A School for Politicians and Political Staffers

by Chris Arterton

Discussions about diverse public policy issues like ethical behaviour, accountability and voter apathy often come back to issues of education. What are our schools and universities doing to address problems that have emerged in the political processes that underlie our democracy? This article discusses the creation and operation of an institute devoted to the formal training of politicians and persons interested in working for politicians.

The creation of a formal curriculum in politics, taught at a university and leading to a degree, can be the subject of some considerable controversy. In the United States, a number of prominent individuals were dubious about the creation of a professional school of politics. For example, when my school first opened its doors in Washington, the president of the American Association of Political Consultants scoffed at the idea of a master's degree in politics. Then, somewhat later, Bill Clinton's close personal adviser, George Stephanopolus, was quoted as saying that you cannot teach politics in a classroom. That was just before he left the White House and joined the faculty of Columbia University to teach politics.

At the other end of the spectrum, academics have sometimes disparaged the applied curriculum as less respectable than scholarship aimed at theory-building. In the United States, political science has become increasingly abstract and theory oriented over the past three decades and a curriculum of practical politics seems a step backward to those pushing this trend.

Finally, any number of journalists have criticized the idea of a school devoted to training more spin doctors, media manipulators and opinion chasers. Hostility to politics and politicians translates into disdain for the process of educating more of the same.

Nonetheless, despite all the criticism, over the last 20 years, the Graduate School of Political Management at George Washington University in Washington D.C. has grown and prospered, students have come in increasing numbers, been educated, and moved on as alumni into promising and productive careers. And, we believe, they are practicing politics with greater skill earlier in their careers and with a more enhanced sense of ethics in their work.

The school was founded in the belief that democratic politics have changed greatly in the last thirty years, becoming ever more specialized and ever more dominated by technical knowledge and expertise.

> ***The new politics is increasingly reliant upon computers, telecommunications, management, legal regulations, television, and statistical research skills.***

While these developments may be more observable in the United States, I think it is possible to observe the technologies of communication changing politics in many areas of the world.

Chris Arterton is the Dean of the Graduate School of Public Management at George Washington University in Washington D.C. This is a slightly revised version of his presentation to the first graduates of the Manning Centre for Building Democracy at a dinner held in Ottawa on April 18, 2007.

Let me reflect on why and how this trends is proceeding. In many areas of politics – in lobbying, campaigning, and issues management – the old personal networks of yesterday are being supplemented by technical means of building support, means that can be taught and learned. The skills and power of yesterday's politicians were rooted in a elaborate network of individual contacts.

Who you knew was critically important. Who would return your phone calls, who you could ask for a favor. And while "people skills" are still tremendously important in political life, one is struck by how different is today's politics. Contemporary politicians build their support, constituencies and power through adroit use of cable television, focus group research, video and audiotapes, computer-driven mail lists, micro-targeted communications through a variety of channels, internet websites, e-mail programs, and so forth. They manoeuver in a world in which legislation is influenced as much by public opinion polls and 30 second advocacy ads, as by the smoozing and backslapping of lobbyists in the capitol corridors.

> ***In short, what you know has become as important as who you know.***

It is clear that these changes have produced the commercialization of politics. As technical knowledge breeds specialization, and specialized knowledge generates proprietary expertise, individuals and companies are able to charge for their services.

As a result, we have seen a proliferation of political consultants. An inescapable fact of modern political life is that success in politics, and even access to those in power, now depends increasingly on the acquisition of the expertise taught at such places as the Graduate School of Public Management Since this trend toward a politics mediated by communications technology is – I submit – irreversible, we had better learn how to conduct a genuine politics of civil debate, educative advocacy, responsible choice, and accountability within the confines of communications technology. That will necessarily mean dealing with the fact of manifold specializations in political communications and a lessening in the effective potency of amateurism.

I will return to this issue about the merits of this development at a later point, but, for the moment, let me pursue this argument without considering the positive and negative aspects of this change.

The heart of the matter before us is to consider the role that formal education can play in preparing young people for careers in politics. I will suggest five answers.

First, educational programs afford an opportunity to learn comprehensively, magnifying the lessons of practical experience because of the breath of exposure that one can acquire through study. In one year, our students learn:

- How to read and use poll data;
- How to create, film and edit TV ads;
- How to set up a field organization to contact voters;
- How to design an effective website an email campaign;
- How to develop and use a political database;
- How to employ social networking websites to maximum effect
- How to manage people in the hectic environment of an election campaign; and more.

Since the skills and techniques used in politics all tend to reinforce each other, I am a strong believer in the value of breadth that learning politics through education allows. It takes a number of years – working in a variety of positions – to learn all of these skills and techniques, particularly as careers tend to get tracked in one specialized area of politics. So, in addition to bringing our students to the forefront of these expanding areas of expertise, the curriculum allows them to become informed consumers across a whole range of applications that are effective are indeed necessary.

Many of our alumni will never become pollsters, for example, but they will know what to expect from a pollster and how to differentiate a good question from a poor one and how to read poll data in order to sharpen their effectiveness.

The faculty at my school does not think, however, that the degree is a substitute for practical experience in the field. Rather we believe that both are necessary. Field experience is essential to insure that a sense of practical reality gives meaning to the lessons we teach. Experience also adds judgment and perspective to the application of proficiencies learned in the classroom. On the other hand, we have found that studying politics systematically can accelerate the gains of experience. Our students and alumni move up the ladder of success more rapidly than they would without this education.

A second important and fortunate benefit of creating a formal curriculum in politics is that – in contrast to the way that personal politics inherently excludes – a curriculum in politics can be broadly shared. At the Graduate School of Public Management this year, more than half of

our students are women. We have in addition – a strong number of students from minority groups and an increasing flow of applicants from the world's emerging democracies, including many from Latin America. And we even have some students from such highly developed democracies as Canada.

A third strength of formal political education is the importance of separating knowledge about how politics works, from partisan preferences as to the outcomes of politics. I have to be careful because I happen to believe that, ultimately, ideas are more powerful than techniques. Partisan politics and strong advocacy of policy preferences matter greatly to the workings of democracy.

Nevertheless, I believe that highly charged partisanship and increased skill in message development can become intoxicating, leading practitioners to believe that, if they advance rhetoric skillfully, loudly and repeatedly, they can create reality. The antidote to this tendency is found in direct contact with peers and faculty who hold opposing views.

It is also true that partisan politics can distort one's thinking as to how the political system should function, and that leads to the temptation to change the political institutions in an effort to achieve partisan goals. However, such efforts to change (or distort) the political process in order to predetermine policy outcomes only serves to de-legitimize political institutions and weaken democracy.

Rather, I suggest that learning political skills in a university setting allows sharing of knowledge across party lines, facilitates respect and cordiality between those who disagree politically, and creates a greater sense of professionalism among those who work in politics. We have seen numerous examples in which students who will spend their professional lives working against each other have become close personal friends during their time at the school. And, these friendships persist after they leave and serve to strengthen a feeling of professional community that transcends partisan differences.

I should also admit frankly that here is an area in which a school of politics cannot fulfill all the needs of training young political leaders. To be successful young leaders need to have a strong sense of purpose. They need to know why they are working in politics. But, at the Graduate School of Public Management, partisan ideas divide us, while the study of the political process unites us. Therefore, we tend to concentrate on the latter and ignore the former. We have yet to solve the problem of how to think through, discuss and teach the ideas and ideologies that drive politics. We have to think about how to tutor young people in the ideals and perspectives drawn from commitments to social values, without allowing that to become a cause of aggressive divisions among students and faculty. Universities can play a role to the degree they emphasize an analysis of why political techniques work. This is my fourth argument on behalf of political education. Because in a year of study, we can cover subjects in great depth, our students learn more than what was done in a given situation. As faculty, we hope that they can do more than merely copy what they have observed others doing. We want them to know why things are done one way and not another. We want them to be able to analyze situations so that they will be able to innovate as well as replicate. When conditions change, we hope that they have learned the reasons behind the use of different techniques, so they will be better able to adapt to change.

Fifth, finally and most importantly, we believe that formal education can give greater attention to the teaching of ethics and professional responsibilities that go along with the use of political skills. As noted above, politics in the United States has become more commercialized in the last three decades. Many consider this to be a dangerous trend. Too often short term calculations of victory drive out longer term considerations of the health of democratic institutions.

If our political system is in severe trouble, what can be done about it?

In the first place, those who work in politics today believe that the popular view of a disfunctional political system is wildly inaccurate and unrealistic. Contemporary politicians argue with some cogency that modern disdain is not all that unique, politics has always been thus. And, certainly evidence abounds that from its beginnings the American democracy has been filled with vitriol, distortion, and self-interest. In fact, in Philadelphia in 1787, a cynical view of political man led the founders to enshrine in our governmental machinery an overlapping and extensive sharing of powers, precisely because they worried about the tendency for ambition to drive out propriety, prudence and responsibility. By this view, our political view is churning along as planned, perhaps not as it ought to be, but as it must.

What has changed is that the modern era has been markedly transformed not so much by changes in political man but because of the rise of communications technologies. We should also recognize that American citizens do not wholly fulfill their part of the bargain. As is widely lamented, rates of knowledge about and interest in public life are low; all measures of participation are far below what one would hope for a robust democracy. Even so, casting blame on citizens is relatively fruitless.

Clearly we would all prefer a citizenry that is interested, engaged, rational, and demanding. The fact that we fall so short of the ideal of democratic citizenship, however, will remain just that: a fact.

> ***We need to think, therefore, about leveraging political leadership into behaving more appropriately. How can we do that?***

Abstractly, we can think in terms of a progression of measures from mild up to strong means, means that might serve to move toward this end.

Mild forms of reform would rely upon political managers – meaning candidates and their staff, public office holders, party officials, consultants – to establish for themselves the bounds of propriety which should circumscribe their conduct. There are, in fact, some efforts to achieve self-regulation by those involved professionally in politics. Some candidates have signed agreements with their opponents not to spend more than an agreed figure; others have pledged publicly to keep their rhetoric and campaign commercials within specified bounds.

The American Association of Political Consultants has adopted a Code of Ethics that all members sign, but the code has been invoked only in a very few instances. Although they did recently expel one of their members for unethical conduct.

Stronger actions would include efforts to certify political consultants on the basis of knowledge and appropriate behavior. Acceptance of a Code of Conduct and continuing education would be necessary to maintain certification. Cases of inappropriate conduct would be sanctionable by the loss of certification. Peer review would lead to a growing body of precedent, slowly elaborating a sense of ethical behavior as defined collectively by political consultants.

Licensing would constitute an even tougher form of regulation. An agency designated by the government would determine who could provide consulting services to candidates for public office. Presumably, adherence to a Code of Conduct would be essential to preserving one's license, and such requirements would constrain behavior more vigorously than self-policing by the industry itself.

There are, of course, some major problems with licensing political consultants. The dividing line between the content of speech and the conduct of one engaged in political advocacy is exceedingly difficult to draw. That should make us concerned that licencing or registration would serve to curtail free speech.

Secondly, the experience of the US Government agency that regulates campaign finance – the Federal Election Commission – should give pause to anyone who believes that government agencies can effectively regulate political life.

Laws, regulations and codes reach only to the level of behavior, yet our real objective should be to hold those in politics to higher standards; we want them to behave with prudence and judgment. Yet, for many of those engaged in campaign politics, the laws that were passed since 1974 were viewed mostly as inconveniences that could be eroded and by-passed by having smart lawyers perpetually raise tough legal questions that gradually expanded the margins of permissible behavior.

It is a particularly American response to respond to problems by passing laws. For many, the instinctive reaction is to try to legislate ethical behavior.

Any objective analysis would have to conclude that this approach has achieved mixed results at best. But perhaps the more significant conclusion is that these laws do not reach to the significant dimension of personal comportment that we mean when we speak of ethics. We want public servants – candidates, their advisors and staff, interest group representatives, government officials and all those in the fight over public policy to know the difference between right and wrong, not just between legal and illegal. In addition to instituting a system of laws, our need is to create a culture of politics that will lead politicians to self-enforcement of moral codes rather than grudging acceptance or subtle sabotage of laws regulating their conduct.

A profession in politics does not have to mean a tightly closed guild of licensed practitioners, as in lawyers or doctors. Rather a profession can be open-ended but based upon a community that shares norms and a set of ethical propositions and responsibilities. These norms provide boundaries for the applications of political skills and a sense of propriety within which the technologies of politics can be applied. This is an important – though long term – role for political education as a strategy for improving politics. Through self-examination and debate, our students and alumni and, hopefully, political consultants will eventually come to see themselves as managers of democratic practices with obligations that transcend their duties to their clients.

All academic institutions have a dual mission: they teach tomorrow's leaders and they generate knowledge. To these tasks, professional schools add a third: an obligation to engage the related profession in a critical examination of its values, mores, and consequences. The Graduate School of Public Management attempts to stimulate self-examination within the profession of poli-

tics by advancing knowledge in the field, lauding appropriate professional conduct, encouraging the discussion of ethics and the development of professional standards, and striving to advance societal imperatives over the narrower agendas of individual practitioners.

Of course, recognition and acceptance of a set of professional responsibilities in politics will take decades to achieve. My own belief is that, when it comes to engaging those already practicing politics, we should move slowly. Instead of tackling the most delicate and complicated topics of professional ethics, those in politics should begin by discussing more mundane business practices. Not only do these go to the heart of commercialization, but also it is very likely that their business practices are more routine and less fraught with grand issues of public morality. The progress and confidence achieved in that limited sphere might then translate to a willingness to address larger questions.

In any case, the existence of schools educating the next generation of politicians has the prospect of nurturing and teaching more than "on-the-job" skills. Formal teaching inherently subjects an area of human activity to broader debate than does the unquestioning mentorship implicit in the old boy network. If there is a central justification for the ivory tower, it should at least be that we provide a haven for those political professionals – budding and fully formed – to think about the obligations, principles and balancing tests that ought to constrain the exercise of the technologies and skills we teach. In creating a new field of study, we hope to establish the foundation for long-term solutions to the problems of American democracy. As we see it, a major question is whether commercialization can be replaced by professionalization.