

AN INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE MAJORS

Kim Quaile Hill, Ph.D.
Cullen-McFadden Professor of Political Science



Texas A&M University

June, 2010

A publication of the Department of Political Science, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, 77843,
with the support and assistance of the Texas A&M University Career Center.

AN INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE MAJORS

This document is an introduction to and information guide for how an undergraduate political science major might prepare for a career in the business world during his or her time as an undergraduate student. Business careers can take many forms, of course. They might be in general management of one or another kind of firm, financial or personnel management, research and development, marketing, or sales as the most general and most likely broad categories. The specific products or services a business provides can also lead to even more specialized careers and educational requirements for those careers. Thus no single pamphlet like this can provide specific advice for every business career opportunity.

Fortunately, however, many business careers demand some common skills and educational background. This pamphlet explains how a political science degree is relevant to those skills and that background. It also discusses a number of fundamental topics that a student seeking a career in business should consider and explore. This document will not tell you everything you need to know to get your first job and launch your career. It is but an introduction to what you should think about and do. Nor will it guarantee you a job in your chosen career field. The advice here, however, will help you think about whether this career is right for you *and* prepare for and search for a specific business job if you choose to do so.

How is a Degree in Political Science Appropriate for a Career in Business?

You may be uncertain about the answer to the preceding question. Some prospective employers – although not the most sophisticated ones – may be, as well. Thus you should understand the value of a political science degree for a career in this field. Doing so will help you fashion the rest of your educational, extracurricular, and employment record to enhance your career prospects. Knowing the value of a political science degree will also enable you to explain that to potential employers who might be uncertain about it.

There are several ways by which a political science degree is valuable for a career in the business world. First, one should remember that this degree is one in the broad field of education called the *liberal arts*. A liberal arts education introduces students to the fundamental knowledge in art, the humanities, and the social sciences that has traditionally set apart the learned members of society. Increasingly, too, such knowledge encompasses an understanding of diverse cultures around the world, the place of the United States in the larger world, and the major social and economic challenges and opportunities for our nation both at home and abroad. Thus a liberal arts student will share this knowledge with other learned members of his or her society. And such knowledge is invaluable for many business firms today.

Liberal arts educations are valued for other reasons, as well. They provide instruction in critical thinking skills from several disciplines. They emphasize intellectual creativity. And they offer students considerable opportunities to enhance their writing, public speaking, and other communications skills. As this document explains below, all these skills are especially valuable in the business world.

Second, most of the coursework in political science at Texas A&M is meant to educate students in how political phenomena are studied scientifically. The majority of political science professors are social scientists who study politics in this way, thus the bulk of the knowledge these professors create in their research and teaching is scientific knowledge. POLS 209 is an introduction to how *the scientific method* is used to study political phenomena, and much of your upper-level coursework adds to what you learn in POLS 209. The scientific method is, furthermore, a powerful form of logical, creative, and systematic thinking. Thus knowledge of the scientific method and facility using it will greatly enhance your critical thinking skills and creativity. Such knowledge and skills are of great value, too, for a leadership position in the business world.

Many undergraduate majors in political science also take courses in what is called *political theory*, which refers to philosophical attempts to understand politics. Coursework of this kind also enhances one's intellectual skills, especially for logical and critical thinking. Political theory also helps us explore questions about what role government should have in society and what role citizens might play in government. Knowledge of the latter sort is important to us as citizens of a democratic nation, but it is relevant, too, to business firms and their employees.

Political science courses will also teach you much about *everyday political life in the United States, other nations of the world, and international organizations*. A factual understanding of election processes, lawmaking procedures in the U.S. Congress or other similar institutions, the ways interest groups attempt to influence law and public policy – and knowledge of a host of comparable topics – can be valuable for many kinds of professional work in business. As but a couple of examples, you should learn from your political science courses how many kinds of business and many business activities in all firms are regulated by one or another government agency in the United States or even in another country. Many business firms also lobby government to influence the kinds of regulations they face and the kinds of subsidies, loans, or other assistance they might receive from government. Thus there are numerous and close ties between government and business that business firms must have expertise to understand.

Your education in political science will equip you with much of the kinds of knowledge outlined above. For that knowledge to be useful for your job search, however, you must recognize its relevance for your career ambitions and learn to articulate its relevance to prospective employers in a compelling way.

Are the Preceding Skills from a Political Science and Liberal Arts Degree Really Ones That Private Employers Value?

Many college students misunderstand the kinds of education private sector companies most want new employees to have. They assume – incorrectly – that businesses only will hire students with business or technical majors. This misunderstanding arises in part for a real, factual circumstance. Most recruiters who visit college campuses from private businesses target their interviewing at a narrow set of degree fields. (Although many of them will also interview liberal arts majors.) As examples, such recruiters may know that their firm intends to hire a specific number of entry level accountants, management trainees, or civil engineers in a given recruitment year. And the recruiters' job is to find candidates for positions like these where numerous new hires will be made. Recruiters who come to campuses, however, generally represent large firms that have very structured hiring processes and which plan to make large numbers of hires in specific job fields in a given year. But such recruiters only account for a small proportion of all business sector entry level hires.

Many more jobs are created each year in small businesses that do not visit college campuses to recruit. Other jobs are filled by business managers who independently interview candidates for their particular offices or locations. Some jobs are also filled by hiring individuals who have interned with or worked as a part-time employee with a business firm while they were in college and were judged to be potentially valuable employees.

Thus some business jobs are, indeed, filled with candidates who have very specific business skills like those cited above and that are the major hiring responsibility of campus recruiters. But it has long been recognized and widely discussed by private company executives and recruiters that they mostly want to hire employees with select, critical skills of a more general character. Read any guidebook to seeking a job in business. Do a search on the World Wide Web for advice on getting such a job. The universal advice there – again from business leaders themselves – is that it is *specific skills and not specific degrees* that are sought for many business employees.

And which skills are most sought? Uniformly, business leaders say they seek employees who are creative and have good analytic, problem solving, communications, and teamwork skills. A specific and important list of such skills was assembled by The Conference Board, a prestigious business association that does research on a variety of topics of concern to private firms and industries. The Conference Board report, *Are They Really Ready to Work?* (2006), reports the results of a survey of over 400 private employers in the United States which asked what skills these employers thought were essential for new employees in the 21st century *and* how well prepared in these skills were the candidates for jobs that they actually interviewed.

As *Are They Really Ready to Work?* explains, some of the most important skills sought by these businesses are:

- Professionalism and a strong work ethic
- Oral and written communications skills
- Teamwork and collaborative work skills
- Critical thinking and problem solving skills

The importance of the preceding list of skills can be highlighted by some additional statistics. *Ninety percent* or more of the business respondents in this survey reported that each of the four preceding general skills was very important for four-year college graduates to succeed in the workforce in the 21st century. None of the other 15 skills about which there were questions in the survey was judged to be so important.

Equally important to liberal arts majors were the results of the study with respect to how these business respondents judged the four-year college students that they actually interviewed for jobs. Only 16 percent of the survey respondents thought that such job candidates were generally excellent in their writing skills. Only 26 percent rated the reading comprehension of such candidates as excellent, and only 25 percent rated the oral communications skills of the candidates they interviewed as excellent. Only 28 percent judged such job candidates to be generally excellent in critical thinking and problem solving, and only 22 percent of the business representatives said they generally found four-year college graduates they interviewed for jobs to be excellent in creativity. Further, only 17 percent of the respondents reported that the college students they interviewed for jobs generally had excellent professional and work ethic skills.

The lists of intellectual and job skills discussed above that businesses seek in new employees should sound familiar because they include the key skills that a liberal arts degree is routinely expected to impart – and that are discussed earlier in this pamphlet. We emphasize, however, that a political science major cannot simply claim that he or she has these skills because of having a liberal arts degree. You must craft an academic, extracurricular, and work experience record during undergraduate school that documents and substantiates your educational and skill levels. More specifically, a liberal arts degree will be of little value if you have an undergraduate transcript with mediocre grades, little other demonstrated evidence of the competencies and skills listed above, or recommendation letters that cannot vouch that you have those competencies and skills. But a political science major who can make a compelling case to a prospective employer that he or she has strong skills of these kinds will be especially competitive on the job market.

The findings of The Conference Board survey are also notable in an additional respect. Eighty-two percent of the business respondents reported that *leadership* skills were very important for the career success of four-year college graduates. The authors of The Conference Board report on the survey highlighted this expectation, especially because of concern that new hires in businesses must soon replace the large number of expected retirees from the Baby Boom generation that now is approaching retirement age. Yet only 15 percent of the survey respondents reported that they generally found four-year college graduates to have excellent leadership skills. Every reader of this pamphlet, however, should know that Texas A&M prides itself on preparing students for leadership in business, government, and society generally. And there are many organized classes and extra-curricular programs at the university that offer such preparation. Thus an ambitious political science student could take note of these survey findings and make a particular effort to acquire some of that leadership education and experience while an undergraduate student.

Conventional advice about getting a good business job, however, adds one more dimension to how one can be prepared for a job search beyond having the skills that come with a liberal arts degree. We label the advice on this second dimension as being about *building your resume*. That is, a thoughtful political science major can acquire additional knowledge, skills, and experience beyond what he or she gets from coursework in the major that will also help land a business job. Such knowledge, skills, and experience can be the product of taking additional, specific coursework to round out your resume – as this pamphlet discusses below. Extracurricular activities in student government or any of a host of student or non-profit organizations can demonstrate meaningful skills or experiences for a business employer, as well. Part-time employment, summer employment, and internships selected for their relevance to a particular business sector or a particular skill you wish to acquire can be very important in this respect, too.

Is a Business Career Right for You?

Many students enter the University uncertain about what their career ambitions might be. And they may know little about what it really means to be an attorney, work in private business, serve in government, or any other career. Other students may be strongly encouraged by their parents to seek a particular career. Perhaps a student's mother or father is an attorney, an independent businessperson, a teacher, or a government official, and the family wants the student to pursue the same career. Some students are happy to continue family traditions in this way, while others are uncertain about whether they wish to do so.

The career you pursue, however, is going to be uniquely yours. Your first job, should you decide to stay in the same line of work, will shape your entire work and professional life, determine the kinds of work associates and friends you will have, shape the environment in which you work, and determine the kinds of career goals that are realistic for you. This will be *your* job, too, not that of your parents, your relatives, or your friends. Thus it is important that you investigate prospective career fields carefully and weigh how they do and do not appeal to you.

At the same time, many Americans change careers in some time in their adult lives. Thus you, too, might change careers for any of several reasons – because you become unhappy in your initial career, the employment prospects for that career diminish over time, or a new and more promising opportunity unexpectedly arises. Thus you may not remain in the same career your entire life. But some kinds of undergraduate and graduate education prepare you better for moving from one career to another. And some first jobs provide better opportunities in the same way. So thinking about these kinds of educational and career possibilities should also be a part of your career choice deliberations.

What Sort of Business Career Might Be Right For You? How Should You Go About Finding and Applying for Internships and Jobs in the Business World?

This pamphlet offers advice about how you can learn about different business careers and build your resume to prepare for such a career. But you do not have to face these challenges alone. Imagine that you could have the services of a highly professional employment agency that would assist you at every stage of your career search. You already have available such an agency in the University's Career Center located on the second floor of the Koldus Building.

The Career Center has professional career and employment counselors who work exclusively with College of Liberal Arts and political science majors. These counselors can guide you through every stage of a search for a career and a specific job. Their services are extensive and are mostly provided in one-on-one sessions with individual students. These counselors have a series of career assessment tests that you can take and that identify your most notable personal skills and interests *as well as* a set of specific jobs where such skills and interests are most applicable. The Career Center has a variety of online information services that will inform you about career, internship, and job opportunities in all sectors of the business world, including those the assessment tests identify for you.

The Career Center also hosts a large number of career fairs, on-campus interviews with representatives of individual companies, and other employment information events. The counselors in the Career Center can prepare you to interview you with the recruiters who come to campus seeking to interview political science majors. The Career Center also hosts annual recruitment and job information events with other possible employers, such as with representatives of Federal government agencies. For students whose career interests do not match those of the recruiters who come to campus the Career Center has an online connection to Aggie Former Students who can assist you with career advice and job searches, especially in the business firms or industries in which they work.

The Career Center counselors will assist you, as well, with all the critical details of your job search, including goal setting; seeking summer, part-time, or volunteer work to build your resume; preparing a resume for your job search; drafting letters in search of internships and jobs; interviewing skills; and salary negotiation skills.

While the Career Center has many professional services to offer you, you must take an active and responsible role in how you use those services. Ideally, you should develop a relationship with a Career Center counselor in your first year as a student at A&M. Your work with the Center in your first year will be less intensive than in later years. But if you begin to learn about your career preferences and opportunities early, then you will be optimally positioned to build your resume for such opportunities through coursework, part-time or summer employment, volunteer activities, and internships. Equally important is how you use the services available in the Career Center as you begin the actual search for a specific job. Many students have disappointing job searches because they don't follow the advice of their Career Center counselors or because they fail to make a sufficient effort in their own behalf as they go through their searches.

What Are the Prospects for Future Jobs and Long-term Careers in the Business World?

Some political science majors who are interested in business careers already know what industry or what specific business job they hope to work in. Other students, however, may be uncertain about the variety of business jobs they might consider, as well as about how promising the career opportunities in those jobs might be. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)* would be an especially valuable resource for the latter students. But it provides much useful information for all students interested in business careers. The *OOH* is published biennially by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the United States Department of Labor, and it is available on the World Wide Web at www.bls.gov/OCO. The *Handbook* offers a wealth of information about current and future employment prospects in all industries and jobs in the US economy. Of particular value in the *OOH* are the projections for the numbers of new positions that will be created in different industries and jobs, the kinds of work that people in specific jobs do, and the educational and experience requirements for getting different kinds of jobs.

A student who is interested in a business career but uncertain about what specific career he or she might pursue, then, can learn from the *OOH* which industries and jobs are predicted to produce the most jobs in the near future, which industries and jobs are expected to have only average employment growth, and which will see declines in the numbers of positions.

The online version of the *OOH* at the time this pamphlet was written makes forecasts of job growth to the year 2018. And several industries or categories of jobs are projected to grow especially rapidly or to produce especially large numbers of new jobs in that period. Consider some of these especially high growth industries or business sectors.

Healthcare and social assistance (the latter category including such things as childcare for two-career families, health and social services for the aged, and health care for other special populations) is projected to experience over a 24 percent increase in jobs and to produce 4 million new jobs. Many of these jobs will be for physicians, nurses, physicians' assistants, health care aides, and others who provide direct health services. But a clever political science student will recognize that growth in these professions and the institutions like hospitals and nursing homes where they will work will also require growth in many related businesses. Physicians will need more business services and supplies such as those for computing and information equipment and technical support, routine business supplies and products, office management support, and pharmaceutical products. Hospitals will need large numbers of new managers and administrators along with more services and products from the food service, computing and information, office supply, hazardous waste disposal, and various other industries. Health professionals and institutions will need more insurance services, retirement planning professionals, security services, custodial services and doubtless many more business specialties. Thus if one thinks creatively, as a good liberal arts student should, he or she might envision a wide range of career opportunities that will be associated with the growth of the healthcare industry.

The *OOH* also projects that the *professional and business services* sector of the economy will experience a 23 percent increase in new jobs and add over 4 million jobs. This is a diverse industrial category that includes such employment groups as human resources, management services, and information technology professionals. Included, too, are software publishing, internet publishing, and wireless telecommunications businesses. Managers and administrators in leisure and hospitality industries – such as for amusement, gambling, and recreation businesses – are included, as well. Over a half million new jobs are forecast for the latter three sub-sectors alone.

The *hotel, restaurant, and other food services* sector is also forecast to add about 840,000 new jobs.

The *education* sector is also projected to produce about 1.7 million jobs. While most of these positions will be for elementary, secondary, and college and university teachers, many must also be for administrators and various kinds of specialized-skill support staff.

Even some industrial sectors that are projected to have only modest percentage increases in jobs will produce large numbers of them. The best example here is for *retail trade* as in department, clothing, electronics, grocery, and related kinds of stores. Over 650,000 new jobs are forecast for this sector.

Several industries and sectors are also forecast to experience declines in the numbers of new jobs. The most notable of these are *manufacturing* businesses, *utilities* companies, *agriculture*, *forestry*, and *mining*.

The preceding paragraphs summarize some of the most notable information in the *OOH*. Yet a student uncertain about his or her career path, or one who wants more information about a preferred path, should consult the *OOH* more closely for more details.

What Other Undergraduate Courses Might You Need for a Business Career?

As discussed above, your political science bachelors' degree can equip you with many of the most important skills suitable for entry-level jobs in business. But it may not be sufficient education for some of the jobs you most desire or for your longterm career ambitions. Thus you may have to supplement your political science coursework in any of several ways. Think of this effort, recall, as one to *build your resume*.

Some other undergraduate courses can provide skills that might be of value to all students seeking a business career. Coursework in logic like PHIL 240 Introduction to Logic, in statistics – and POLS 309 Polimetrics would be a good choice here, and in scientific research can strengthen your critical thinking and analytic skills. Advanced political science courses that require original research papers can help in this same way. Courses like COMM 203 Public Speaking and COMM 205 Communication for Technical Professions can strengthen important communications skills that would benefit most business professionals.

Selected business courses would also be of particular value to students who imagined seeking a general management position in the business world. Such a student might take courses like MGMT 105 Introduction to Business, MGMT 209 Business, Government, and Society, MGMT 211 Legal and Social Environment of Business, and MGMT 212 Business Law that cover the major forms of business organization, the social and governmental environment that shapes business activity in the United States, and the legal environment of business.

Finally, if you are considering a career in a particular functional area of business – such as financial management or personnel management – then other courses in business, psychology, or sociology might be especially appropriate. A student who envisioned a career in a particular business sector – like health care or computer technology or retail trade as but a few examples – might find other undergraduate courses of value. And a student who is unsure of what courses might best relate to his or her career interests should consult an advisor in the Undergraduate Office of the Department of Political Science or the University's Career Center.

What Graduate-Level Coursework Might You Need For a Business Career?

There are various graduate degrees in business, and each one has its own particular benefits. The master of business administration (MBA) was initially designed for individuals who did not major in business in undergraduate school (although now many people with undergraduate business degrees still seek MBAs). The MBA provides a broad, general education in business matters, although some programs allow one to specialize to some degree, as well. The MBA is likely of particular value to those individuals who envision a career in business management but not in a specialized area like finance or personnel. Because it is a general degree, it might be an especially good one for a political science undergraduate who took few or no business credits in undergraduate school. Many people also think the MBA is critical for individuals who hope to enter senior management in a large business firm. However, the large number of MBAs that now exist, the wide range and quality of universities that grant such degrees, and the availability of many specialized business degrees may have reduced the distinctiveness of the MBA in this respect.

Specialized graduate business degrees, in contrast, may be of interest to students who know they have particular career or work interests. A student who enjoys working with numbers and data might be drawn to a masters degree in accounting, finance, operations research, or a related field. Someone who enjoys working with people and who especially has some interest in human psychology might best pursue an advanced degree in personnel management or marketing. Alternatively, a student who is attracted by the career opportunities in healthcare discussed above might consider a degree in hospital administration, social work, or in one or another

medical field. A student interested in a career in the hotel or restaurant industries might investigate degrees in Hotel and Restaurant Management.

For more advice about graduate work relevant to a business career, and about preparing for and applying to graduate schools, you should seek advice from counselors at the University's Career Center and in the Mayes School of Business.

Where Can You Learn More About Careers in Business?

Before you read the specific advice below in this section, consider how we recommend that you use that advice. There are numerous sources from which you can glean information about career options and how to prepare for them. One could get lost in the mass of such information. Diving into it headlong, so to speak, might be overwhelming. Some published and on-line sources are also far more detailed – and sometimes boring to read for that reason – than you might need early in your information search. Thus we recommend that if you start a search for career information with only vague ideas about career interests, you should sample and skim a wide range of information. Once you have a specific career in mind, then you should read and seek advice that is more detailed about that specific career.

The University's Career Center has lots of published materials and a full-time professional staff that can both advise you about career options and point you to other resources that can help you prepare for a chosen career. Your student fees pay for this service, thus you should learn early in your academic career what it offers. Then use it aggressively.

There is an abundance of career and job-seeking advice on the World Wide Web. A Web search on such terms as "careers in business" or "jobs in business" will turn up much of that. The Career Center also has lists of good Web sites for such searching.

The Evans Library has a number of publications that also provide this kind of advice. Of particular value is Blythe Camenson's *Great Jobs for Liberal Arts Majors* (2002). This author has also produced a number of more specialized job advice books for people with very specialized field interests (e.g., in sales and marketing, service industries, and museum careers) or who have distinctive personalities or avocational interests (e.g., introverts, perfectionists, entrepreneurs, or those who are mystery buffs or who have an interest in foreign languages). Evans Library owns a number of such works that might appeal to some political science students.

The American Political Science Association publishes a pamphlet entitled *Careers and the Study of Political Science* (2003) that offers a brief survey of how a degree in this field can prepare one for a career in a number of fields including business. You can read a copy of this pamphlet in the Undergraduate Office of the Department of Political Science.

Bibliography

Are They Really Ready to Work? 2006. New York, New York: The Conference Board. Available at www.conference-board.org. Downloaded November 30, 2009.

Camenson, Blythe. 2002. *Great Jobs for Liberal Arts Majors*. Chicago: VGM Career Books.

Careers and the Study of Political Science. 2001. Washington, DC: American Political Science Association. Sixth edition.

Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008-2018. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Available at www.bls.gov/OCO.