Notes from the Chair

It’s our goal in Calvin’s Political Science Department to help students see their calling as a life-direction with high stakes and high expectations. We think that goal means that Christians must try to understand, perhaps better than anyone else, the basic assumptions and values that shape our political institutions and motivate our own political behaviors. So our graduates must be just as comfortable thinking about “big” ideas as they are assessing statistical data about policy outcomes or public opinion. Analytical skills are basic to what we do, but applying those skills is meaningless without a normative framework of Christian thinking to guide their use.

Calvin’s Political Science Department has a storied history of combining the best normative and empirical thinking in our teaching and research. And some of our past faculty – for example, Paul Henry, a member of the U.S. Congress from 1985 to 1993, and Steve Monsma, a Michigan state legislator from 1972 to 1982 – have even taken this kind of thinking directly into political office. We are delighted this year to add two new teacher-scholars to our faculty as we continue to carry on the Department’s important legacy.

Dr. Becca McBride comes to us from Vanderbilt University, where she received her Ph.D. in political science earlier this year. She has a B.A. from Belmont College and an M.A. from Georgetown University, where she specialized in Chechnya, violent ethnic conflict, and terrorism. While at Georgetown she also started working at the Central Intelligence Agency as a Russian analyst, a job she continued to hold for a short time after graduation. She returned with her family to her native Nashville, where she taught at Belmont for several years and eventually began her Ph.D work. She will be teaching international relations and comparative politics at Calvin. She is also continuing to develop several research projects on the politics of intercountry adoption, an understudied policy area that affects many Christians in profound ways. Becca is married to Adam, a finance manager with Deloitte, and she has two children, Keegan and McKenna. It’s also important to point out that the entire family is quite passionate about anything related to Disney.

Dr. Kurt Pyle earned his B.A. in mathematics and political science at Hope College in 2006. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. in political science at Michigan State University, where he specialized in American politics and political methodology. At Calvin, Kurt is currently teaching courses on American politics and research methodology. He is an expert on the role of emotion in shaping political behavior and attitudes, which shapes his research agenda in many ways (it might be a surprise to readers that political scientists are only recently taking emotions seriously as a factor in political decisions). Kurt is recently married to Emily, a veterinarian at a local animal hospital. They are outdoors enthusiasts who also enjoy traveling and shopping at local farmer’s markets.

—Kevin den Dulk
From Student to Scholar: McGregor Fellowship Program

What does a professor do when he or she has no courses to teach? Calvin College and the Political Science Department encourage faculty and students to learn for themselves by getting involved in summer research. Students can get a taste of what a career in political science is like through the McGregor Fellowship Program, an external grant that funds nine weeks of research and mentoring for students of the humanities or social sciences. This past summer, the Political Science Department had the honor of having McGregor recipient, Greg Kim, work with Professor Westra on his book project, tentatively titled, “Reforming the Global Security Order: Institutional Legitimacy and Global Security Governance in a Changing World.” Westra’s project is a continuation of his work from the previous summer when he collaborated with McGregor scholar, James Randall. Like before, Westra emphasized, many qualified students applied for the position, and it was incredibly difficult to choose. Ultimately, Westra selected Kim because of his outstanding academic performance in Westra’s POLS 309 course.

Westra’s research involves the analysis of states’ efforts to reform rules and charters of security institutions and of the entire global security order, which includes a whole range of treaties and organizations that were established following World War II. Specifically, Westra is interested in what states have done to improve these structures and what makes these efforts succeed or fail.

Kim was heavily engaged in the empirical aspect of Westra’s research. His job consisted of three tasks: case collection, source collection, and case coding. Case collection comprised of listing all of the reform efforts that fit within specified parameters. After composing a list of all possible cases, Kim had to find sources that supplied the original texts, which were often found in the UN Treaty Collection, the UN Bibliographic Information System, or other databases. All of this was in preparation for Kim’s final task: case coding. Together, Westra and Kim developed the “Institutional Reform of the Global Security Order Codebook,” which contains rules of how to code and read the data that Kim collected. For example, the codes distinguish between new institutions, institutions that are expanding membership, and those restricting membership, among other variables. Initially, Kim coded 50 to 60 cases, which showed the coding to be consistent and reliable. By the end of the program, their data set included 182 cases!

From the start, Kim showed enthusiasm and initiative for the project. He had read about Westra’s work with Randall the previous summer and was curious if he could do something similar. Having taken four courses with Westra during his junior year, Kim believed that, although the work might be tough, he would learn a lot and he would be doing meaningful work. He found his prediction to be true; Westra is as detailed and rigorous in his research as he is in the classroom. Kim often worked independently, which he found at first to be challenging, but the work proved to be rewarding, and Kim appreciated that Westra trusts his students. In addition to learning the value of social science research, Kim also learned about the stamina it requires. Kim hopes to continue to work in social science research after going to graduate school in international studies.

The McGregor Fellowship Program is a great benefit for the college and the department, as it promotes student involvement in the academic work of their professors. The Political Science Department is proud of both its students and professors and hopes to have many more opportunities for similar collaborative work.

Find Us on Facebook!

Facebook is no longer just a way to message friends and play games; it is also a great source for networking. Earlier this summer, the Political Science Department launched its own Facebook group as a way to connect students and alumni. Many alumni have already joined the group and posted their profiles. This inventory of personal biographies will aid current students in developing contacts with alumni and help them think through their vocation by showing models of professional tracks. With postings from alumni, students will also be able to learn from their advice and identify internship opportunities.

Alumni will benefit from the group as well. Already it has been useful to connect alumni within the same region, such as Washington, D.C. In addition, the page will inform members of upcoming department events, lectures, publications, and anything related to the life of the department.

The Facebook page is one element of the department’s broader efforts to help students develop their vocational calling. These efforts include, among other things, facilitating internships for students, headed up by the new internship director, Professor Mikael Pelz, and a reinvigorated Pi Sigma Alpha group, under the direction of Professor Becca McBride.

To join the Facebook group, find the group on Facebook titled, “Calvin College Political Science and International Relations,” and click on the request button. If you are already a member, invite your political science friends!

The Political Science Department’s Facebook group is a great opportunity for students and alumni alike to stay connected with the department and establish contacts that will prove to be valuable in the future!
Alumni Update: Matthew Faraci

Since graduating from Calvin College in 1998, alumnus Matthew Faraci has been able to reach out to young adults, both through his career and his personal advice. He has had a wide variety of experiences in the Washington, DC, area in the service of a prominent midwestern Congressman, the U.S. Secretary of Labor, senior government officials, and the president of a high-profile business organization. In addition, Faraci is an award-winning television producer and has taken on leadership roles at a number of well-known non-profit groups. His accomplishments led him to his current position as Executive Director of Public Affairs at The Stone Agency, an organization he helped build that engages more than four million young adults across the country. Today, Faraci applies his unique experience for Stone’s clients, where he is helping companies, non-profits, and others in the public arena build vibrant communities and connect with the customers and constituents in the ways they want to be engaged—by fusing smart and micro-targeted messaging with the most cutting-edge digital strategies.

As seen in his work to connect people through The Stone Agency, Faraci finds relationships to be very important. In particular, he cherishes his rich relationships with professors like Bill Stevenson, Luis Lugo, Chuck Strikwerda, Bob DeVries, and Corwin Smidt during his time at Calvin. Faraci commented, “On many days—after class—I would find myself in one of their offices, talking through a whole host of issues from politics, to issues from my studies, to moments where I sought personal advice. That’s what makes Calvin a special place. You can gain a knowledge set anywhere, the distinctive is the richness of the experience, and people are the key ingredient there.” Instead of feeling lost in a sea of faces, Faraci felt as though the professors saw him as a uniquely special person, a person worth investing in.

In today’s hectic society, Faraci realizes that young people face difficult challenges in the job market, and he passes along some of the wisdom he has attained over the years:

“First, don’t think less of yourself because the economic opportunities are fewer. God created you with a plan and purpose for your life, and if you follow what He has for you, He will put you in a position where you can build His kingdom and do His work. That is an absolute guarantee. As the Scriptures point out, though there was a famine in Egypt, there was a light in Goshen where God’s people were.

“Second, as you consider above, consider how-as my old Chief of Staff used to say - you can be a solution for someone. As an example, think of the whole area of grassroots digital engagement. Everyone understands its power and its importance, but not everyone understands how to make it happen. Perhaps you do. So when you see a campaign, a company, or an organization, look for gaps. Think about what they could be doing better and pitch them on your solution and how you can fix the problem. In an era where dollars are scarce, your ability to demonstrate value is a significant asset.

“Third, be a professional. I can’t tell you how many interviews I’ve conducted in which people fail to dress properly, don’t send a follow up thank you note for the interview, or have a poorly assembled resume where they missed important details. God expects us to be excellent in all we do, make sure you meet the highest standards with every opportunity.

“Finally, always operate with absolute integrity and remember whom you are really working for. Colossians 3:23 reminds us that ‘Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.’”

Matthew Faraci and his wife keep busy with two young boys and a newborn baby girl.
Against the Tide: Immigrants, Day Laborers, and Community in Jupiter, Florida

October 18, 2013: Dr. Timothy Steigenga spoke on his most recently published book, Against the Tide: Immigrants, Day Laborers, and Community in Jupiter, Florida, which he co-authored with Sandra Lazo de la Vega. Steigenga is a professor of political science and chair of the social sciences and humanities at the Wilkes Honors College of Florida Atlantic University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and has been honored with multiple awards for his service and research, including a Dwight Allison Fellowship, the Presidential Leadership Award, the Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Chairman's Award of Excellence, and the FAU Researcher of the Year Award.

Building the Rule of Law in New States: Kosovo and the Shadow of the European Union

November 4, 2013: The fourth annual Pruis Rule of Law Lecture featured Dr. Sandra Fullerton Joireman, Weinstein Chair of International Studies and professor of Political Science at the University of Richmond, currently also professor of Politics and International Relations at Wheaton College in Illinois. Dr. Joireman received her PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles, and has done postdoctoral work at the University of Oxford. She has authored a number of books, most recently Where There is No Government: Enforcing Property Rights in Common Law Africa, as well as many journal articles. Much of her research and writing has focused on African countries, and on how institutional frameworks impact economic growth and political stability, including law and property rights in previously colonized countries.

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution

November 11, 2013: The Henry Institute welcomed Potters House high school students to Calvin. Six teams of students who are participating in “We the People: The Citizen and Constitution Program” each presented a 4 minute presentation within a simulated Congressional hearing setting, where they were judged by panels who evaluated their presentations and asked follow-up questions. Calvin students from the honors political science class served as evaluators. The November 11 event was a dry-run for the high school students, who will be continuing on to the competitive stage of the program, which culminates in a national event in April of 2014.

Department Picks

The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver

The Poisonwood Bible is a compelling coming of age story that chronicles the birth of the Democratic Republic of Congo through the eyes of the four daughters of Baptist missionaries. Each chapter is written by a different daughter from the time they are children arriving in the Congo until they are adults struggling with the imprint of the Congo on their lives. Though the daughters are meant to represent different ways the West has interacted with Africa, tried to shape Africa, and misjudged Africa, they are also characters who are at once imperfect and endearing. Every time I read this book I experience it in a different way, and I come away profoundly changed. Not only does this book allow you to live through one of the most compelling stories of political change in Africa, but it challenges your understanding of how your own journey has been shaped by the choices of others in your life.

Professor Becca McBride

Stalin’s Curse: Battling for Communism in War and Cold War by Robert Gellately

Gellately’s well-researched and eminently readable book presents Stalin as an ideologically-driven and coldly analytical leader, who combined ruthlessness and a careful attention to detail in his efforts to expand and strengthen the Soviet empire. Gellately’s research suggest that Stalin was fiercely devoted to communist ideals, even when his domestic policies produced disastrous results, and that Western leaders failed to grasp both the depth of his hostility towards them and the shrewdness of his dealings with them, even when their foreign policies produced disappointing results in Europe and elsewhere.

Professor Joel Westra