

The Politics of San Francisco

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San Francisco Political Issues: Housing and Economic Development
(Political Science 475.1)

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.Introduction: This course offers San Francisco State University undergraduates an opportunity to study the recent political history of San Francisco, with a particular focus on the economic and social context within which policy debates and political engagement have emerged. More critically, the course offers students an opportunity to combine academic study with practical experience, as all students are placed in local community-based non-profit social and economic development agencies as interns. SFSU students are joined in the course by non-profit staff, who attend the course through the university's extension program. Finally, the course is taught by a team that includes a university professor, three community activists, and a former deputy mayor (for five mayors).

San Francisco is blessed with a wealth of non-profit community organizations, whose services provide essential elements of the city's social service, health, and affordable housing infrastructures. These organizations are chronically understaffed, and look to the university for new sources of staff and organizing leadership. But most university students lack any exposure to community work, or to the concrete realities of staff work in the service of social and economic justice. San Francisco State students are a potential source of new community-based staff, were they to be engaged in the work of nonprofits, and see it as valuable and viable career option.

Political Science 475 is organized to provide such an opportunity for SFSU students, as well as provide critical services to local community-based non-profits. The course is part of the San Francisco Urban Institute's Urban Curriculum Project. This Project grew out of the need to provide engaged learning for SFSU students, and at the same time provide local communities groups access to the educational and intellectual resources of one of the nation's premier urban universities.

Course Design:

Political Science 475 meets one evening a week, for 3 ½ hours, for the duration of a fifteen week semester. There is one required text: a source book combining academic analyses, historical accounts, planning and analytic documents, demographic and economic data, and an extensive bibliography. Additional text materials are distributed throughout the semester.

The course takes as its main topic the post-war economic and social transformation of San Francisco and examines the often volatile mix of community politics and economic power which determined so much of the contemporary landscape. The course explores several major policy debates, particularly involving land use, development, employment and housing, and searches for continuities and discontinuities with contemporary issues.

The course is unique in that many of the issues under study directly involved persons teaching the course. Indeed, three of the instructors were major participants in the land use and development struggles of the past twenty years, often sharply at odds with one another. The course thus allows students to revisit these debates through the eyes and analyses of the actual participants, and forces students to confront the clash of what we might call decent opposites.

The course typically enrolls between 35 and 55 students, no more than half of whom are regularly matriculated university students. The others are community-based staff, typically midlevel administrative and front line community organizers, and mid-level staff from city and county agencies. The community-based students are provided enrollment and registration through the University College of Extended Learning, and earn four units of upper division university credit. The cost to non-matriculated students is \$25/unit (compared with the usual extension fee of \$650/course). The agencies and non-profits have included housing and social service providers, as well as health, youth, and community development organizations.

Each university student is expected to secure an intern placement with an agency whose staff are enrolled in the course. Thus, university students share the class with men and women with whom they work in their intern placement. Intern responsibilities vary enormously, as do the number of internship hours.

The course operates through a lecture/seminar format, with assigned readings in advance. Each class has a major presentation by one or more of the instructors. The class often divides up into discussion sections, in addition to the normal lecture questioning.

Each student is required to participate in a research/action project as a member of a working group organized through the class. Each course had had three or four such working groups, whose goal is to complete a collaborative research project aimed at producing a body of written and presentational material. Each group is expected to produce both an analytic piece and a public presentation of their work. Topics always include a data analysis component - typically of demographic, economic, or public opinion data-linked to a current planning or political issue.

The topics are chosen with a view to their usefulness in facilitating public debate, and their success depends as much on the accessibility of the analysis as its methodological purity.

Past projects have included analyses of the major economic and social issues in selected electoral districts prior to district supervisorial elections, the demographic analysis of neighborhoods required for local planning initiatives, and the analysis of public perception of selected issues prior to a community congress process. All projects have combined the analytic skills of university students with the organizing skills (and access) of the community students.

One explicit intention of the projects is to introduce university students to the neighborhood realities of community organizing, build enduring relationships between the team members, and bridge gaps of race and language that often divide neighborhoods. Each working group thus includes community staff from both inside and outside the selected neighborhoods, and engages them in teaching university students how to understand the complexities of the city.

Conversely, the students find themselves teaching the utility and power of applied social science methods, when appropriate.

Outcomes: The course has three explicit goals: to educate university students through a process of engagement linked to course work, to open the university up to community based and city staff, and to provide enduring links between the university students and the community groups.

These explicit goals serve several more elusive - but critical - purposes. We aim to engage students sufficiently that they learn the joys of working on public affairs, while not being romantic about how hard or contradictory such work can be. We aim to break down subtle distinctions of status between university students and their community partners, many of whom are formally uneducated but remarkably gifted in both analysis and organizing skill. At the same time, many community students are extremely well educated, and it serves the currently enrolled students well to see the career and life choices made by other university graduates.

Finally, we aim to confront the cynicism of university students by bringing them into collaborative work with men and women who fight to change the world of poverty and inequality every day. The course legitimates the hard demands of political engagement, and validates the impact of political organizing, through an encounter with San Francisco's rich political history. This is a city in which politics matters, where ordinary citizens have helped determine the city's future.

At the same time, the men and women who devote their lives to community work long for an intellectual life, and for a free space in which they can debate and learn.

We do not have longitudinal studies of students in the first three offerings of this course. We do know that virtually every university student expressed satisfaction (through end-of-semester surveys), with both the content and the personal impact of the course. We also know that a number of former students now work for community-based nonprofits, often in the organizations with which they interned. One former student is now an elected Supervisor of the

City and County of San Francisco, and several others worked on the campaigns of supervisorial candidates.

With regard to the community impact, we might quote from an interim report delivered to the Rockefeller Foundation, who funded the initial courses:

...the courses have generated a critical buzz in San Francisco's non-profit environment. They have achieved in very short order the reputation as an almost unique environment within which community activists can learn matters of great substance, share their own experiences and knowledge with one another, and discuss matters of dispute or disagreement. The courses and the Seminar provide a safe environment in which critical research can be done collaboratively, sharp disagreements can be aired, and policy options debated. This reputation for civility, intelligence, and engagement have drawn new students, visitors, and repeated requests for expanding the program.

Our successes are simple and singular, at one level: the two students who have been awarded the California State University's prestigious Panetta awards to intern and learn in Washington, at no cost; the Mayor who visits and tells the class he knows several politicians who would die for the detailed community-based research he just saw presented; the three housing authority activists who have gone back to school, one of whom was awarded the nation's highest community service award; the two community organizers who were inspired to run for city office (and both might win); the combined staffs of two community development organizations who now collaborate regularly in their work; the redevelopment staff who provided detailed Geographic Information System mapping for the community groups organizing neighborhood congresses.

Broader Program Elements:

Political Science 475 is one of several courses offered through the Urban Curriculum Project, a program jointly sponsored by the San Francisco Policy Center (itself a joint venture of the San Francisco Urban Institute and the San Francisco Information Clearinghouse). Beyond the courses, this project has three additional elements:

First, the university will offer admissions, financial aid, and academic assessment services to community program participants who seek to further their formal education.

Second, the Project will develop a series of contract education offerings in specialized professional development areas (contract management, non-profit organizational development, financial and fiscal management, as examples), for community organizations wishing these services for their staff.

Third, each cohort of university students and community staff will be offered membership in a

Community Leadership Seminar, which will provide on-going opportunities for participants to work together, receive periodic policy briefings, and receive specialized training in community

organizing, advocacy, and coalition building. This Seminar is intended to provide an on-going bridge between university students and community workers often separated by neighborhood, issue, race, or language.

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