UW-L Professor Organizes Interdisciplinary Research Workshop

Professor Grace Deason of the UW-L Psychology Department and Professor Rebecca Hannagan of Northern Illinois University (NIU) recently organized a unique research workshop focused on Political Psychology and Gender. The International Society for Political Psychology and UW-L’s College of Liberal Studies provided funding for the workshop, which was held August 27 and 28 at the NIU—Naperville campus.

Deason and Hannagan brought together scholars from the fields of political science and psychology who study the impact of gender on political behavior. In addition to presenting new research, the workshop aimed to build a network of scholars and to provide career mentoring to graduate students and junior faculty. Graduate students who attended the workshop came from a wide variety of schools and programs, including Yale, Michigan, Duke, UCLA, the University of Minnesota, and Northern Illinois University. Assistant professors and more senior scholars hailed from the University of Calgary, Brandeis, Union College, and Princeton, among others. UW-L Professors Ray Block of the Political Science and Public Administration department and Christina Haynes of the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department also attended the workshop and presented their research.

The papers presented at the workshop addressed the topic of intersecting identities – including race, religion, partisanship, sexual orientation, and gender – and how such identities impact the decision to run for office, Congressional voting behaviors, perceptions of candidates and leaders, and the group dynamics of decision making bodies. Scholars received in-depth feedback on their work in peer review sessions that matched each presenter with a junior and senior scholar. These sessions were designed to ensure successful publication of the research presented at the workshop.

Informal networking took place throughout the workshop as conversations over breaks flowed easily from the research panels and discussions. In mentoring sessions over lunch, the organizers paired graduate students and junior faculty with more senior scholars to discuss topics such as getting an academic job, getting tenure, applying for grants, or building collaborative networks.

Alisa Von Hagel, NIU alumnae and Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin—Superior, noted: “The workshop was an excellent opportunity to meet with an incredible group of scholars, all of whom are engaged in timely, innovative, and compelling work. The most valuable experience was the time set aside for peer mentoring and the willingness of participants to engage in thoughtful and useful dialogue, providing great insight on how to advance within the profession.”

To connect the academic research with women’s experiences in politics, the organizers also invited local political leaders to be a part of the conference. Joining the group for dinner on the first evening of the workshop was Alderman Deborah Graham, who represents Chicago’s 29th Ward. She shared her personal story of
entering public service that has included serving in the Illinois General Assembly for the 78th District.

The workshop concluded with a plenary panel featuring State’s Attorney Anita Alvarez, Naperville City Councilwoman Judy Brodhead, and DuPage County Board member Laurie Nowak. These leaders shared their stories of entering public service – each quite distinct from the others. State’s Attorney Alvarez simply knew from her years working her way up as a prosecutor that she had the skills to do the job. Councilwoman Brodhead had come from a politically engaged family, but her entry into public service was in response to something that happened in her community that compelled her to take action. Nowak, who just won her first elective office in November, stated "one of the many reasons I sought office was the lack of women represented on the County Board. Of 18 Members there was only one woman elected when I ran."

The workshop was a truly unique opportunity for the scholars to exchange ideas and to interact with those whom they study. Deason and Hannagan plan to disseminate the research presented at the workshop in the form of a peer-reviewed journal issue. They also aim to facilitate the network and mentoring that began at the workshop by hosting a Facebook Group, inviting participants to be part of panels at larger conferences, hosting Google chat sessions to discuss issues in the profession, and perhaps hosting another workshop again in the future.