Political Science 101 Introduction to American Government (Two Sections)

- Semester Taught: Spring 2013
- Average Final Enrollment: 13
- Global Learning Goal:
  - Students will be able to analyze American politics and government in a global context through comparative politics.
- Global Learning Outcomes:
  - Recognize oneself and one’s culture through the perception of others
  - Contextualize and analyze complex connections among phenomena including but not limited to issues of domestic policy, federalism, political parties and civil rights for the United States and around the globe.
  - Critically analyze the history and diversity of the U.S. and its role in the world
  - Openness, recognition, and acceptance of differences
- Regions: The Middle East, Africa
Reflection on Internationalizing American Government

I started teaching at Ivy Tech for the fall semester of 2011. At the time, I designed the course using the pre-selected course textbook as my guide. I had taught the course for less than a year when I joined ICAB, the Internationalization Collaborative Across Bloomington. There were international elements already included in the course, in part from the course text, and part self-developed. In fact, foreign policy was a big part of the last chapter in the text, covering the American invasion of Iraq as well as the War on Terrorism. After two semesters of independent development, I was eager to add more to the experience.

ICAB introduced goal oriented course design. As a new instructor, I had never considered pedagogy before and instead focused almost entirely on international content. Once I began to work with the ICAB team, I focused on key chapters that lent themselves to internationalization, and then redesigned delivery based on the method of goal oriented course design. By integrating the global learning objectives, I rethought not only delivery, but also the outcome. This helped improve the overall quality of the course by eliminating and streamlining course content, as well as focusing attention on both standard and internationalized learning goals.

Internationalizing this course has been an experiment in trial and error. The most critical problem involved balancing my expectations about student ability to participate in the assessments I created for them. In all, I discovered that I had inflated expectations about student willingness to perform research outside of class. Based on previous experience and lessons learned during the ICAB workshops, I attempted to avoid excessive ‘content’ in class, only to discover gaps in student knowledge later.

Federalism and Nigeria

The best example of balancing my own expectations is with the exercise on Nigeria. The second chapter of the text covers the emergence of the U.S. Constitution in the context of the American Revolution. Initially, the students were responsible for reading two different articles. One reading covered Nigeria’s Constitution, the other on the trials of federalism in Nigeria. Their task was to write an essay suggesting some tips and strategies for changing the Nigerian Constitution. Still, in many papers, students miss identified the number of states in the country, the surface similarities in the structure of the two constitutions, and so on.

Clearly, the students were able to use the essay to express their understanding of their own constitution fairly well. Many of them were able to draw parallels between the rebel movements in the United States (Shay’s Rebellion) and militant unrest in Nigeria. This successfully prompted them to think more deeply about the role of federalism in American government as an important enforcement and security device. It also allowed the students to go beyond the level of description which is the goal for this course in general. As a result, I consider assessment to be successful.

The Courts and Somalia

In this course, students also cover a chapter on the federal court system. The purpose of the chapter is to convey to them a sense of how the Supreme Court functions, particularly with regard to its power to interpret the U.S. Constitution. As part of internationalization, the students examined two similar legal decisions on abortion, one from the U.S. legal system and that of the new Somali Constitution. In
the course of using this case, I discovered two errors in particular, one pertaining to student reading and another to the construction of their assessment. In addition, I wanted some way to record their attitudes and expectations of this project prior to their engaging the material pertaining specifically to Somalia.

My first error was denying the students the opportunity to digest the reading assignment on their own. In the first run of the course, I brought all of the materials to class and had the students read the articles individually. Unfortunately, it also meant that I was doing most of the analytic work for them. By making part of the reading required outside of class (in this case an edited version of Justice Blackburn’s *Roe v. Wade* majority opinion), there would be more time available in class for students to discuss the material with one another. This, I believe, is a more valuable use of time. They will have more time in class to write a reflection.

Overall, this exercise could still be considered a success. Because of the controversial nature of the topic, I was admittedly wary to open the floor to debate without first positioning the students with something concrete to discuss. It was immensely helpful to go through the process of internationalization because it changed the focus of the debate from an internal political question, to a question of institutions, processes, and most importantly, sources. The students seemed to enjoy looking at the variety of legal sources mentioned in the opinion of Justice Blackburn’s opinion, and furthermore, seemed particularly intrigued by the alternative approach to the issue.

Because the students had to write an in class reflection, it was fairly clear that they had only absorbed the importance of the Supreme Courts interpretive power, but they had also become aware of the strong similarities in approach that many cultures take to making and instituting law. In the next semester, I will administer a pre-test writing in which students will make a prediction about what the Somali Constitution will say (and why), because reading the material. The post-test, an essay reflection, will remain an in-class writing assignment. This will give students a chance to digest the material. This will push them in the direction of openness, recognition and acceptance of differences between the legal systems by unpacking terms like and concepts from their usual moral or political packaging.