Taking It to the Street: The Demographics and Pedagogy of APSA's "Star" Teachers*

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Each year since 1993, the American Political Science Association has recognized its campuswide teaching award winners in the December issue of *PS*. From 1993 to 1999, more than 400 faculty were recognized for their achievements in the classroom. Though we know who receives teaching awards, we know little about these exceptional teachers. What are the demographic backgrounds, behaviors, and attitudes of "star" teachers? Do they value teaching in qualitatively different ways than other university faculty? Do they use similar particular teaching strategies? Do different institutional settings value different styles of teaching? Are there meaningful variations in the approaches and activities of star teachers with different demographic backgrounds?

This article presents the findings of a survey that I administered in the spring and summer of 1999. The survey included both fixed and open-ended questions as well as longer personal interviews with a random sample of the respondents. The response rate was 80% (322/401), which yielded a highly representative sample of APSA's teaching award winners and a sample that mirrors the composition of the Association as a whole. The *APSA Survey of Political Science Departments* reports that 20% of all full-time political scientists are women, while women compose 20.2% of the respondents in the present study. Forty-six percent of tenure-line faculty in APSA are full professors compared to 45% of the survey sample. It is only with regard to race that APSA's teaching award winners differ from the discipline as a whole. Whereas 4.7% of APSA's membership is African-American, only 2.9% of the sample is African-American. Asian Americans and Latinos are similarly underrepresented.

Teaching Effort and Motivation

Studies show that faculty uniformly report that teaching is important, with a vast majority believing that they care more about teaching than their colleagues do (Blackburn et al. 1980). It is not surprising, then, that the APSA faculty who responded to this survey cite teaching as an important professional activity. Respondents uniformly place a strong emphasis on teaching. Table 1 demonstrates that more than 95% of the respondents in each subgroup report that teaching is either very important or essential.[1] The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) consistently reports similar figures in its national survey of faculty (HERI 1999).

Does this consensus on the importance of teaching translate into similar patterns of class preparation? If measured in terms of time committed to course planning, the answer is an emphatic No. Excellent teachers vary significantly in their preparations and the disparities correspond to differences in academic rank and sex. Table 2 shows that senior faculty spend less time preparing for class than their junior colleagues, a difference that may result from two key factors. First, nearly all junior faculty face the significant challenges of new course preparations during the initial years of their careers. One respondent from a national liberal arts institution reported, "I repeated only one upper-level course during my first two years here. To say it was a grind is a tremendous understatement." Another respondent from a large research institution stated that, "TAs are invaluable in managing the workload of my large survey courses, but it took me two or three years to decide how much supervision they actually needed."

The second factor relates to the maturation of senior faculty who find themselves more comfortable in the classroom and have had the time to refine their instructional and evaluative techniques. In personal interviews, senior faculty report that it is the years of experience, not tenure, per se, that have affected their teaching. "It's less that tenure gave me the freedom to teach the substantive material I prefer or in the manner that I desire," explained one senior faculty member, "but the years required to get tenure helped me become more at ease in the classroom than when I first started teaching." A senior faculty member at an institution that has no tenure system echoed this sentiment: "I now know what works for me in the classroom, which, paradoxically, has allowed me the freedom to try some new things as well."

The sex of the respondent also helps explain the time devoted to teaching. Table 2 shows that women are more likely (65.8%) to devote eight or more hours per week to class preparation than men (59.1%). In personal interviews, both male and female faculty report that men seem to be more comfortable with a less structured classroom environment, which also might require fewer hours of preparation. Also, several female respondents stated in their personal interviews that students automatically accept the expertise and authority of male faculty members and feel that a woman's professional stature is linked more closely to performance in the classroom. A female faculty member from a top research institution remarked that, "My male colleagues get away with teaching styles for which I would be punished by students on their course evaluations." Women also claimed that students demand more "out of class" time from them for help with course preparation, advising, and even counseling. "It is my experience that students expect much more personal attention from me and my female colleagues," stated one faculty member from a baccalaureate institution. "It can become a tremendous time commitment."

Institutional affiliation offers another explanation of the time devoted to teaching. Faculty at Ph.D.-granting institutions spend significantly less time preparing for class than faculty at baccalaureate- or master's-granting institutions. There appears to be a tradeoff. The amount of time devoted to research is much greater at Ph.D. institutions than at master's or liberal arts institutions. Table 2 shows that faculty at Ph.D.-granting institutions are more than twice as likely as baccalaureate institution's faculty to spend eight or more hours per week on research and writing.

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TABLE 1
The Importance of Being a Good Teacher

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Essential
Entire Sample	0.6%	1.3%	15.8%	81.4%
Academic rank				
Professor (n = 144)	0%	1.4%	11.8%	86.8%
Associate professor (n = 82)	0%	1.2%	17.1%	81.7%
Assistant professor (n = 80)	1.3%	1.3%	22.5%	75%
Sex				
Female (n = 63)	1.6%	3.2%	14.3%	81%
Male (n = 249)	0.4%	0.8%	16.5%	82.3%
Institutional affiliation				
Ph.D. institution (n = 247)	0.9%	1.4%	18.1%	79.6%
Master's institution (n = 57)	0%	1.8%	8.8%	89.5%
Baccalaureate institution (n = 30)	0%	0%	16.7%	83.3%

This may be explained, in part, by the liberal arts institutions' incentives for good teaching (Peterson et al. 1989). Respondents from research institutions consistently noted that for excellent teaching they received few extrinsic rewards, such as salary increases, and that teaching was a secondary or tertiary concern for tenure and promotion. Research institutions' systems for teaching evaluation tend to rely on student evaluations and to include peer or external review on an ad hoc or volunteer basis.

In short, excellent teachers at Ph.D.-granting institutions must find ways to balance the requirements of good teaching with the necessity of producing scholarly research.

Teaching award winners from liberal arts institutions reported greater extrinsic rewards for teaching, with pedagogic competency weighted heavily in promotion and tenure decisions. A representative comment from a respondent at a top-ranked liberal arts institution stated that ". . . there is no way to get tenure here without effective teaching skills. A strong research record is also necessary—increasingly so—but nobody is granted tenure with a poor teaching record." In these institutions, teaching evaluation tends to include multiple measures beyond student evaluations, including peer review by senior colleagues or external faculty committees. Excellent teachers in these institutions have both the opportunity and the incentive to develop and revise their pedagogy.

A second explanation for the "effort gap" between excellent teachers in different institutions lies in the level of ancillary support. Faculty at Ph.D. institutions are much more likely to have teaching assistants (68.2%) than their counterparts at master's-granting schools (19.3%) or baccalaureate institutions (16.7%). These assistants provide support primarily for large introductory classes by leading discussion sections and grading exams or papers. In personal interviews, few of the respondents reported that they used TAs in any systematic way in upper-level classes. Several noted that the testing instruments of upper-level classes (papers, essays, exams, etc.) make it difficult to use TAs in an effective manner, but that TAs' support in introductory classes liberated them to focus more on specialized classes.

TABLE 2
Professional Time Allocation

	More than eight hours of class preparation each week	More than eight hours of research each week
Entire Sample	61.5%	52.5%
Academic rank		
Professor (n = 144)	61.3%	57.2%
Associate professor (n = 82)	59.5%	44.3%
Assistant professor (n = 80)	67.5%	67.1%
Sex		
Female (n = 63)	65.8%	47.5%
Male (n = 249)	59.1%	66.5%
Institutional affiliation		
Ph.D. institution (n = 247)	56.9%	67.0%
Master's institution (n = 57)	70.2%	58.2%
Baccalaureate Institution (n = 30)	86.7%	30.0%

Pedagogic Practices of Teaching Award Recipients

In terms of pedagogy, APSA's teaching award winners are somewhat difficult to characterize. They form a heterogeneous group in terms of their instructional techniques, the way they organize class sessions, and to a lesser extent their use of diverse evaluative techniques and the instruments they use for grading student performance. While there exist some patterns based on institutional affiliation, sex, and academic rank, it appears that a variety of instructional techniques are effective. In fact, students and faculty favor no single instructional approach when selecting teaching award recipients. The sole exception is an emphasis on writing—the grading strategies of award-winning teachers show a strong consensus on written assignments both inside and outside the classroom. This commonality aside, students and faculty emphasize no single instructional strategy over others. Now, on to some specifics.

Instructional Techniques. As indicated in Table 3, nine of 10 teaching award winners use class discussions. This figure doesn't tell us much about their classroom pedagogy, however, since class dis-

TABLE 3
Instructional Techniques

(% who use the technique in most or all of their classes)

	computer	experiential learning	group projects	extensive lecturing	cooperative learning	class discussion
Entire Sample	15.3%	8.8%	15.1%	55.9%	30.1%	90.8%
Academic Rank						
Professor (n = 144)	16.2%	12.2%	16.4%	61.2%	27.6%	98.7%
Associate prof. (n = 82)	14.8%	5.0%	11.1%	53.1%	25.9%	90.3%
Assistant prof. (n = 80)	14.1%	5.2%	18%	47.5%	39.7%	94.9%
Sex						
Female (n = 63)	11.6%	12.1%	22.1%	36.7%	58.4%	95.1%
Male (n = 249)	18.8%	8.3%	13.9%	61.4%	24.1%	89%
Institutional Affiliation						
Ph.D. institution (n = 247)	11.4%	8.8%	12.9%	58.7%	29.6%	90.1%
Master's institution (n = 57)	22.8%	10.7%	21%	51.8%	32.2%	96.5%
Baccalaureate institution (n = 30)	23.4%	6.7%	82.8%	43.3%	30%	76.7%
Selection Mechanism						
Student body election (n = 25)	30.4%	66.7%	81.8%	60.8%	36.3%	91.6%
Student committee (n = 28)	50%	14.2%	64.3%	60.7%	21.4%	85.7%
Faculty committee (n = 112)	13.6%	6.6%	17.3%	55%	25.6%	89.1%
Student-faculty committee (n = 124)	15.4%	12.2%	18.7%	54%	37.1%	92.7%

cussions are a natural addition to all other instructional techniques. More interesting is the finding that a majority of star teachers still use extensive lecturing in most or all of their classes (55.9%). An additional 33% use lectures in some of their classes. Faculty reported that lecturing provides an efficient means of communicating substantive material. One senior faculty member put it bluntly, "Oftentimes students simply don't have the substantive knowledge to have a productive discussion. It's a waste of time . . . in fact, it's irresponsible."

Besides lecturing, a number of professors use computer-aided instruction (15.3%) and experiential learning (8.8%) in most of their courses, while less than 10% of the respondents use other techniques such as group projects, cooperative learning, and class discussions. Of the 30 people we interviewed, 28 indicate that the figures for computer-aided instruction are likely to underestimate the use of basic computer technology by APSA's top teachers, especially outside of the classroom. Nearly all of the respondents from personal interviews (28/30) find themselves using technology to communicate with students in ways they believe to be more efficient and effective. These respondents indicate that they use email primarily to send assignments or answer questions from students. One faculty member at a master's-granting institution stated, "I use email to 'knock down' questions that can be best addressed outside of class and to gather new questions or topics for discussion to bring back to the classroom."

There exists some variation in the instructional techniques of teaching award winners at different types of institutions. Table 3 indicates that faculty from Ph.D.-granting schools are more likely to lecture than their counterparts from other institutions, though, as noted earlier, lecturing remains an important part of pedagogy in all settings. Furthermore, faculty at research institutions are less likely to employ pedagogies that require intensive oversight by the professor or strategies that demand intensive preparation. These schools generally have higher student–faculty ratios, which significantly increase the costs of experiential learning, computer-aided instruction, or group projects.

There are significant differences in instructional techniques between the sexes. Table 3 shows that exceptional female professors use a more diverse range of instructional techniques than their male counterparts. Men are much more likely to depend on extensive lecturing and are somewhat more likely to use computer-aided instruction, but they trail women with regard to the use of experiential learning, group projects, cooperative learning, and class discussion. This finding is consistent with the greater amount of time women faculty devote to class preparation. Lecturing may be an efficient means of communicating substantive material, but it may also require less preparation time than other instructional techniques.

One of the most surprising findings of the survey is that senior faculty appear to be just as pedagogically innovative as their junior colleagues, despite senior faculty's devoting fewer hours to teaching. Full professors are slightly more likely to depend on extensive lecturing, but also more likely to use computer-aided instruction and experiential learning. As noted earlier, personal interviews indicate that the security that comes with seniority brings with it the freedom to try new techniques and take greater

TABLE 4
Evaluative Techniques
(% who use the technique in most or all of their classes)

	essay exams	multiple-choice exams	quizzes	term/ research papers	student presentations	grading on a curve
Entire Sample	82.3%	16.5%	17.8%	63.6%	35.2%	16%
Academic Rank						
Professor (n = 144)	86.4%	16.3%	19.1%	61.8%	24.1%	19.9%
Associate prof. (n = 82)	80.5%	18.5%	18.5%	65.9%	31.7%	11%
Assistant prof. (n = 80)	81%	12%	15.8%	65.4%	44.8%	15.4%
Sex						
Female (n = 63)	84.4%	15%	17.4%	61.6%	46.6%	8.3%
Male (n = 249)	83.6%	17%	18.2%	64.6%	32.5%	18.3%
Institutional Affiliation						
Ph.D. institution (n = 247)	83.5%	15.9%	13.8%	63%	31.3%	15.7%
Master's institution (n = 57)	77.2%	22.8%	26.3%	64.9%	42.1%	14%
Baccalaureate institution (n = 30)	85.7%	10.5%	25.9%	72.4%	48.3%	20.6%
Selection Mechanism						
Student body election (n = 25)	87.5%	34.7%	58.3%	70.9%	40.9%	10%
Student committee (n = 28)	67.9%	21.4%	35.7%	64.3%	28.6%	46.5%
Faculty committee (n = 112)	84.4%	11.1%	13.9%	57.2%	37.2%	17.1%
Student-faculty committee (n = 124)	83.7%	18%	13.4%	64.8%	35.8%	19.5%

advantage of institutional resources such as information technology staff. Senior faculty also compare favorably in their use of other instructional techniques.

It does not appear that students or faculty value certain instructional techniques over others when choosing teaching award winners. Four principal voting bodies confer teaching awards: the entire student body (7.8%), a student committee (8.8%), a faculty committee (35.8%), and a student–faculty committee (39.9%). Table 3 demonstrates that students favor faculty members who incorporate experiential and group learning, but they also reward faculty who use extensive lecturing. Faculty are similar to students in recognizing excellent teachers who are lecturers, but also in rewarding colleagues who use cooperative learning or class discussions. These findings are consistent with existing research suggesting that faculty and students do not emphasize significantly different pedagogical techniques (Feldman 1988).

Evaluative Techniques. While teaching award winners vary somewhat in their instructional techniques, they rely on very similar methods to evaluate student performance. Table 4 presents the rates at which educators use these different methods. The most obvious finding is that writing plays a crucial role in the classrooms of a vast majority of these exceptional teachers. More than 80% of the respondents use essay exams in either all or most of their classes, and a significant majority (63.6%) also assign research or term papers. One junior faculty member stated that, "There is no doubt that multiple choice allows me to directly measure the substantive knowledge of my students. That being said, I believe that essay exams and other writing assignments are more valid measures of the student's understanding of the material." Other evaluative instruments such as quizzes (17.8%), multiple-choice exams (16.5%), and weekly essay assignments (13.2%) are less popular, with a majority of respondents stating that they use these and other instruments in none of their classes.

The pedagogical consensus of APSA's teaching award winners is even more striking when the sample is broken down into different subgroups. Table 4 presents data that show how institutional affiliation, sex, and academic rank have no dramatic effect on the choice of grading instruments. The popularity of writing assignments remains very strong and consistent since faculty from each demographic category use essay exams and term papers at comparable rates. In addition, these findings demonstrate the limited importance of multiple-choice exams and quizzes for respondents in each of these categories.

Over and above the strong consensus on grading strategies, there are some notable minor variations among different subgroups. Men and women also share an affinity for writing assignments, but differ on the use of student presentations and grading on a curve. Women are much more likely to include student presentations among their graded assignments, while men are more likely to grade on a curve. Similar patterns exist among groups based on faculty rank. Junior faculty are nearly twice as likely to use student presentations than their senior colleagues, while full professors curve their grades more often than associate or assistant professors.

Institutional affiliation has a moderate effect on the evaluative techniques of teaching award winners. Like all teaching award winners, faculty at Ph.D.-

granting institutions use writing assignments more than other evaluative methods. This might be surprising given their larger class size, but, as noted earlier, Ph.D.-granting institutions provide more ancillary support for instructors, which may allow them to use more time-intensive techniques. Finally, faculty at Ph.D.-granting institutions use student presentations and quizzes less than their colleagues at other institutions, but they are also less likely to grade their assignments on a curve.

Do students or faculty favor certain grading techniques over others when choosing teaching award winners? The data on Table 4 indicate that they do not. The faculty selected by a student committee or chosen via an election of the entire student body are decidedly heterogeneous in their evaluative techniques. Essay exams and term papers are the most favored grading instruments, but students also favor quizzes and multiple-choice exams. The results for grading on a curve, however, are somewhat confusing. Award winners chosen by student body elections use this technique with the least frequency (10%), but those chosen by student committees are the most likely (46.5%) to grade on a curve in order to ensure a normal distribution of grades.

Conclusion

APSA's teaching award winners, like all faculty, believe that teaching is important. Generally speaking, these faculty use a variety of instructional techniques and are willing to try new methods. There are some differences in teaching style among faculty at different types of institutions, but perhaps not as much as one might expect. Faculty at Ph.D.-granting institutions employ many of the same strategies as faculty at baccalaureate institutions, in part due to the support of teaching assistants. Still, excellent teachers at baccalaureate institutions are more likely to employ techniques such as group projects and computer-aided instruction, which may require more intensive preparation and greater student–faculty interaction. There are clearer differences based on sex and academic rank. These data indicate that women are more pedagogically diverse than men and that senior faculty are just as imaginative in the classroom as their junior colleagues.

The grading strategies of teaching award winners are somewhat easier to characterize. Excellent teachers require that their students write. In fact, the vast majority of faculty, regardless of their demographic backgrounds or institutional affiliations, favor essay exams and term papers over any other strategies. Conversely, only a small minority use multiple-choice exams and quizzes.

Finally, the findings presented here indicate that the pedagogy of teaching award winners is not systematically related to the mechanism by which the awards are granted, whether by campus-wide election, student committee, faculty committee, or student–faculty committee. This is contrary to the popular notion that students and faculty use radically different criteria to identify effective teaching, and is consistent with existing research in higher education (Feldman 1988).

A next step in the study of teaching in political science might be to compare the behavior and attitudes of teaching award winners against a broader sample of political or social scientists. This comparison would help clarify some of the relationships suggested by this analysis and would also facilitate the use of more sophisticated analytical tools.

Notes

*The author would like to thank the Department of Political Science at Illinois Wesleyan University for generous support of this research. Josip Glaurdic also provided invaluable research assistance.

1. Faculty who fall into the "other" category for faculty rank, such as lecturers or instructors, are not included on this table or the others that follow. Only 1.6% of APSA's teaching award winners place themselves in this category.

2. There are other mechanisms for choosing teaching award winners, but their frequency is much rarer than these four mechanisms. The remaining 7.7% either fell outside these four categories or were missing.

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