

Political science department is poorly named



Connor Stangler

There's nothing social scientists love more than inventing words.

Their terms — operationalize, structuralize, variabilize — are vague verbal badges that distinguish them from less concrete disciplines, like the fickle humanities. The words all mean basically the same thing: make measurable the things that should and never could be measurable.

Of all the disciplines that deal with human subjects but strive to become that official, quantified, bona fide hard science, political science might be the most unsuited for the attempt. In fact, to return the field to its origins, to make it more faithful to its objectives and to save it from deluding itself, I propose a simple name change — eliminate the word "science" from Truman State's political science department.

The change wouldn't just be in name. It also would require a massive realignment of what political scientists here at Truman study. Rather than reducing the mechanisms of governments, human rights, war and international negotiations to data and formulae, students and professors would talk about them in terms of people, history and culture.

There's immense pressure among certain fields to copy the hard sciences. First, the sciences seem to be more respected. Because they can produce verifiable work, their claims are considered stronger than the subjective opinions or theories of history or English. Every discipline wants to be taken seriously, and because it is easier to judge the accuracy of the hard sciences, the social sciences borrow what doesn't and shouldn't belong to them.

Second, these political "scientists" envy the exactitude of physics or the explanatory power of chemistry. Faced with the mind-numbing complexity of human interactions and cultures, the systems and organization of sciences almost are impossible to resist. If only we could capture humans with statistical analysis, then imagine what we could do and what we could know. We could be more certain of our decisions to go to war, produce a certain negative campaign ad or predict the future of the world order. Because numbers can strip away the irrationality and ego of humans, then why shouldn't we quantify? If we have the potential to be more accurate with what we do and say, why shouldn't we take the chance?

The problem is political scientists don't have that chance. The urge to transform the study of politics into a measurable project distorts the nature of what they're trying to study. Measuring voter turnout or weapons production is fine, but to then make claims about human nature based on those numbers is to discover things that aren't actually there. Once they've quantified the basics, political sciences march eagerly into realms of complex interactions. To quantify human rights abuses, to "variabilize" the crimes of warlords or to explain a history or culture of violence through standard deviations or graphs is to step far beyond the line of reasonableness. Humans do not define their political experiences with numbers, so we should not describe them that way.

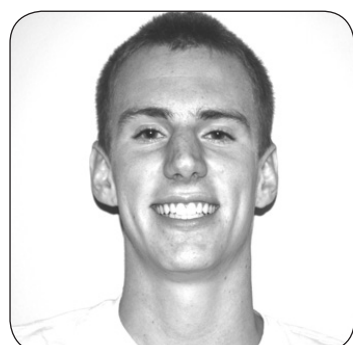
The arguments against the scientific dreams of political science are neither new nor rare. Some departments around the world, such as those at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, still refer to the study as just "politics." It harkens back to a time when John Locke, Thomas Paine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau struggled with the whims of human nature, when politics was more rooted in the heart and mind than in the bell curve.

Some political scientists, themselves, call for reform. In a controversial article that appeared in the "New York Times" during June 23, Northwestern University political scientists Jacqueline Stevens said "everyone knows the clean equations mask messy realities that contrived data sets and assumptions don't, and can't, capture." She calls out her fellow faculty members, saying their attempts to predict future political developments based on statistics "have failed spectacularly." Even though many have recognized the limits of quantification, we still cling to it because it's clean, comprehensible and orderly. Especially when dealing with the most complicated and uncertain of human relationships — politics — we should not shy away from the difficulties of morality and gray zones.

This is not to say political scientists do not produce fantastic work or should never use graphs, only that they should be wary of the seduction of numbers. In an attempt to rationalize, they mischaracterize the beautiful irrationality and disorder of the human.

Connor Stangler is a senior English and history major from Columbia, Mo.

NASA deserves more funding



John Brooks

Last week, Austrian skydiver and daredevil Felix Baumgartner completed a jump from 128,100 feet to break the previous world record for the highest skydive on record. If you get the chance, go to YouTube and watch a few videos of the event. It's amazing to see him toss a salute, step out of a tiny capsule into open air and then touch down safely on the ground a few minutes later. As you watch these videos, you'll probably notice the Red Bull logo on everything — Baumgartner's suit, the wall at the mission control, the capsule — everything. That's because Baumgartner's jump was sponsored by Red Bull.

Red Bull did not publish how much the event cost them, but there's little doubt it was quite expensive — but also quite profitable in terms of the global exposure to their brand, according to an Oct. 15 USA Today story. I certainly don't begrudge Red Bull for plastering its logo on everything. They sponsored the mission. But I do think it's sad that a private corporation has to fund ventures that NASA should be able to afford.

NASA's budget was cut by the Obama administration from \$1.5 billion to \$1.2 billion for the 2013 fiscal year, according to a Feb. 10 redorbit.com article. NASA's budget has decreased as a percentage of

the total federal budget during the last four years from .57 percent during 2009 to .48 percent during 2012, according to a Feb. 1 guardian.uk.com article. This is shameful.

Presidents are not as responsible for as much as people tend to think. But they do set Congress's legislative agenda.

When I was at Missouri Boys State during 2010, I heard Missouri Governor Jay Nixon speak. During a question and answer session, Nixon was asked why he cut funding for education. He responded to the effect that there isn't enough money to fund everything. That's true. We do not have money to spend on all the programs out there. Yet NASA's budget consists of just .48 percent of our budget this year. We spent \$850 billion on bailouts for bankers. That's more money than has been spent for the entire 50 year program of NASA. We're spending billions of dollars on sinking programs that need to be reformed like Social Security, and they cut money to NASA? What a brilliant idea. I'm not suggesting NASA necessarily would choose to spend their money on events like skydiving. But Baumgartner's jump did have scientific applications. It showed that humans can survive jumps from such a high distance given the proper equipment. Energy drinks are funding research, and we're putting our space shuttles into museums. Bravo.

Ignoring other political issues, I hope whoever wins the upcoming Presidential election commits to increase NASA's budget. The sense of wonder and thrill of exploration around space are truly hard to describe or re-create. As a child, my parents took me to the U.S. Space and Rocket Museum in Huntsville, Ala. where I saw attractions like replicas of the space capsule that originally went to the moon. I got my picture with the SR-

71, the fastest plane ever built. When I saw Baumgartner jump, I was reminded of the sense of amazement and beauty that filled me as a child. Exploration is exciting. Science is cool. Science can be cool — but not when we're cutting budgets that are half of one percent of our total budget.

There are far more popular things beside space to invest in right now. We're privatizing our space travel. NASA is hitching rides for our satellites on other countries' rockets because our program is in between generations of shuttles. President Obama and the Democratic congress had a super majority for two years between 2009 and 2010. They could have passed any legislation, they cut funding to NASA, and now private corporations are funding our explorations. Maybe that's for the best. They'll find a way to profit off it. They have to. The returns NASA has brought from their work may not bring many votes or boatloads of cash, but politicians need to think about more than money and votes. I know, that's asking for a lot. But maybe it will happen.

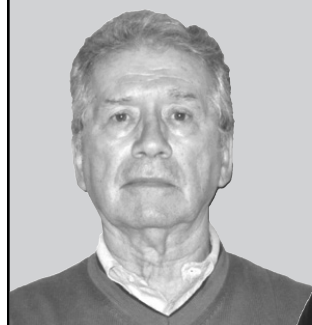
Throughout the future maybe we will have leaders who will invest in our future, in exploration and going back into space — to the moon and beyond. Possibly private companies will pick up the slack, as they seem to be doing. Increasing NASA's funding is about more than just exploration though — it's about regaining that sense of awe at our world and the universe. It's about our future, and I want leaders who can see beyond their few short years to the vast beyond, and see that our exploration starts now — with us.

John Brooks is a sophomore English major from Columbia, Mo.

What qualifications must be met to consider a subject area a science?

"Political science and psychology are social sciences. Social sciences encompass behavioral interaction. You can do definitive research to describe human interaction. When you're collecting data and using scientific methods, you're doing scientific research."

Sal Costa
Psychology professor



"The word 'science' has had different meanings over time. It can mean a body of knowledge or refer simply to subjects like chemistry and biology...I think having a rigorous approach to data is key in what I consider to be science. There must also be an attempt to create a formal model."

Douglas Ball
Linguistics professor



"Some parts of political science are more scientific than other parts...If there are reoccurring and knowable patterns of behavior in the political realm, we can come to know them by using rigorous and systematic study. The application of science in political science is a goal as much as a reality."

John Quinn
Political science professor



"Any field of study that seeks knowledge by proposing and testing hypotheses could be considered a science."

Eric Patterson
Chemistry professor



AROUND THE OFFICE

HvZ demonstrates Truman's quirky community



Dan Mika

Humans versus Zombies has been called "weird" by my friends from home, a "waste of time" by my mom and "the number one threat to America" by Stephen Colbert. Only two of those phrases accurately describe the game, which exactly is why this campus-wide game of tag needs to continue expanding as a Truman tradition. HvZ was invented at Goucher College and is played at more than 650 colleges around the world, according to humansvszom-

bies.org. But it seems like it was invented specifically for Truman, designed to show off the student body's quirky way of killing free time.

My friend, when he was walking through the library, thought it was "weird" that so many students were carrying around Nerf guns.

My friend told me this when we were discussing where we wanted to go to college last fall. Despite ruining any hope of my friend coming to Truman State, the idea of walking around campus with a Nerf gun while rocking a chest strap full of foam darts Rambo-style and not getting dirty looks intrigued me. When I discovered why all of those students in the library were armed, Truman went straight to the top of my college list.

The game emphatically is nerdy but then again, so is Truman. Residence Life has been putting on a month-long Harry Potter program where students can be sorted into one of the four houses from the series, take "Defense Against The Dark Arts" classes and run around the quad playing Quidditch. That blatantly is nerdy, and that's okay at Truman. If we can pull off having students run around The Quad play-

ing Quidditch, then running around The Quad throwing socks and firing Nerf guns at each other doesn't seem so dorky.

But the greatest part of HvZ is the sense of community that players generate during the game. Survival is an evolutionary impulse shared by all creatures on this planet. It doesn't care about what residence hall you live in, what your major is or which Greek letters are on your hoodie. HvZ is Truman's great social equalizer because it removes normal social boundaries, forces complete strangers to work together to stay alive and compels zombies to conspire against their prey. It sure beats an awkward mixer to me.

HvZ has even made me closer to my little brother Dominic. He's in 5th grade and absolutely is obsessed with his extensive collection of Nerf guns. I told him about HvZ a week before my family came to visit me. When they arrived, Dominic presented me with one of his coveted Nerf guns completely covered in marker ink.

"This will help you kill the zombies," he told me, and despite my objections to his fixa-

tion with any sort of weaponry, I couldn't help but feel proud of him. HvZ truly is a game that brings people closer.

As of Monday, 253 students have already signed up for the game on Trumanzombies.org out of the nearly 6,000 students attending Truman. While 253 is a high number, I feel that it should be more. HvZ week needs continued support if it is to become a Truman institution akin to the Gum Tree or partying during Reading Day's Eve. It should be featured in the brochures sent out to prospective students and explained in detail during campus tours. HvZ is one of the best ways Truman can enhance the tight-knit community that it touts itself as. United, we can fight zombies on the way to class across campus. Divided, we wander to the next course in yet another boring week during the year. Don't be bored. Go fight zombies.

Dan Mika is a freshman communication major from Mt. Prospect, Ill.