Mitchell and Martin, 2018; Pyke, 2011; Zvobgo et al., 2023b), many express compassion.

Through these candid conversations, I have been able to create the sentiment that we are all doing our best and are all on the same team – because we are. This understanding is the basis, I believe, of productive teaching and mentorship, including teaching and mentorship of research. We are in this together.

Goals, Trajectories, and Values for Research and Teaching

To be most effective with students in research and instructional settings, it is important to be clear-eyed about one’s identity as a scholar and teacher and know one’s research and teaching goals. I myself am an International Relations (IR) scholar interested in how a variety of non-state actors – especially international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and ordinary citizens – influence governments’ decisions to adopt and comply with a variety of norms, laws, and institutions. While traditional IR scholarship has tended to ignore the role of non-state actors in world politics, my work shows that non-state actors can change state behavior and influence domestic and foreign policy (see, for example, Zvobgo [2020]).

I publish my work in general-interest political science journals and top field and subfield journals, as well as with university presses and trade presses. I enjoy teaching at all levels of the curriculum, from first-year writing seminars to upper-level special topics lecture courses to senior capstone seminars, though I am partial to teaching first-years. They have seemingly endless stores of enthusiasm and optimism, both of which go a long way in my line of work. I relish the opportunity to work with students over multiple semesters and years.

My research expertise is divided into three related streams: human rights, transitional justice, and international law and courts. This expertise is my comparative advantage so when I joined W&M, I requested to teach courses on these topics, which I now do. I decided very early on that my courses would speak to each other, with the assigned materials and required skills building on each other, so that students on my informal “human rights track” (those who take my course sequence across semesters and years) would enjoy the greatest value-added possible. I also decided that all my classes would be research-based. Here, I credit instructional faculty at USC who teach research, research teaching, and use teaching to support their research (Becker, 2020; Božović, 2024; Rathbun and Božović, 2020). They illuminated and modeled for me the pedagogical value of research. They also showed me how much undergraduates can achieve in research with the proper training and guidance.

I have found it is helpful, also, to have a clear set of values to guide one’s teaching and mentoring relationships. Mine are informed by my positionality: I am Black, a woman, and an immigrant from the Global South. My father was a professor of African history, and my mother is a university administrator. I always knew academia was a possible career path, but it is not one that I seriously considered until my final year at Pomona, when I undertook my first major research project, a senior thesis, a version of which would later become my first peer-reviewed publication.

That I come from an academic family potentially creates some distance between me and my students, especially those who are the first in their families to attend university. At their age, I never doubted that I belonged in academic spaces, whereas some of my students may doubt that they belong. Even later in graduate school, when I began to develop doubts about my place in a white- and male-dominated discipline and profession, I still knew that I could be a political scientist. I just did not know if I wanted to be one. Even with my academic family background, experiences of racialization and racial exclusion (Zvobgo et al., 2023b) help me connect with students from underrepresented groups. These experiences have also fundamentally shaped my teaching inside and outside the classroom, especially as I work to train the next generation of social scientists concerned with issues of human rights, transitional justice, and international law. I start with the premise that every single one of my students could, with the right resources, time, and guidance, become a world-class researcher and professor. Students may come into my classroom or my lab with different experiences and levels of preparation, but that does not mean I cannot even the playing field. In fact, I see it as my responsibility to do so, especially as it concerns women, first-generation students, students of color, and students from the Global South.

Virtually every IR topic – nuclear proliferation, climate change, forced migration, human rights abuses, war, etc. – is likely to disproportionately affect a woman of color in the Global South. Yet women, people of color, and people from the Global South have been historically (and are presently) excluded from IR, both as an academic field and as a policy field. While academia and policy research and practice are diversifying, one reason people from minoritized backgrounds do not pursue IR careers is a lack of representation – something I am working to remedy, in part by teaching research inside and outside the classroom, breaking down the “hidden curriculum,” and helping to lessen the “pipeline problem.” If students decide to not pursue an IR career, I want it to be because they genuinely and enthusiastically want to do something else, not because they do not know this could be a viable career path for them or because they lack training and preparation. I seek to empower my students to choose their path rather than have it be chosen for them.

Teaching Research Inside the Classroom

My teaching and mentorship of student research begins in the classroom. Ideally, students on my informal human rights track start with my first-year writing seminar on the construction of the international human rights legal regime following World War II.

Developing Research Questions and Reviewing Scholarship in the First-Year Seminar

The goal of my first-year seminar is twofold: to introduce students to international human rights law and expose them to the many ways social scientists study it. The ultimate goal, beyond my class, is for students to study international human rights law as social scientists.

In the course, we read the full text of major human rights treaties, including the 10 core United Nations (UN) covenants and conventions. Each treaty is paired with a relevant piece of social science research (usually a single article or book chapter). For example, when we study the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), we read portions of Lisa Baldez's 2014 book, *Defying Convention*, on why the United States has signed but not ratified the treaty. When we study the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), we read Audrey Comstock's 2021 book, *Committed to Rights*, specifically the chapter on succession (ratification of treaties by countries that did not exist or were not independent at the time a treaty entered into force). The CERD has had a noteworthy number of successions, many of them by newly independent states that suffered identity-based violence under colonialism. When we study the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), we read one of my own articles on treaty reservations, since the CRC (and CEDAW) have attracted a large number of reservations (Zvobgo, Sandholtz, and Mulesky, 2020). Students have been particularly responsive to Nina Reiners's 2021 book, *Transnational Lawmaking Coalitions for Human Rights*, in which the author traces, among other issues, the development of the right to water by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Over the course of the semester, students write four 500-word critical reflections. For each reflection, they make and defend an argument based on the course materials and class discussions from the previous two weeks. Students have many options for completing this assignment successfully. They can, for example, problematize the content of the treaties we have studied in the previous two weeks, identifying treaties' contributions and limitations as tools to safeguard human rights. (These are ideas that students can more deeply research and evaluate empirically in future classes or independent studies.) Students can also identify the strengths and weaknesses of the academic research we have read, also in the previous two weeks. The idea is to get them thinking (and writing) like scholars.

The major course assignment is a 3,000-word literature review. A few weeks into the semester, students propose a social science research question (like those in the works we have read) and identify three or more scholarly works (books, articles, or chapters) published in the last ten years that speak to that question. At this stage, I sometimes suggest a reframing of students' questions. It is not unusual, even after many discussions, for students to ask a descriptive question like "Is the UN Universal Periodic Review effective?" In this case, I might propose the following social science question: "Under what conditions do states accept recommendations from the UN Universal Periodic Review?" I also give feedback on the

sources students have compiled.³ Continuous, low-stakes feedback is a recognized pedagogical best practice (Hommel and Rohrlich, 2022).

Once I approve students' proposals, their job for the rest of the semester is to read and analyze the scholarship they have gathered, and then take a step back. I have them answer the questions "What does the literature as a whole tell us? What do we know? What do we not know?" This requires them to think about how the scholarship they have examined, and the arguments and findings therein, relate to one another. Do they agree with, contradict, or build on each other? This assignment sets students up well for other courses in government, IR, and related social science fields where they must conduct research. The assignment sets them up especially well for my upper-level courses on human rights and international law.

Evaluating Existing Theories in the Intermediate Lecture Course

Whereas in my first-year writing seminar, students develop their own research question, I give students in my upper-level human rights lecture course a research question to work on throughout the semester. Specifically, I ask them what theories of human rights treaty commitment and compliance presented in Beth Simmons's 2009 book, *Mobilizing for Human Rights*, best explain a particular country's commitment to CEDAW and subsequent compliance with a specific CEDAW obligation. The current version of the course focuses on women's rights (hence, students' analysis of CEDAW commitment and compliance), but I anticipate future versions focusing on other protected groups – including racial and ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and children – and the treaties concerning them.

I assign students to work in groups of two or three, as many scholars do. This is not an easy assignment; students have been trained to work independently and, often, their inclination is to compete with one another, rather than collaborate in a sustained and meaningful way. After my first time assigning this collaborative project and receiving some backlash from some students, I considered getting rid of it. But upon reflection, more students enjoyed the assignment than did not, and I was encouraged by a fellow teacher that I was equipping students with an important skill that they would be more likely to use in the future than, say, analysis of human rights treaties. The next time I taught the course, I more explicitly framed the assignment – from day one – as being about both the "what" (content) and the "how" (collaboration) of human rights scholarship. I also set up some guardrails against procrastination and possible shirking among collaborators – a source of worry and stress for many students – including weekly progress reports and opportunities for peer feedback. The course went much more smoothly after these adjustments.

For the paper, students select their country from a pre-set list of countries covering different geographic regions and different legal and political systems.⁴ Students select their treaty obligation from the International Human Rights Obligations and Commitments (IHROC) project on which I was a collaborator (Mulesky, Sandholtz, and Zvobgo, 2024; Zvobgo, Mulesky, and Sandholtz, 2020). One of the IHROC datasets codes the 10 core UN human rights treaties, including CEDAW, at the provision (treaty-article-paragraph) level. Another dataset codes whether a given state party has entered a reservation against a given obligation.

In the first half of the semester, students work on the first part of the question: commitment. In a

³ I give students, as a first set of potential resources, a list of peer-reviewed journals that regularly publish articles on human rights and international law topics, emphasizing that peer-reviewed works are the gold standard.

⁴ No two groups of students in a given section of the course have the same country.

case study of approximately 2,500 words, the research partners investigate the factors that motivated their selected country to ratify CEDAW. Students adjudicate on which theory of treaty commitment best explains their case.

To complete this assignment, I give students several resources, including data on treaty membership from the UN, data on political regime types from the Polity V Project, and the JuriGlobe legal systems classification data. I also give suggestions for determining national leaders at the time of signature and ratification, when leaders entered office, and for how long leaders were in office.

Students sort through the data around the time of signature and ratification for the country they have chosen and they suggest, based on the data, whether Simmons (2009) would expect such a country to ratify an international human rights treaty like CEDAW. I also ask students to speculate about whether the country was a sincere or strategic ratifier, and what this would likely mean for subsequent compliance.

In the second half of the semester, students work on the second part of the question: compliance. In a research paper of approximately 5,000 words – the first half of which should be a revised version of the case study they previously submitted – the research partners investigate the factors that led their country to comply with a particular CEDAW obligation, either fully, partially, or not at all, from the time the country ratified CEDAW to the present. Students are invited to judge which theory of human rights treaty compliance best explains their case.

To ground this analysis, I assign students to develop a source database – a set of 10 to 15 data sources drawn from the UN Digital Library, the UN Women Digital Library, CEDAW Committee annual reports, and CEDAW state party reports, among others. I also encourage students to consult government websites (e.g., the website of a country’s national human rights institution), reports from domestic and international non-governmental organizations, and the secondary literature.

This is high-level research: essentially, students create over-time indicators of CEDAW compliance at the obligation level. Students assess both *de jure* and *de facto* compliance and, again, use Simmons (2009) as a guide for their analysis: to what extent should we expect a country – given its regime type, legal system, leadership, neighbors’ behavior, and reservations (if any) – to comply with this human rights treaty obligation?

For students who take this upper-level lecture course after taking the first-year seminar, they have now developed four broad sets of skills: they know how to (1) ask a social science research question and survey the state of the field; (2) test hypotheses derived from existing theories using existing data; (3) develop a corpus of materials which, once analyzed, advances scholarship; and (4) collaborate on a multi-month project. This assignment gives students a running start for courses in research methodology and sets students up well for other more advanced projects, including senior theses. The assignment is especially useful for those students who later enroll in my senior seminar.

Producing Original Research in the Senior Seminar

Everything comes together in my senior seminar on transitional justice, in which students produce a 5,000-word original research paper. We take a scaffolded approach to the assignment, beginning with a proposal, followed by a draft paper, anonymous peer reviews, a class presentation, and, finally, the full paper, complete with a revisions memo as if at a journal. Students must also pass their references through the Gender Balance Assessment Tool (Sumner 2018), ensuring that at least 30 percent of the works they cite are authored or coauthored by women, consistent with authorship patterns in the political science discipline

(Samuels and Teele, 2021).

Papers examine a historical transitional justice policy in two or more contexts and apply insights to the United States. For example, students could study reparations in Germany and Guatemala to understand why some historically repressed groups receive reparations while others do not, or why some groups receive reparations later than others. Students would then propose how the United States could improve on these historical precedents, as the country grapples with historical and contemporary violence, especially racial violence.

Library Resources

For every course, I set up an 80-minute session (the equivalent of a full class session) with research librarians for political science, sociology, and economics. It is vital that students learn about the many resources available to them as they conduct research – whether it is for a course, an independent project, or an assistantship they hold on campus.

Teaching Research Outside the Classroom

In addition to teaching in W&M’s Government Department, I direct the International Justice Lab (IJL) at W&M’s Global Research Institute. I founded IJL in 2019 and have mentored 24 student fellows, with more than a dozen undergraduates and recent alums currently working in the lab. W&M has earned a reputation for providing undergraduates first-rate mentored research experiences. Noting a gap in research opportunities in human rights, international law, and justice, I proposed IJL during my hiring process and secured a large investment from the university to get IJL off the ground and running. Five years later, I am now pursuing large external grants for sustainability, with the help of a post-doctoral research associate who is funded through an internal grant.

I recruit students at all levels, from first- to final-year students, for paid positions. (I am committed to making research experiences inclusive, not reserved only for those who already possess a particular skill-set or who can afford to do unpaid work.) Students participate in every aspect of research: building theory, crafting research designs, collecting and analyzing data, conducting fieldwork, and writing and publishing.

The earlier students join IJL, the better: they accrue more experience and opportunities with time. As described in *PS: Political Science & Politics*, the “ideal trajectory” is for students to join the lab as first- or second-year students. At this stage, they support one of my existing projects. The next year, they start collaborating on a paper with me and their “cohort mates,” which we carry out to publication. The final year, students conduct an independent project (Zvobgo et al., 2023a: 515).

In addition to this lab model – one of several collaborative research models at W&M – my coauthors and I discuss scaling operations, research products, and funding. We also address challenges like student retention, faculty career stage, and external evaluation (Zvobgo et al., 2023a). For a deeper dive into labs and an example of organizing a multi-year research project, see Zvobgo (2022), my chapter on the concept, utility, and application of labs in the social sciences, published in the *Handbook of Research Methods in International Relations*.

Undergirding my work is the Stewardship Model of Mentoring, which I developed with Megan

Becker, Benjamin Graham, and Jonathan Markowitz in the USC Security and Political Economy Lab, where I served as director while in graduate school. For two years, I assisted the principal investigators in recruiting, training, supervising, and mentoring more than 65 undergraduate student researchers. I also led my own research teams.

The Stewardship Model addresses barriers to entry and barriers to retention of students from underrepresented groups. As we note in the *Journal of Political Science Education*, “[they] are less likely to be invited to serve as [research assistants], coauthor peer-reviewed publications, and receive research support” (Becker and Zvobgo, 2020: 364). These disparities make it less likely that they will pursue academic careers and persist in them (Monforti and Michelson 2008).

We therefore leverage targeted recruitment, technical training, applied research experience, multi-level mentorship, and a thoughtfully constructed learning community to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. We equip researchers from diverse backgrounds with the exposure, skill-sets, and psycho-social support necessary to thrive not only in academia but also in industry, nonprofits, and politics. But, why?

[N]one of us could have joined the professorate without substantial investments in our professional development, growth, and success. We [...] must be good stewards of these investments by not only multiplying them in the next generation but also dispersing them more widely (Becker, Graham, and Zvobgo, 2021: 158).

Research and teaching are often discussed as in competition: strong researchers lack the interest, time, or opportunity to teach well, and those who cannot research teach instead. At some institutions, research is the clear priority. But strong research does not necessarily diminish strong teaching, or vice versa (King and Sen, 2013). Teaching and mentoring undergraduate and graduate students can support professors’ research output (Zvobgo et al., 2023a) and keep them excited and motivated. This has certainly been my experience, especially as I practice stewardship.

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