

STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT REPORT

PROGRAM: Politics (BA)

SUBMITTED BY: Chad Rector

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Program description from the Course Catalog: Please copy and paste the current year’s catalog description of this program. This is generally a one-two paragraph description immediately following the name of the program. Please be sure to include the listing of program outcomes as printed.

Resources for the study of politics in the Washington area are extraordinary, and students have the opportunity to participate frequently in many history-making events that occur in this capital city. The program presents a structured curriculum of courses in political theory, international relations, and the politics and governmental institutions of the United States and foreign countries. Students majoring in politics are encouraged to consider a minor in communication, economics, English, history, information technology, or philosophy.

Seniors are required to complete an internship in a government agency, congressional office, corporate government affairs department, or other site approved by the academic internship mentor for politics. Seniors must also complete the senior seminar and a comprehensive examination.

Upon successful completion of the politics program, students will be able to

- explain the internal logic of basic political science concepts such as power, institutions, political systems, the state, conflict, and citizenship;
- acquire factual knowledge using appropriate sources;
- interpret information as a way to evaluate abstract or conceptual ideas;
- understand the motivations and beliefs of political actors from their own perspectives;
- use conceptual ideas to evaluate novel situations;
- express analysis and conclusions in clear writing;
- understand the structure and conclusions of scholarly articles in political science; and
- understand, correctly, the basic working of political institutions in the United States and around the world.

List all of the program’s learning outcomes: *(regardless of whether or not they are being assessed this year)*

Learning Outcome	Year of Last Assessment	Assessed This Year	Year of Next Planned Assessment
Concepts Explain the internal logic of basic political science concepts such as power, institutions, political systems, the state, conflict, and citizenship	2015-16		

Research Acquire factual knowledge about the world by finding and interpreting information from appropriate sources	2015-16		
Analysis Interpret information about the world by using it to evaluate abstract concepts	(2016-17 – not reported)		
Empathy Explain the connection between motivations and actions, including for political actors or organizations with different values	(2016-17 – not reported)		
Application Use analytic concepts and models to understand novel situations		x	2018-19
Writing Express written analysis and conclusions in a clear, coherent way.		x	2018-19
Review Find and interpret the structure, arguments, and conclusions of scholarly studies in social science			2020-21
Knowledge Demonstrate a command of basic facts about the workings of political institutions in the United States and around the world			2020-21

Describe briefly how the program’s outcomes support Marymount’s mission, strategic plan, and relevant school plan (*generally not more than two paragraphs, may use bullet points*):

Marymount’s mission and strategic plan emphasize the need to encourage our students to achieve academic excellence and intellectual growth through the liberal arts tradition. The Politics program promotes these through the elevation of critical thinking and analytical writing. The program’s courses offer breadth and depth to each student’s intellectual pursuit. The University emphasizes the importance of service, intellectual curiosity, and global perspective; the Politics program encourages service through civic engagement, curiosity through our inquiry and thesis requirements, and global perspective through our courses on global issues and specific regions outside the United States.

Provide a brief description of the assessment process used including strengths, challenges and planned improvements to the process, and provide evidence of the existence of a culture of continuous improvement based on assessment (*generally not more than two paragraphs, may use bullet points*):

Our assessment process was entirely overhauled in 2016, in response to suggestions from the Assessment Committee. Starting with the 2015-16 report, the assessment process focuses on student performance in the senior thesis and student responses to a program survey of graduating seniors. The strength of the assessment process in politics is its focus on “inquiry research,” which demands critical thinking, research and writing skills, and knowledge integral to the formal study of politics. We developed 8 learning outcomes and assessed two of them that year - concepts and research. The following year, 2016-17, we collected data on our third and fourth learning outcomes – analysis and empathy – but did not report that because we were doing a full program review, with an external reviewer (and so we did not submit a learning outcomes assessment report that year).

Following the 2015-16 assessment and the 2016-17 full review, the department made a number of changes and introduced a series of new initiatives, detailed in the “Component 7 – Reporting on Action Plan Progress” report also filed this year. Briefly, we:

- Reduced major requirements and streamlined requirements for the major and minor,
- Instituted a new outreach program targeting majors during the first- to second-year transition,
- Began a pilot for a project to incorporate service learning into the curriculum, and
- Began more fully integrating visits from alumni into the curriculum.

Describe how the program implemented its planned improvements from last year:

Outcome	Planned Improvement	Update <i>(Indicate when, where, and how planned improvement was completed. If planned improvement was not completed, please provide explanation.)</i>
Concepts - explain the internal logic of basic political science concepts such as power, institutions, political systems, the state, conflict, and citizenship.	The program is doing a full program review, with an external reviewer, this year. We will present a comprehensive set of proposals for a curriculum change, if appropriate, following the completion of the program review; the findings of this assessment report will also inform that set of proposals.	See the action plan update for details. We instituted a large number of changes to the major and minor. These included reducing the number of required core courses, in particular eliminating a required course that was <i>not</i> focused on either core concepts or research. We have continued to follow through with changes instituted in 2012-13 that made student research more central to the curriculum.
Research - acquire factual knowledge using appropriate sources.	The program is doing a full program review, with an external reviewer, this year. We will present a comprehensive set of proposals for a curriculum change, if appropriate, following the completion of the program review; the findings of this assessment report will also inform that set of proposals.	

Provide a response to last year's University Assessment Committee review of the program's learning assessment report:

Comment: "Outcomes are altered, but now are single concepts. Description implicitly linked to mission, but not explicitly linked to outcomes. Please list the full text of outcomes and not these short-hand versions."

Response: The committee was dissatisfied last time because we put short headings of the learning outcomes in the grid near the top of the report, and had complete explanations in an appendix (at the time, it seemed redundant to us to explain everything in detail twice). But we now understand that the learning outcomes should be written out in the grid. So this year we did that.

Comment: "Many UAC comments were un-answered in this year's report..."

Response: We were told after the 2014-15 report that the learning outcomes we had been using through that time were not appropriate. In the 2015-16 report we began using new learning outcomes developed after extensive consultation with Ms. Boudinot. The "unanswered" comments were detailed comments about how assessment on the old learning outcomes might be carried forward in future years; we explained in the 2015-16 report that following up on those would be irrelevant since – at the request of the committee – we were using different learning outcomes anyway. But we now understand that the committee didn't like that. So this year we are answering every comment, no matter how irrelevant to the actual process of assessing learning outcomes, such as this one.

Comment: "Difficult to determine what are the outcomes of the program as different outcomes used in different places. Three outcomes are listed in the course catalog, but the 'outcomes' measured are not those outcomes. By listing only titles, you are preventing the committee from evaluating your outcomes. The two learning outcomes that you assessed are worded appropriately."

Response: The learning outcomes in 2015-16 were different than the ones assessed in previous years because the committee told us to assess different ones. Again, we're sorry that we put the full descriptions in an appendix instead of in the grid thing. Truly. Mortified. We fixed that this year.

Comment: "Examined on their own, the assessment measures and targets are appropriate. Both 'outcomes' as identified use thesis and survey as measures. Rubric for thesis included, as are survey questions."

Response: Thanks.

Comment: "Identifies 'outcome' as met, but no additional discussion is included."

Response: Okay, we'll include more discussion.

Comment: "There is no discussion of what the assessments tell you in terms of areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. First assessment of these outcomes. Assessment plan included, using 'learning outcomes'. Program review scheduled with follow-up revision as appropriate."

Response: Okay, got it; we'll include more discussion.

Comment: "Program outcomes as in catalog are not assessed. Learning outcomes are detailed and assessed. Would a larger set of program outcomes more appropriately encompass what program is interested in evaluating?"

Response: At the request of the committee, we were using new learning outcomes. New ones. So they were different than what was in the catalog. When we proposed 4 learning outcomes Ms. Boudinot suggested that 8 would be better. If the committee wants us to use more than 8 we'll think about it, but honestly even 8 seems kind of excessive to us. Unless this comment refers to the 3 learning outcomes that were in place prior to 2015, which, again, we are no longer using.

Comment: "You've obviously done a great deal of work to improve program assessment in Politics. Your report does not really reflect this work. If you will revise the report to include your outcomes and a discussion of the results, it will meet all of the requirements. The assessment process you've set up seems quite effective. Your thesis rubric is very good."

Response: Got it. We included the learning outcomes in the right place this time. See? They're up that grid, starting on the very first page. And we're putting in more discussion. Enjoy!

Outcomes Assessment 2017-2018

Learning Outcome 5: Application - Use analytic concepts and models to understand novel situations

Assessment Activity

Outcome Measures <i>Explain how student learning will be measured and indicate whether it is direct or indirect.</i>	Performance Standard <i>Define and explain acceptable level of student performance.</i>	Data Collection <i>Discuss the data collected and student population</i>	Analysis <i>1) Describe the analysis process. 2) Present the findings of the analysis including the numbers participating and deemed acceptable.</i>
<p>Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they derive and discuss a hypothesis or conceptual framework and then apply that theory or framework to a novel set of facts that have not otherwise been introduced in a class. In principle, the students should be able to use a theory or analytic framework outside the context in which it was developed.</p>	<p>The rubric (see enclosed, under assessment plan) divided concepts into 4 categories and assesses each on a 4-point scale (novice, developing, proficient, and accomplished). We define an acceptable paper as one that averages at least a 3 (proficient) on that scale and our target as a program is for at least 80% of students to meet that “proficient” target.</p>	<p>We reviewed the 18 senior theses from POL 420. These represent all graduating seniors in politics.</p>	<p>The rubric is enclosed as Appendix B. Of the 18 students, the breakdown in scores was:</p> <p><u>(Score) number of students:</u></p> <p>(16) 2 (15) 2 (14) 3 (13) 4 (12) 3 (11) 1 (10) 1 (09) 1 (08) 1</p> <p>78% of the students (14 of the 18) were in the “proficient” range, defined as 12 or above. This is just short of our 80% target.</p>
<p>Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.</p>	<p>The survey asks students to rank on a 1-5 scale (1=poor, 5=excellent) how well the department teaches application. Our target as a program is for an average score of at least 4.</p>	<p>The 18 students in the senior seminar (effectively, the students graduating in politics in May 2018 or planning to graduate in December 2018) were given a survey in late spring, asking them to rate the department on all 8 learning outcomes. In 2018, 9 out of 18 students responded to the survey.</p>	<p>The specific question was: “One of the goals of the politics program is to help students use analytic concepts and models to understand novel situations that they have not previously encountered. In general, how well do you think the politics program as a whole prepared you to apply theories to new situations that you have not previously studied?” Students were presented with a 1 to 5 scale. Of the 9 students who responded to the survey, 3 of them chose “5,” 4 chose “4,” and 2 chose “3,” for an average score of 4.1, exceeding our target (although lower than the scores for learning outcomes we have assessed in prior cycles).</p>

Interpretation of Results

Describe the extent to which this learning outcome has been achieved by students (*Use both direct and indirect measure results*):

In general, we feel that most students achieved this outcome. On average the students in the 2018 graduating class had more difficulty with learning and writing than the cohorts immediately before and immediately after them, as reflected in their grades, performance in writing their senior thesis, and in the faculty's informal assessment of them as a group. Nevertheless, most of the students, including those who had been struggling earlier in program, were able to complete a senior thesis that took concepts developed by political scientists in one domain and apply it to others, showing that they could separate abstract ideas from contextual factors. Two examples from the senior thesis illustrate:

- “Bob” (not his actual name) wrote a thesis about the anomaly of the 2016 Republican presidential primary. Briefly, political scientists prior to 2016 had believed that networks of party leaders and activists have programmatic goals and therefore coordinate to mobilize primary voters so as to block candidates that they find broadly unacceptable; this happened in all major party presidential primaries from 1980 to 2012, but on the Republican side in 2016 President Trump won the primary despite being broadly viewed by party activists and leaders as unacceptable. Bob used a series of published political science papers from pre-2016 to argue that the critical element in this mechanism of party mobilization was communication between party leaders and voters; taking this framework outside the context of the 1980-2012 system, Bob argued that this communication channel had broken down by 2016 because of the rise of Republican ideological activists without programmatic goals and the rise of an alternate communication network – social media – that cut party leaders and activists out of the loop. Bob showed that he could take the “party decides” analytic construct outside of the context in which it was created – 1980-2012 – and apply it to a novel situation. 15/16.
- “Susan” wrote a thesis about the relationship between political corruption and natural resources – specifically forests – in developing countries. A number of prior studies have shown that corruption by local officials has a tendency to subvert national or international conservation goals, in a variety of contexts. Susan’s thesis correctly applied these findings, largely within the same context that they were originally developed, and then used them in a study of forest management generally. She passed up several opportunities to apply studies of other natural resources, noting in her thesis that studies of fisheries and endangered species were inapplicable to her study of forests without explaining why. Still, she applied concepts appropriately, taking studies of some countries and using them to generate insights about other countries, making her thesis almost but not quite “proficient” with respect to this learning outcome. 11/16.

Briefly describe program strengths and opportunities for improvement relative to assessment of outcome:

The political science program is designed from the beginning to have students think analytically about theories and concepts and then have them apply those theories and concepts to practical political situations in a variety of alternate contexts. Although our assessment indicators suggest that a large majority of our students are achieving this outcome, there are some stragglers as well. We assess that, if there is a deficiency, it is that struggling students do not necessarily understand that analytic concepts are designed to be generalizable tools that should be applied in multiple contexts. For these students, simply *completing* advanced writing assignments is often a challenge, making it impractical to expect that they can be taught later in their programs. So, we conclude that more could be done in early courses to introduce this concept.

Discuss planned curricular or program improvements for this year based on assessment of outcome:

We will:

- Incorporate more explicit discussions of application in the required introductory courses – POL 102 and POL 103 – to introduce students early to the purpose of theory. E.g. an explanation about the causes of World War One is also an explanation about the causes of the 1991 Gulf War, and so on. We will update rubrics for selected writing assignments in those courses to make particular note of applications out of context.
- Develop a new module for POL 250, the sophomore-level course that introduces students to research design in political science, that will include a section on how scholars use findings in one context to generate hypotheses in another context. (For example, how the process of international cooperation on trade can help us understand the process of international cooperation on climate change, or how party coalition formation in a parliamentary democracy can help us understand party cohesion in the United States.)

Learning Outcome 6: Writing - Express written analysis and conclusions in a clear, coherent way.

Assessment Activity

<p>Outcome Measures <i>Explain how student learning will be measured and indicate whether it is direct or indirect.</i></p>	<p>Performance Standard <i>Define and explain acceptable level of student performance.</i></p>	<p>Data Collection <i>Discuss the data collected and student population</i></p>	<p>Analysis <i>1) Describe the analysis process. 2) Present the findings of the analysis including the numbers participating and deemed acceptable.</i></p>
<p>Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they explain and test a hypothesis with appropriate evidence, and draw a conclusion. In principle, the students should be able to explain their argument clearly, fluidly, concisely, and professionally.</p>	<p>The rubric (see enclosed, under assessment plan) divided concepts into 4 categories and assesses each on a 4-point scale (novice, developing, proficient, and accomplished). We define an acceptable paper as one that averages at least a 3 (proficient) on that scale and our target as a program is for at least 80% of students to meet that “proficient” target.</p>	<p>We reviewed the 18 senior theses from POL 420. These represent all graduating seniors in politics.</p>	<p>The rubric is enclosed as Appendix B. Of the 18 students, the breakdown in scores was:</p> <p><u>(Score) number of students:</u></p> <p>(16) 5 (15) 3 (14) 4 (13) 3 (12) 3 (11) 0 (10) 0 (09) 1</p> <p>94% of the students (17 of the 18) were in the “proficient” range, defined as 12 or above. This surpasses our 80% target.</p>
<p>Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.</p>	<p>The survey asks students to rank on a 1-5 scale (1=poor, 5=excellent) how well the department teaches writing. Our target as a program is for an average score of at least 4.</p>	<p>The 18 students in the senior seminar (effectively, the students graduating in politics in May 2018 or planning to graduate in December 2018) were given a survey in late spring, asking them to rate the department on all 8 learning outcomes. In 2018, 9 out of 18 students responded to the survey.</p>	<p>The specific question was: “One of the goals of the politics program is to help students use analytic concepts and models to understand novel situations that they have not previously encountered. In general, how well do you think the politics program as a whole prepared you to apply theories to new situations that you have not previously studied?” Students were presented with a 1 to 5 scale. Of the 9 students who responded to the survey, 5 of them chose “5,” 3 chose “4,” and 1 chose “3,” for an average score of 4.4, exceeding our target.</p>

Interpretation of Results

Describe the extent to which this learning outcomes has been achieved by students (*Use both direct and indirect measure results*):

We feel that this objective has largely been met. The one student whose paper was rated below proficient was an international student for whom English is a third language. This student received help from the writing center and from the course instructor, but still struggled to express ideas in English fluidly.

Briefly describe program strengths and opportunities for improvement relative to assessment of outcome:

Writing is a major component of the political science program. Starting in POL 250 students are completed to write a 4000-word scientific paper that goes through several revisions with multiple rounds of editing following peer reviews and consultations with the instructor, and most upper-division courses devote 25% or more of class time to the writing process. The specific details suggest that there may be an opportunity for improvement with respect to international students in courses that involve substantial writing projects.

Discuss planned curricular or program improvements for this year based on assessment of outcome:

We will:

- Outside of formal course requirements, informally require students with difficulties writing in English to submit pared-down drafts of assignments earlier in the writing process. We will discuss among the faculty in the department the possibility of making a general department syllabus statement or policy.
 - In the event that a politics major is selected for the coming year as a writing center peer tutor (several have applied), bring a politics peer writing tutor in to selected writing courses for a workshop or other icebreaker, and then use those activities as a bridge to specifically (on an individual basis) encourage particular students to use the resources of the writing center early in the writing process.
-