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## Marian political science faculty and alumni fight for program

Submitted by Colleen Flaherty on December 8, 2021 - 3:00am

Marian University in Indianapolis is closing its political science program and laying off the program's last remaining tenured professor, an expert in U.S. government. Some program alumni and faculty members are upset about the decision and, perhaps more than that, mystified: they say Marian has not offered a clear rationale for nixing political science, which has as many declared majors as most other liberal arts programs on campus this year—and which is arguably as important as ever, given the troubled state of U.S. political discourse.

No other major is targeted for elimination.

“I had no idea this was coming. I was completely blindsided,” said Johnny Goldfinger, Marian's last tenured professor of political science, who heard the news in July from his provost. “I didn't even know that this was even being thought about, quite frankly.”

The university's Board of Trustees voted to eliminate the program in a closed meeting earlier this month. Current majors will be allowed to finish their program of study, but the program must stop accepting new majors.

Marian says it has consistently raised questions about the political science program's quality and average annual numbers of graduating majors. Yet Goldfinger and Pierre Atlas, who was until recently the program's other tenured professor, deny this.

Atlas, who resigned from Marian over the summer after it denied his sabbatical request and subsequent request for unpaid research leave for reasons that

remain unclear to him, recalled, “There was always a desire to increase enrollment. But that was a generic, across-the-board desire for all liberal arts majors. The fact is that political science was doing well in the context of the liberal arts.”

The American Political Science Association wrote a [letter](#) [1] to Marian, asking it to reconsider its decision. Steven Rathgeb Smith, executive director of the association, said in an interview Tuesday that while he’s seen some other institutions cut back their political science programs of late in response to financial pressures, “it’s usually been part of an overall effort that has been focused on the humanities and other social science departments, as well.” Marian, meanwhile, appears to have “singled out political science for closure and is not taking a more comprehensive approach to thinking about how they would put in place cutbacks.”

Smith noted another trend in political science, especially at larger universities: many departments’ enrollments are on the rise, “because of the intense interest in politics and political polarization, and a lot more engagement with the political process and service learning and internships.”

Beyond Goldfinger and alumni, Marian’s faculty and administrators with joint faculty status voted against the proposal to eliminate political science last month, 104 to 26. A petition opposing the decision has also gathered 600 signatures.

Brad Wucher, a university spokesperson, said via email, “As part of Marian University’s mission to provide the highest quality education to our students, we are continuously assessing our academic programs.” Recently, he said, “the faculty and administration completed a comprehensive review of the political science program, and it was determined that, based on academic quality, student demand and persistence, and career opportunities, we could better serve our students by incorporating the key aspects of the political science major and minor into other areas of study, including history, sociology and global studies.”

### **‘A Selective Target’**

Atlas, who helped found Marian's political science major in 2002, and who is now a senior lecturer at the Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University at Bloomington, said the Marian faculty did redesign the major at one point—because professors wanted to, not because they were told to do so.

“It is a selective target,” Atlas said of the university's plan for political science. “It was like a Pearl Harbor sneak attack. Nobody saw it coming, and there was never a good-faith attempt to try and fix the program. It was ‘We're gonna get rid of it.’”

Why target political science? Atlas said he had some ideas, boiling down to personalities and politics, but he didn't want to speculate on the record.

Goldfinger said he thinks it's because he formed the college's first chapter of the American Association of University Professors in 2019, after about a year of organizing. The AAUP is a union on some campuses, but it's an advocacy chapter at Marian. Both before the chapter existed and now, as its leader, Goldfinger said he's been an outspoken proponent of shared governance on campus—and that Marian's president, Daniel J. Elsener, doesn't take kindly to faculty dissent. Most recently, Goldfinger said he opposed the planned elimination of two of four threatened minors—art history and classics—on the grounds that they were not costing the university anything to retain.

Now, fighting for the future of political science, Goldfinger has posted student and alumni testimonials, significant documents, and data to a website called [Apple Tree News](#) <sup>[2]</sup>. This is a reference to a comment that multiple professors remember Elsener making in 2019—right around the time the AAUP chapter was formed—in response to a faculty engagement survey. That survey revealed unexpectedly low faculty satisfaction rates, professors said, and Elsener is said to have shown the faculty a PowerPoint slide featuring livestock yoked to a wagon and said that everyone must be “pulling in the same direction.” Any problems at Marian came down to a few “bad apples,” Elsener also allegedly said.

Matthew Duncan, an Indiana-based lawyer who graduated from Marian's political science program in 2014 before interning for Republican lawmakers in Indianapolis, has appealed independently to Elsener to retain the political science major. Duncan said Tuesday that Elsener called him to discuss the matter and that Elsener "talked at length about how he thought the political science program needed to be improved or overhauled. And he said something like, 'You know, unfortunately, due to tenure, it's difficult to replace the faculty.'"

Duncan, who attributes much of his professional success to the political science program, said, "I love Marian—it was the greatest decision I've ever made in my life. I made many lifelong friends there." Yet he said he and "a number of other political science alumni I have spoken with feel like we're going to lose our connection to Marian if this political science elimination is approved. And I personally am not going to donate any more to the university if this plan goes through."

## **Major Questions**

Duncan's comments echo those gathered by Goldfinger as student testimonials. "Political science is all around us. There is no escaping politics," says one written by Katrina Ornelas, a recent Marian political science alum and current law school student. "I have always possessed the desire to give back and show my deep appreciation to my alma mater and all the opportunities Marian has given me. However, if this proposal to get rid of the political science department is accepted, I unfortunately will find myself in a position to not give back or donate to Marian."

Apart from Goldfinger and Atlas, political science had one more, nontenured, faculty member. Goldfinger said the university currently plans to retain that untenured professor and move her to a global studies program that is in the works. Current political science students will be able to graduate with that major. In the future, though, students interested in politics—including U.S. politics—will apparently have to rely on other programs, including global studies.

Goldfinger hasn't been asked to be a part of that. That violates widely followed standards on tenure from the AAUP, which say that institutions should make every attempt to find new positions for tenured faculty members when programs are eliminated.

According to Goldfinger's accounting, political science at Marian has 31 current declared majors—as many as chemistry and more than English, sociology, graphic design, philosophy and a dozen other unthreatened majors. Eight programs currently outrank political science in terms of declared majors.

Wucher, the university spokesperson, said that while many Marian students begin as political science majors, “on average, only four students graduate per year with that degree, instead finding their way into related areas in the social and behavioral sciences. This academic program change is, in part, a response to that student behavior.”

Wucher did not immediately provide comparative data as to how many students graduate from other programs each year, on average. But he said that programs with similar numbers to political science may be at risk if they do not show progress toward improvement.

Goldfinger shared data on annual political science majors since 2012. That year, there were six. The next year there were seven. In 2015 and 2016, there were four each, and the next year total graduates dipped to zero. Numbers have increased every year since, to eight in 2021.

According to information from 2019, political science graduated more majors than 50 other programs that year.

Marian's original written program elimination proposal, from August, cites a “program analysis and personnel changes,” and the college's decision to “pursue a different direction for its social science programs.” Goldfinger, among others, pushed back on this rationale and received a bullet point–style addendum as to why political science was no longer viable. “There was a major program revision and since that time there has been no significant increase in majors,” that addendum said in part, and “there was no clear

argument presented on what makes political science at Marian distinctive when compared to competitors.”

Marian has also explained its decision by saying that political science has one remaining faculty member and “no intention to create additional faculty lines.” This is presumably the university’s lack of intention, as Atlas said he assumed he would be replaced when he left.

The university’s plan has at least one fan among political science alumni: Joe Elsener, President Elsener’s son, who is currently chair of the Marion County Republican Party.

“I love my liberal arts education, but I definitely got a sense when I got on this side of it and I got my first campaign job in 2012 that a lot of what I studied day to day had nothing to do with what I was doing professionally—and I have never met a colleague who was also a political science major from any other school that didn’t agree with me,” Joe Elsener said Tuesday. “A lot of what we ended up doing was really focused on data and analytics, and using data, the marketing aspect of it, the targeting aspect of it.”

Joe Elsener continued, “That’s not to say I didn’t learn a lot at Marion, and it was phenomenal and I loved it—again, reading, writing, critical thinking. But I think the way they’re reforming this major and what they ultimately end up turning it, I’m hoping, it sounds like you’re still going to get that foundation of reading, writing and critical thinking, but hopefully more of the economics, data analytics, global studies—those type of things.”

[Academic Freedom](#) <sup>[3]</sup>  
[Faculty](#) <sup>[4]</sup>

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#### **Links**

[1] <https://appletreeneews.com/documents/american-political-science-association-letter/>

[2] <https://appletreeneews.com>

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/academic-freedom>

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