

# Arizona State University

College of Liberal Arts & Sciences  
Department of Political Science  
Tempe, Arizona 85287-2001  
602/965-6551

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Graduate Admissions  
Department of Political Science  
The University of Chicago

To the Admissions Committee:

It is a great pleasure to recommend Joel Olson to you as an outstanding candidate for admission into your graduate program in political science. I say this with no hesitation whatever, for Mr. Olson is probably the best student I have seen in 14 years of teaching at Arizona State. At the least he deserves to be ranked among that handful of truly excellent students who have gone on to earn law degrees or doctorates from some of the finest programs in the country.

I base this judgment on the work Mr. Olson did in the two classes he took from me, beginning with Political Ideologies (POS 101) in the fall semester of 1987. This was one of the largest classes I have taught -- over 220 students -- and it must have been fairly difficult, for about one-third of the class finished with either a D or an E (i.e., failing). Joel Olson, however, seemed to have no difficulty at all. He earned an A on all four examinations, finishing the semester with the highest score in the class. I particularly remember the essay he wrote on George Will's Statecraft as Soulcraft, a book that seemed to bewilder most of the other students. Mr. Olson clearly grasped the central themes of Will's book, which he set out in a wonderfully concise manner in his essay, then moved beyond this to offer a brief critical analysis of Will's claim to speak for "true" or "proper" conservatism. It was a most impressive performance. It was also characteristic of his work in that class, on multiple choice and essay questions alike.

After the semester ended I saw Mr. Olson around campus a few times and spoke to him once or twice about his interests in political theory. It wasn't until the spring semester of 1989, though, that I had a chance to see him in another course of mine. In this case the class was the second semester of our history of political thought sequence, a junior-senior level class with about 80 students. The level of the students in this class (POS 441) was considerably higher than in the Political Ideologies class Mr. Olson had taken earlier; indeed, there were several excellent students, including one who is now a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Virginia. But Joel Olson was again clearly and indisputably the best. His score at the end of the semester was 158 out of a possible 160 points -- the highest score I believe I have ever given in this course, which I've taught about ten times.

When I say that Joel Olson is probably the best student I've seen, then, I have ample evidence on which to base this judgment. I don't know what his GRE scores are, but I'll be very surprised if they are not extraordinarily high. In my classes, certainly, he demonstrated not just unusual ability, but a real gift for reading, understanding, and analyzing

Richard Dagg  
Associate Professor



complex arguments and abstract concepts. In addition, he matches this gift with a writing style that is not only lucid, but downright engaging. His essays always showed that he knew what points to stress, what ideas needed explaining, and how best to organize his thoughts. They also showed that he was thinking for himself, and not simply parroting what I had said in lectures.


Perhaps the best way to put the case for Joel Olson is to say that he has all the earmarks of a genuine scholar. He came to class regularly, of course, he joined in class discussions, and he completed all his assignments on time. But more importantly, he displayed a quiet passion for the subject. He has told me, and I have every reason to believe him, that he thoroughly enjoys studying political theory, in all its aspects and variety. Whether it's the history of political thought, problems of democracy, or critical or post-modernist excursions in political theory, Joel Olson finds it fascinating. I think he may be a bit too indiscriminate in his affection for political theory at this point, but there is no doubt that he has the true scholar's love for the subject.

From the academic standpoint, then, I cannot imagine anyone better suited to the scholarly life than Mr. Olson. I wish I had been able to see his work in a smaller class, with more give-and-take among the students and the opportunity for more creative work on their part. I understand from colleagues, however, that Joel has done exceedingly well in these respects, too, so I have no reservations with regard even to these dimensions of his scholarly potential.

Where personality or temperament are concerned, Joel Olson again seems to be remarkably well-suited for graduate school. He is a soft-spoken, even taciturn, young man, but he has not hesitated to raise questions and join in discussions in my classes. As I've indicated, he is certainly capable of thinking for himself, and he has some strongly held convictions, particularly with regard to environmental issues. I don't know much else about him personally, but I've seen nothing to indicate that he is abrasive, unreliable, or untrustworthy. On the contrary, everything I've seen of him leads me to believe that he will be an excellent teaching or research assistant.

In sum, I am convinced that Joel Olson is a truly outstanding candidate for the finest graduate programs in our discipline. He already has a solid undergraduate background in political theory, and I think that he needs only the opportunities provided by a department with excellent students and faculty in that field to become an accomplished political theorist himself. I recommend him in the strongest possible terms, and I hope you will see fit to admit him on the most attractive terms possible.

Yours sincerely,

  
R. D. [redacted]  
Associate Professor