"What does one do with a degree in Political Science?"

By Dr. Dale Story

What does one do with a Political Science degree? A very common question. One of our favorite answers is: "Whatever you want." Your career opportunities in Political Science are unlimited.

Now, if you are looking for a professional degree with specific career tracks, almost guaranteed salaries, and even predictable employment arenas, Political Science is not for you. On the other hand, if you want flexibility, a myriad of choices, opportunities to try different professions, and unconstrained chances for advancement--Political Science is probably for you. Especially if you enjoy studying politics.

I like to start with a few personal stories. My own experience was one in which all my high school counselors and their battery of tests told me I was destined to become an engineer. I was admitted into an excellent engineering school with a sizeable scholarship. I had paid internships alternating semesters. The promises of a lucrative career in the future were very appealing. But my problem was that I was discovering that engineering (both my courses and my internships) were not very interesting to me. Fortunately, I was attending a strong liberal arts school and was taking a number of History, English, Sociology, and Political Science courses. I decided to switch to Political Science, entered graduate school, and the rest is history.

My brother was a Political Science major from the beginning of his college career. And he took the most common (if any Political Science career track is common) route of going to law school. He did very well in law school and secured a position in a prestigious firm in a major metropolitan area. He prospered in that role for several decades. But he eventually grew tired of the grind of "billable hours" and decided to see about pursuing other options. His quest led him to a position as Executive Director of a large metropolitan church. The critical-thinking skills and problem-solving abilities that he garnered as a Political Science major served him well as he switched careers relatively late in life. Though not as lucrative as his law career, the point is that his undergraduate studies gave him the opportunity to follow a new career that he found to be more personally fulfilling.

Finally, a student of mine years ago related an interesting story to me. It involved his comparing notes with one of his close friends. My student was interested in politics and wanted to work in a university environment. He majored in Political Science, not knowing exactly what the future held. His friend majored in one of the professional
programs on campus. This program had a 100% success rate in the professional entrance exam and could guarantee its students placements in particular firms at salaries very impressive to a young college graduate. Upon graduation, my student knew he had enjoyed his Political Science major, but still was not sure what direction he was going. In fact, he worked several part-time jobs (waiting tables, retail, and the like) for upwards of a year. Meanwhile, his friend was already in his white-collar, professional position making a very decent salary. Yet, my student was making contacts, pursuing leads, and eventually was hired as a low-level development officer in a major university. He has worked his way up the ladder over the years and now is the Vice President of Development for a very prestigious medical school. In the meantime, his friend (who seemed to have all the advantages upon graduation) is with the same firm doing much the same thing at much the same salary many years later.

Bottom line is that your Political Science degree will serve you well in pursuing a variety of different career paths--and even in changing paths.

Good luck.

Dale Story

Professor