Course Proposal for the First Year Seminar

Name: Dan Palazzolo  
Department: Political Science  
Availability: Fall 2010 and Spring 2011  
Approval of Chair (pending)  
Title: Deficits and the Public Interest

Description of Course Content/Theme: It is not hyperbole to say that the Federal budget deficit has been the most vexing domestic policy problem since the 1960s. If the Federal government continues on its present course of deficit spending, which most experts consider to be “unsustainable,” the problem and its consequences are bound to get much worse. Today’s college students will be among the many Americans who will inherit the mounting debt. This seminar will explore the fiscal, political, and moral dimensions of the Federal budget deficit and the compounding debt left in its wake. We will discuss the causes and consequences of Federal budget deficits and debt, policy choices for dealing with those problems, and the political and institutional forces that affect budget decisions. Though the deficit, debt, and future obligations of the Federal government are based on facts that are readily available to anyone, the problems and their solutions are highly controversial. Competing values, contending economic theories, partisanship, divergent group interests, institutional constraints, and political calculations shape the debate over budget policy and often prevent policymakers from achieving the “public interest,” by itself an elusive concept. The seminar will consider multiple perspectives held by political scientists, economists, policy analysts, journalists, and practitioners.

Briefly describe how the course will seek to achieve the five goals of the First Year Experience:

1. Expand students understanding of the world (e.g. State how the course will challenge students either to think about important questions and issues they likely have not thought about before, or think about them in ways they have not thought about them.)

   Surveys show that many young people have a sense that something is wrong with the deficit spending, but few understand the complexity of the issue, or have thought about the variety of ways to assess the causes, consequences, or choices. I have taught this seminar before, and the students are stunned by what they learn. They also gain a clearer appreciation of the complexity of governing and making choices. In addition, by studying the issue from various points of view, the course challenges preconceived notions (whether they be liberal, conservative or somewhere in between) about the role of government in society.

2. Enhance their ability to read and think critically (e.g. A preliminary list of books and articles for the course and exercises or pedagogical methods that will be used to improve critical reading and thinking.)

   Here is an illustrative list of books:
David A. Hyman, *Medicare Meets Mephistopheles*
Don Kettl, *Deficit Politics: the Search for Balance in American Politics*
Laurence Kotlikoff and Scott Burns, *The Coming Generational Storm*
Peter Peterson, *Running on Empty*
Robert J. Samuelson, *The Good Life and Its Discontents*
James H. Schulz and Robert H. Binstock, *Aging Nation*
Aaron Wildavsky and Naomi Caiden, *The New Politics of the Budgetary Process*

I also will use various editorials to spur discussion.

3. Enhance students’ ability to communicate effectively in writing, speech, and other appropriate forms (e.g. Describe the type and number of writing assignments students will complete, the opportunities students will have to develop their writing skills, the kinds of questions will they address, the ways in which they will be asked to communicate their ideas, and the type of feedback students will receive.)

Students will write three reaction papers in which they will identify the main argument, assumptions and evidence of the readings and raise questions for discussion (about 2-3 pages each). I will allow opportunities for revising the first reaction paper and the essay and meet with students to review their writing. Students will also write a research proposal and 12-15 paper on a topic relevant to the seminar.

The class will involve discussion of the readings, and students who write reaction papers for the class period will be asked to shared their ideas with the class.

Each student will give a presentation of their research before the final draft of the paper is completed.

4. Develop fundamentals of information literacy and library research (e.g. Indicate how students will make use of library resources.)

They will use a range of sources from the library. I will require them to identify secondary literature on the topic they are interested in, including books and articles on JSTOR or in text, and their research will require them analyze either news articles, government documents, databases, or some combination. I would require them to use at least 10 sources.

5. Provide the opportunity for students to work closely with a faculty mentor (e.g. Indicate specific efforts you will make to interact with each student, learn more about each students’ interests and abilities, and provide appropriate guidance for their intellectual growth.)
1. Meet with each student after the first class to talk about their interests and reasons for taking the course.
2. Meet with each student after I evaluate the first reaction paper, discuss ways to improve the paper, and allow them to write another draft.
3. Review a rough draft of the essay assignment and with each student.
4. Meet with students outside of class to discuss their research proposals.

6. Briefly state your background for teaching this course:

   I have published two books and several articles dealing with budget politics and I have taught this topic as a senior seminar. I would need to alter the approach for first year students, but I can teach the course in a way that will not require a pre-requisite.