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Community-Engaged Political Science at Wabash College

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Shamira Gelbman, professor of Political Science at Wabash College, possesses a gift for making connections; her research focus on governance and policymaking permeates her teaching approaches and service commitments, and those ideas drive the connections that she and her students establish with the campus, their local community, and national conversations.

Gelbman remains vitally interested in how politics work on every level—as well as in exploring the ways that people actively participate in citizenship practices—and she brings a dynamic and innovative energy as she continues to explore these ideas in every part of her job.

Integrating Research and Learning with Community-engaged Projects

Gelbman pursues every avenue available to connect her students to communities outside the classroom walls; she consistently arranges opportunities for her students to take part in substantial community-engaged work. One key element in being able to establish these community-based projects is making and maintaining connections. Gelbman says Crawfordsville's small size facilitates networking; additionally, Wabash aids these efforts by having a staff member whose job includes the responsibility of assisting with community connections. Gelbman also maintains community ties as a member of the board of the local League of Women Voters chapter. All of these relationships offer potential opportunities for Gelbman to do meaningful work with her students outside of the classroom.

Lorraine McCrary, associate professor and department chair of Political Science at Wabash, admires Gelbman's emphasis on community-engaged teaching strategies, including working with her students to create local museum exhibits as well as working with students in the Wabash archives. Gelbman works closely with the campus archivist to develop projects for many of her classes, and opportunities continue to arise. McCrary notes that Gelbman will be working with a new set of documents that the Wabash archives will receive; these documents include information about activism around politics in Montgomery County, where Wabash is situated. Gelbman and her students will look at how the organization which donated the documents thinks about politics.

In all aspects of her professional life, Gelbman is drawn to examine questions of how organizations run. One way this interest plays out in the classroom is in a course entitled "Governing Wabash" which takes the college seriously as a political community. This class clearly demonstrates the convergence of Gelbman's research with her commitment to community-engaged teaching. In the class, students consider the roles of the college's administrative structure, including the board of trustees, administration, faculty, and student government association. Students in this class also gain a historical perspective by considering various governance moments in the life of the school. Additionally, students conduct case study research in the archives, and each student presents their findings in a podcast that can be accessed by the campus community.

Todd F. McDorman, professor of Rhetoric and dean of Wabash College, appreciates that Gelbman's projects put students into civic settings beyond the campus. For example, Gelbman's "Sociology and the Politics of Health" class includes a significant community partnership with the City of Crawfordsville. Gelbman developed the class



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because Wabash does not have a Sociology department, but students who were taking the MCAT needed a preparatory Sociology course. Since Gelbman's research sits at the intersection of Political Science, History, and Sociology, she developed this class to meet student needs. The class offers an introduction to basic Sociology and Political Science concepts using health as the lens. Students then gain hands-on, community-engaged experience in consulting with the staff of Crawfordsville's Mobile Integrated Health (MIH) program. After hearing from the staff about their achievements and problems they are dealing with, the students research and articulate solutions to address the identified challenges. At the end of the term, Gelbman's students submit professional memos outlining their proposed solutions to the MIH staff in a briefing presentation. Gelbman explains that such public engagement is particularly important for students who are interested in pursuing social service work. Through projects like this one, they learn that real people's lives can be affected by what they have to offer.

Connecting Classroom Learning to Wider Concerns

Some of Gelbman's classes bring national concerns into the community-engaged work. One case happens every four years, when Gelbman teaches a class looking at political science research focused on mid-term elections. Each student tracks one heated House race and reports about the race on campus. As Gelbman's students apply their learning outside of the classroom, they feel more invested in communicating their findings accurately and effectively.

Similarly, Gelbman teaches a class on election polling in Presidential election years. In this class, students not only learn about polls—how they work, their uses and limitations, their margins of error, and how seriously to take them—but they also conduct a local exit poll in Montgomery County. In 2024, Gelbman secured a grant from the Community-Engaged Alliance which enabled her students to present community programming through the League of Women

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Voters. In these presentations, her students shared the information they had learned about polling with the wider community. The course culminates with a presentation event that covers the results of the students' exit poll and takeaways about what polls can and can't tell us.

Some of Gelbman's classes simply connect to national dialogues. In teaching the freshman tutorial—a themed course which serves as an intro to college-level work—Gelbman has focused on food-label controversies, such as whether a tomato is a fruit or a vegetable—as well as why the US Supreme Court felt the need to rule on this question. Students also learned about the butter versus margarine "wars," along with the similar current public debate about plant-based dairy replacements and whether they can be called "milk." Gelbman's goal is for students to absorb how politics has played a role in such national debates that may seem at first to have nothing to do with politics.

As a Political Science professor, Gelbman experiences some additional time pressures during an election semester like this one. She focuses the second half of her "Introduction to American Politics" class on the current election. Since she can't know how the election will turn out when she plans the term, she has to "roll with what happens" in real time, making preparation for the course very "dynamic." From October to early November of election years, Gelbman finds herself fielding media calls and requests to serve on panels about the election, often with little notice; she also receives emails asking her to explain ballot measures and the League of Women Voters' stances on them. Gelbman's willingness to take on these extra responsibilities demonstrates her own commitment to civic engagement.

Applied Learning and Innovative Assignments

Whether or not a class contains a community-engagement component, Gelbman makes sure to find ways for her students to actively apply their learning. McCrary highlights the fact that Gelbman develops some assignments quickly, in response to current events. McCrary recalls a time that a new bill was introduced which would enact policy relating to athletes' names, images, and likenesses. Gelbman created a classroom activity in which she assigned her students roles as lobbyists and lawmakers. In this way, the students were able to understand firsthand how lawmaking can be driven by lobbyists, without even leaving the classroom.

Gelbman has diversified the types of projects she assigns in her classes. While students in her Senior Seminar do complete a traditional research paper, she has changed the writing projects in other classes to those which reflect professional writing genres, such as a memo to a campaign manager in her course on congressional elections. As



Gelbman points out, such assignments are both more appealing and more relevant to her students' interests.

Gelbman continuously seeks ways to have students apply their learning in meaningful ways. In thinking through new assignments, she considers what end result she wants to interact with, as well as what would be interesting to her students. One innovative project Gelbman relies on is having students create podcasts based in their individual research projects. Wabash students and faculty members have the support of an education technologist who can help students with projects like these, and Gelbman has learned how to support students in developing their work. Gelbman also prepares students by discussing the podcast genre in class and listening to examples together. Students then host their podcasts on a Google website; Gelbman affirms the usefulness of this hands-on experience for students' future personal and professional lives.

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Gelbman also supports undergraduate research. One student who worked with her in this capacity is Rodolfo Solís, who is currently a Political Science lecturer at the University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley. As a sophomore, Solís gained firsthand research experience in one of Gelbman's classes in which students conducted Twitter data content analysis. Solís enjoyed the experience and asked for more research collaborations. Gelbman agreed and oversaw several qualitative-oriented projects for Solís, including his writing an entry on the *Voting Rights Act amendments of 1975 for Latinos in the American Political System: An Encyclopedia of Latinos as Voters, Candidates, and Office Holders* edited by Jessica Lavariega Monforti. Solís reports that their work together motivated him and informed his later doctoral research. Gelbman also helped Solís secure opportunities to work with the National Science Foundation and the American Political Science Association Summer Institute. Solís values Gelbman's mentorship and patience, as well as how generous she is with her time. Now that he is a *lecturer* himself, he knows the challenges of finding time to work with student research on top of other demanding faculty responsibilities—so he doubly appreciates the devotion Gelbman has for her students.

Faculty Service and Research

Gelbman's commitment to innovative and engaging learning opportunities is matched by her dedication to faculty service and research. McCrary respects Gelbman's helpful organizational and administrative ideas, as well as the curiosity she brings to the faculty about how governance happens. Gelbman currently serves on the academic policy committee and the AI task force, and she is the faculty visitor to the board of trustees. She served as the Secretary to the Faculty—a five-year role—and was formerly a long-term department chair. Additionally, Gelbman's expertise informed her tenure as Faculty Development Coordinator; in that role, she mentored fellow faculty members to develop their teaching and research capacities, but she also helped them develop their vision of how they saw themselves within the governance of the school. Beyond the college, Gelbman has served as editor for a political science organization, held a variety of leadership roles in APSA, and is past President of SPSA Women, the women's caucus of the Southern Political Science Association.

In her research, Gelbman continues to focus on the ways that citizens can affect policymaking. During her recent sabbatical, she traveled to the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, to gather information about the role of women lobbyists during the World War II era. The information she compiled will drive her research agenda for many years, Gelbman says.

In aligning research interests with approaches to faculty service and teaching strategies, Gelbman stands as an exemplar for faculty members across disciplines. As McDorman states, Gelbman "lives the perspectives she teaches. She takes her responsibilities seriously, engages students effectively, and is a strong participant in the Wabash college community." Ultimately, Gelbman's ability to sustain meaningful work in the context of strong community connections benefits everyone involved.





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