

Questions for Professor Philbrick Yadav:

1. What is the specific assignment for this essay?

Alli's essay represents the culmination of her work in my research seminar, POLS 486: Islamic Political Thought. The specific assignment was to craft original research in response to a research question of the student's choosing, in keeping with the general themes of the course, which I've described below.

2. How does this assignment fit with the goals of your course?

All Political Science majors are required to take two research seminars, one in the junior year and one in the senior year. The aim of these seminars is to help majors to develop a critical understanding of a given topic on an in-depth basis, and to acquire the skills necessary to design and carry out independent research related to that topic. These courses are generally very challenging, but offer the promise of a highly rewarding experience in student learning.

Students in my seminar spent the first half of the semester gaining a general appreciation for the considerable variation within the Islamic cannon regarding core issues central to political theory: the nature sovereignty, legitimacy, and justice; the ideal relationship between state and society, the relationship between collective equality and individual freedom, etc. We approached these questions from a range of historical and epistemological perspectives, largely through the use of primary sources in translation.

By mid-semester, students began work on individual research projects. As we continued with our collective reading, students completed a number of interrelated assignments, all designed to produce the kind of work evidenced by Alli's paper. These included (a) a research proposal, in which students identified a research question and mapped out what they would need to know in order to address that question; (b) an annotated bibliography, identifying key relevant sources; (c) a research prospectus, summarizing their work to date and submitted to their peers for critique; and (d) a final paper of 20-25 pages.

3. Why does this student's essay stand out for you as strong writing?

Alli's paper shows creativity and diligence, two attributes which are often in tension for student writers. She has a clear voice, a superb sense of style, and the patience to conduct quality research. From the opening page, Alli makes the apparent paradox that motivates her paper clear, through the use of contrasting anecdotes. She then offers a resolution to this paradox by comparing advances made by women **as women** and advances made by women **as citizens.** The somewhat counterintuitive finding - that women can advance in their rights as citizens even as they experience setbacks as women - is then supported by a rich legal history constructed through the accounts of Iranian women writers and activists. Alli's prose is lucid and her argument is compelling. Her work stands as an excellent example for undergraduate scholars/writers.

Questions for Allison McCracken

1. How did you go about completing this essay? What steps did you follow?

There were a few steps as a class we all had to follow that proved to be really helpful. First was a paper topic proposal, then a 10 page prospectus (an outline/rough draft). We each swapped our prospectus with 2 classmates, then presented our own and critiqued each others, and the next week our final papers were due. The time table was nice because it made it impossible to do everything the night before.

2. What was the most challenging aspect of this essay assignment?

For my particular topic it was difficult to narrow down information without leaving too much out. Also, only having a week between our presentations/critiques and the final draft was tough.

3. How does this essay connect to your work in the course as a whole?

Throughout the semester our class learned about the basic foundations of Islamic political thought. As part of this we read a variety of positions taken by several Muslim authors on the role of women within Islam. In my essay, I explore the legal manifestations of these positions in the specific context of the country of Iran.

4. What is the most important thing you learned from doing this essay?

Organization is essential for long papers, especially keeping track of the information you have gathered and which sources it all comes from. I also learned that it's a lot easier to pick a paper topic after you have already done some research- instead of before- because then you are less likely to screen out important information that does not support your thesis. Additionally, I gained an enormous amount of respect for women in Iran who lived through the Islamic Revolution, and after learning about their hardships I'll never take for granted the rights afforded to women here in the United States.