



ELISE ST. JOHN is an educational policy researcher and consultant for American Institutes for Research. She graduated from Cal Poly in 1994 with a degree in political science. Elise obtained her master's degree in sociology from San Jose State University and a Ph.D. in educational policy from the University of Washington.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Elise St. John

Elise was driven by her fascination of diverse systems of government and how societies are structured, leading her to apply to Cal Poly as a political science undergraduate. Elise credits some of her most valuable experiences, her method of critical thinking, and the foundation of her success to her political science degree. Currently an educational policy consultant for American Institute of Research, Elise acknowledges that her political science background helped her unearth her passion for research. Elise admits, “I did not catch my stride as a student until my third year, however I had two experiences that year which helped me find my particular career pathway.” She states, “These significant opportunities allowed me to understand how relevant political science is in both academic and everyday life.”

Her first experience was an internship with a local congressional campaign in San Luis Obispo that eventually led to an internship in Washington, D.C. working for then U.S. Senator Joe Biden. As an intern on Capitol Hill, Elise had a variety of duties, ranging from bringing the senator lunch to helping create press releases. However, her most important job was reading through stacks of newspapers each morning and clipping various prevalent stories together for Senator Biden. Elise says that as a young student who had only traveled

regionally, her internship experience in D.C. revealed the possibilities a degree in political science offers. Elise's second influential experience was when she took her very first research methods class at Cal Poly. She states, "Learning about the existence of data sources and various methods for examining my endless questions... I still get excited just thinking about it!" This class, along with her Senate internship, bolstered Elise's confidence and completely changed her approach to the study of political science.

After graduating from Cal Poly, Elise obtained her master's degree in sociology from San Jose State University and a Ph.D. in educational policy from the University of Washington. Her dissertation, which examined the factors that influence how elementary school students are distributed to classrooms and teachers, won the Outstanding Dissertation Award from the Mixed Methods division of the American Educational Research Association. Elise asserts that her political science background aided her career in educational research. She explains, "One of my academic mentors once told me that I had a capacity for 'thinking big' and 'thinking small' about the ways educational policy issues play out in schools, and I attribute much of that to my early training in political science." In her current position as an educational policy consultant for American Institutes for Research, Elise is working with education economists in Washington on a statewide study of the teacher pipeline. The multi-year study analyzes the accounts of teachers at various levels of classroom experience. Its purpose is to provide state legislatures with knowledge that will help them design beneficial policies for students and teachers. Elise's political science degree provides the context of local governmental systems and how their policies positively or negatively influence school systems.

Elise's advice to current political science students is to form a relationship as early as possible with either an advisor or a professor. She acknowledges, "It can be intimidating to go to a professor's office hours, but it really helps to have a mentor to help navigate higher education and think through your academic and professional next steps." Elise also stresses that applying for an internship is non-negotiable. She says, "College is a unique point in a person's life where students have time to explore their passions and interests, so do not be afraid to aim big when looking for opportunities."