

Benjamin Toll

Associate Professor

Department of Political Science and Criminology
Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18701

Phone: (812) 929-9025

Email: benjamin.toll@wilkes.edu

Homepage: <http://www.benjamtoll.net>

Teaching Philosophy

I was lucky to grow up as the child of two educators. This means that I would regularly hear about the frustrations of dealing with students who do not live up to their full potential, the minutiae of grading, or just the day to day life of preparing multiple classes without a lot of extra time. I also got to hear about those experiences that we all love like when a student who fights hard to graduate gets over the finish line, that student gets accepted into a great graduate school, or hearing about those moments when students have the lightbulb moment and things start to make sense. I am now in my 12th year of teaching full time at the collegiate level and can honestly say I love doing this job. I feel those moments of sadness when students are struggling or are not doing as well as they can; and, I feel those moments of great joy when students have those fought for and deserved success.

I deeply enjoy teaching college students and trying to innovate how I teach classes every semester. The moments I remember as a professor are those times where students ask those good questions in class, do research outside of class because of a conversation, or I can tell they are thinking in a way they have not done so before. And, I hope to highlight how this is part of my teaching process throughout the rest of this letter.

Every class I have taught has two overarching goals: I want students to learn deeply about the topic through engaging in critical thinking, and I want to increase the level of interest that students have in the political system in order to be better citizens and better thinkers. I have learned a great amount about the time and effort it takes to succeed in the classroom. I take the craft of teaching seriously by continually thinking about how I can improve my courses. I have taught a broad array of courses over my career, and have never had a semester without new preparations. At Wilkes I have taught 16 different courses, and genuinely enjoy the process of creating new classes for students.

I try to provide students with assignments and work that fits the level of the course being taken, but to also provide opportunities for them to grow as students, scholars, and adults. One of the first things I tell students is that facts are important, but without context they are meaningless. Thus, it is a goal of mine that students learn to understand the context of the American political system in order to understand more fully why the facts matter. I have done this in a few specific ways that encourage students to think more deeply about the issue at hand.

First, I try to be clear with students about my goals for each class period. Every week I send out an email over the weekend with the plans for the upcoming week. In this message I will outline the primary question to be discussed for each day of class. At the beginning of each class I will highlight again the big picture question and discuss the path of that particular class period and how we will get around to answering the question of the day.

Another example of encouraging critical thinking is how I teach my upper-level courses where I provide students with unit-based questions that will turn into their exam questions. Thus, students routinely return to those unit questions in class discussions to think about how one could answer them most effec-

tively through the material we are discussing that day. Of course, one can arrive at different answers, but this big question to the unit allows students to keep the theoretical importance of the class in mind even as we discuss the basic facts on any given day.

In my upper-level classes, I also incorporate simulations as a way to encourage critical thinking skills. In my U.S. Presidency course students were placed on teams and engaged in a fantasy draft competition. The teams drafted 8 presidents, and 1 failed presidential candidate, and were judged along five different criteria. This encourages them to work together to build the best team they possibly can. It encourages students to think strategically about drafting presidents and deciding whom to place in what category, much like the strategy required in the role of the presidency every day. Further, students were tasked with arguing why their roster is the best overall and fits as the best in each criteria. This project gives students an opportunity to learn about the presidents, while also sharpening their critical thinking skills. I do a similar simulation in my U.S. Congress class where students play the role of a Senator, and we spend class days simulating the floor process in the Senate.

The second primary goal of my teaching philosophy is that students will have a greater appreciation for the material after the class. I remember not being a good college student in some of my general education classes. I know that many students are not mature enough to put a large amount of effort into classes they are not inherently interested in. Thus, I want to encourage students to think about the importance of politics in everyday life, but also to be more interested in the material after leaving the class.

A way that I have tried to increase student interest in my general education class (Intro to American Politics) is through less lecturing and more active work in class. For instance, I explain how different the Articles of Confederation were from the Constitution through a simulation where they have to decide on the nation's capital as the Articles Congress. Students are able to quickly see flaws and differences between the Articles and the Constitution. This allows me to transition students into a conversation about the difficult decisions made during the Constitutional Convention through a conversation about the Articles of Confederation, which many students have never really studied.

In my Urban Politics and Public Policy Analysis courses, I had students write policy-based assignments for a city or issue they were interested in throughout the course. We studied the academic theory of the issues, but they had to make it practical to the real world we are living in. I have also used real world examples to encourage interest in topics with students. In my Politics of Race and Policing course, I invited two individuals to speak to the class about their experiences on this topic. One of them is a friend who is an African-American that serves on a large police force in the Midwest, and the other is a local connection working in the community to build trust between law enforcement and communities of color. I also did something similar in my FYF course in the fall of 2020. I taught a course on the Politics and Money of Sports. I had students work in groups as a different organization, and they were told to make a recommendation to the NCAA about COVID-related policy in the spring 2021. Many of the students in the course were athletes and found the material interesting already, but I also set up interviews connected to the topic at hand. I know the commissioner of a mid-sized NCAA D1 conference, and he spoke to the class. I also know a defensive coordinator at a Big Ten University and a head men's basketball coach at another Big Ten school. They connected me with staffers that make decisions about these issues within the athletic department at those universities. Students were able to talk with these leaders and learn about how different institutions saw the threats of COVID playing out in real time. It helped them to see the politics and ambiguity of these decision-making processes.

These are just small examples of how I try to get students to think about the big picture and develop an interest in the material outside of the strictly academic components. My other document provides more of a list of things I do in the classroom to try and teach in a different way. I want to briefly remark on the why I try to teach this way. Before COVID came about I taught in a much more straightforward way.

My classes were much more focused on the traditional lecture, with rarely some discussion thrown into a specific class. My evaluations were always strong and this style worked when I was in college so I had no specific plans to change this structure.

However, with the COVID pandemic, a lot of things changed about the way our students engage the world and it really forced me to reevaluate my teaching strategy. First, I have always been honest about my own struggles with mental health, but this is something I became much clearer about with my students. Research indicates that more students than ever struggle with mental health challenges during their college years than ever before. I struggled greatly when I was in college and I will make sure to point out every semester the importance of mental health. I have realized how freeing it can be for students to see a faculty member that has struggled in the same way they are currently struggling and to see that there is a path forward. Second, I have changed greatly how my view of deadlines is structured. Before COVID I would very rarely grant deadlines to students instead focusing on the fact that these deadlines have been known for some time. Now, I try to focus on having flexible deadlines with students but still expecting them to complete the work in a timely manner. What this means, is I have instituted a policy where students can ask me for a deadline extension and will receive permission without question the first time they are asking for this. After the first time, I ask students to come to my office and we discuss time management, as well as how to approach the rest of the semester so they do not need to rely on extensions to complete their work. As a summary, I have started to view my role as helping to educate the whole person. While I am inherently interested in the content of American politics I have come to believe that my primary responsibility is to the whole student and not just their brain. So, I am constantly asking how can I help students to develop their intellect, emotional maturity, ability to work with others, and other soft skills that are so important in today's world.