

STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT REPORT, 2018-2019

PROGRAM: Politics (B.A.)
SUBMITTED BY: Chad Rector
DATE: 9/2019

Executive Summary: Description of Assessment Process

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

Learning Outcome	Year of Last Assessment	Assessed This Year (Y=Yes)	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		2019-20
Research Acquire factual knowledge about the world by finding and interpreting information from appropriate sources	2015-16		2019-20
Analysis Interpret information about the world by using it to evaluate abstract concepts	(2016-17 – not reported)		2020-21
Empathy Explain the connection between motivations and actions, including for political actors or organizations with different values	(2016-17 – not reported)		2020-21
Application Use analytic concepts and models to understand novel situations	2017-18		2021-22
Writing Express written analysis and conclusions in a clear, coherent way.	2017-18		2021-22
Review Find and interpret the structure, arguments, and conclusions of scholarly studies in social science		Y	
Knowledge Demonstrate a command of basic facts about the workings of political institutions in the United States and around the world		Y	

Provide a brief description of the assessment process used including how results are shared and discussed and strengths, challenges, and planned improvements to the process, providing evidence of a culture of continuous improvement based on assessment. If there is something that is impeding your ability to implement improvements, please comment on those issues (*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. In consultation with Ms. Boudinot and after extensive discussion among the politics faculty, we concluded that the program’s focus on writing and inquiry made the senior thesis a better instrument for assessment than any other writing project. We developed 8 learning outcomes and have assessed two of them each year since then.

Over the past several years, following discussions among the faculty around assessment, we have implemented some changes to the way we do academic advising (which we still do informally for our majors, despite the move to professional advising), a greater integration of peer coaching into our WI courses, changes to the way we connect internship experiences to in-class assignments, and a greater integration of class visits from alums into substantive courses. We are also making further changes this year, as we detail in the next section.

Closing the Loop: Progress on Planned Improvements from Prior Year

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>
<p>Application - Use analytic concepts and models to understand novel situations.</p>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	<p>We did not do this in 2018-19.</p> <p>Due to a staffing shortage, both of these required introductory courses were taught by short-term adjuncts that year. We plan to do this in 2019-2020.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 	<p>We started this in 2018-19.</p> <p>In 2018-19 we began the process of making more extensive changes to POL 250. This got started by some of the commitments we made in last year’s assessment report but have gone beyond those as well as we are beginning to have students develop formal “portfolios” of work that they carry through different courses. Part of this, which will be fully implemented in 2019-2020, is to have students explicitly link social science articles they read to “out-of-context” topics.</p>

Outcome	Planned Improvement	<p style="text-align: center;">Update</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>(Indicate when, where, and how planned improvement was completed. If planned improvement was not completed, please provide explanation.)</i></p>
	us understand party cohesion in the United States.)	
<p>Express written analysis and conclusions in a clear, coherent way.</p>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<p>We did part of this in 2018-19.</p> <p>By consensus among the faculty we began taking more proactive steps with students in writing courses for whom English is not a first language. Assessing the practical effects of this is difficult because, by coincidence, many of majors in that category this year were stronger students anyway, and did not have the same degrees of difficulty. However, we persisted in this because we thought it would be a good practice anyway.</p> <p>We elected not to make a syllabus statement specific to any one type of student, for fear of unintentionally sending the wrong message, but rather have taken steps to incorporate peer tutoring generally.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	<p>We did this in 2018-19.</p> <p>In addition, we have begun attempting to implement “cross-cohort” activities such as joint class sessions of courses involving mostly politics majors at different levels, as a way to help first- and second-year students make connections with upper-division</p>

Outcome	Planned Improvement	Update <i>(Indicate when, where, and how planned improvement was completed. If planned improvement was not completed, please provide explanation.)</i>
	particular students to use the resources of the writing center early in the writing process.	undergraduates. We suspect this also may aid in retention.

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

In some previous years, our assessment report was criticized for not responding to every comment from the previous year's report, even though we thought that most of those comments were just filler. In the interests of completeness and following instructions, we will therefore respond to every comment, no matter how banal.

Section 1

Comments: Nicely done.

Response: Thank you.

Section 2

Comments: Thank you for providing (humorous) responses to last year's UAC comments. Could not find the "action plan" as indicated on page #3.

Response: The "action plan" was a reference to the "Component 7 Action Plan Progress" from the follow-up to the program review. We thought the assessment report and the action plan progress report were going to the same committee, since they were due at roughly the same time and both went to "assessment," so we made several cross-references. We now see, and regret, that error. In any case, since we were not required to write an additional follow-up to the follow-up to the program review action plan, that will not be a source of confusion this year. Any humor is unintentional as we are in general trying to play this straight.

Section 3

Comments: Outcomes are well written. The grid thing is very useful. Thanks. Truly.

Response: Thank you.

Section 4

Comments: Well done. Meets requirements.

Response: Thank you.

Section 5

Comments: Well done. The connection between the findings about international students' writing and proposed changes to assignment requirements is appreciated.

Response: Thank you. As noted above, we have refrained from implementing a general policy or syllabus statement about international students in writing courses, but we decided to return to this issue in the future.

Section 6

Comments: Good job

Response: Thank you.

Summary

Comment: As a suggestion for further strengthening of your process (and completely optional), it might be useful to also include measures at other levels in the program (to see progression). The capstone/400-level course is certainly a wonderful place to assess student achievement of the outcome. Having multiple measures at different points in the students' passage through the degree will offer rich information of how the learning objectives are achieved throughout the program. Also, while it is required to only assess two outcomes every year, with a total of eight outcomes (nicely done!), perhaps the program might want to consider assessing more than two, so that each outcome is not assessed only every 5th year.

Response: Thank you for these two thoughtful suggestions.

1. Introducing a third assessment instrument earlier in the program. We think this would probably not provide us with enough new actionable information to make it worth the cost of the additional assessment. As a practical matter, the faculty teaching senior seminar (Tseng, typically) and POL 250 (Rector, typically) consult with each other extensively and in great detail about the shortcomings of their students. (Trust us on this.) As a result, we are usually able to identify much more quickly than the typically assessment cycle where students are not developing the skills they need to successfully conduct inquiry-based research and writing for the thesis.
2. Introducing a third learning outcome for formal assessment each year. We do this anyway, although we only formally report two outcomes every year. Faculty discuss and review senior thesis projects and faculty grade student assignments in the WI courses using their own rubrics that broadly reflect the same outcomes as the program-wide learning outcomes. As a result, we typically make at least as many changes to our teaching that we do *not* report in the annual assessment as we *do* report, since not all improvements we make correspond to instruments that we use for the formal assessment process.

In the event that the assessment process changes so that more than two instruments and more than two learning outcomes per assessment cycle becomes the norm for all programs, then we will revise our process accordingly.

Outcomes Assessment 2018-2019

Learning Outcome 1: Review. Find and interpret the structure, arguments, and conclusions of scholarly studies in social science.

<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 the acceptable level of student performance.</i></p>	<p>Data Collection <i>Discuss the process for collecting this data: who conducted the assessment, when, and how?</i></p>	<p>Result <i>Did you meet your target? What was the result?</i></p>
<p>Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they derive and evaluate 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 hypothesis or analytic concept should be rooted in a broad and critical understanding of published scholarly work in political science that pertains to the specific research question.</p>	<p>The rubric (see appendix) divides “review” 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 13 senior theses from POL 420. These represent all graduating seniors in politics.</p>	<p>Of the 13 students, the breakdown in scores was:</p> <p><u>(Score) number of students:</u></p> <p>(16) 1 (15) 2 (14) 3 (13) 2 (12) 2 (11) 1 (10) 1 (09) 0 (08) 1</p> <p>77% of the students (10 of the 13) 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 review. Our target as a program is for an average score of at least 4.</p>	<p>The 13 students in the senior seminar (effectively, the students graduating in politics in May 2019 or planning to graduate in December 2019) were given a survey in late spring, asking</p>	<p>The specific question was: “One of the goals of the politics program is to help students learn how to find scholarly journal articles and interpret the structure, arguments, and conclusions of social science studies. In general, how well do you think the</p>

<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 the acceptable level of student performance.</i></p>	<p>Data Collection <i>Discuss the process for collecting this data: who conducted the assessment, when, and how?</i></p>	<p>Result <i>Did you meet your target? What was the result?</i></p>
		<p>them to rate the department on all 8 learning outcomes. In 2019, 10 out of 13 students responded to the survey.</p>	<p>politics program as a whole prepared you to find and read academic social science articles?" Students were presented with a 1 to 5 scale. Of the 10 students who responded to the survey, 8 of them chose "5," 1 chose "4," and 1 chose "3," for an average score of 4.7, exceeding our target.</p>

Interpretation of Results

Analysis and Implications: *What does this result tell you about the extent to which your students achieved this outcome? What are the strengths and weaknesses that this result highlights, and what are the implications for your curriculum or your program?*

In general, this learning outcome assessed "better" than we had anticipated. Our general observation is that many of our students struggle with this part of the research process, and we have already begun changing the way we introduce and teach these skills in POL 250 and in other upper-division WI courses.

In some ways, our expectations are high – the specific skill of finding scholarly political science research articles on a given topic and reviewing them is not something any of our faculty learned how to do until they were in graduate school – but as this is a skill we begin teaching in POL 250 and think is important we feel we should assess it.

One of the weakest aspects of the student theses, consistently, was the last category in the rubric, critically evaluating connections. In general, we found that most students did very well in the first two categories, strongly in the third, and weakly in the fourth.

We are also concerned that although we as a faculty think that this is a weak spot in general for many of our students, and the skill was assessed as being below our usual standard, the students felt on average that they

learned it well – on the survey the students gave some of their strongest scores to this skill. This may be a case where the students don't know what they don't know.

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

This will be a specific area of focus for us in the next two years. We will:

1. Revise assignments in POL 250 to reduce the number of individual scholarly articles that students are required to review (as they are assessing strongly on the skill of interpreting and engaging individual scholarly articles).
 2. Revise assignments in POL 250 to introduce a new assignment where students write a literature review essay on a topic in which they critically evaluate connections among a range of articles, with multiple opportunities for revision. Change rubric for final term paper to require a literature review that includes critical evaluation of connections.
 3. Same as #2, but for other advanced electives that have the WI designation.
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Learning Outcome 2: Knowledge. Demonstrate a command of basic facts about the workings of political institutions in the United States and around the world.

<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 the acceptable level of student performance.</i></p>	<p>Data Collection <i>Discuss the process for collecting this data: who conducted the assessment, when, and how?</i></p>	<p>Result <i>Did you meet your target? What was the result?</i></p>
<p>Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they derive and evaluate 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 hypothesis or framework should be based on a correct understanding of how political systems work in practice, and the novel set of facts students observe should be observed correctly.</p>	<p>The rubric (on the next page) divides “knowledge” 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 13 senior theses from POL 420. These represent all graduating seniors in politics.</p>	<p>Of the 13 students, the breakdown in scores was:</p> <p><u>(Score) number of students:</u> (16) 1 (15) 3 (14) 2 (13) 4 (12) 2 (11) 1 (10) 0 (09) 1 (08) 0</p> <p>85% of the students (11 of the 13) were in the “proficient” range, defined as 12 or above. This exceeds 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 knowledge. Our target as a program is for an average score of at least 4.</p>	<p>The 13 students in the senior seminar (effectively, the students graduating in politics in May 2019 or planning to graduate in December 2019) were given a survey in late spring, asking them to rate the department on all 8</p>	<p>The specific question was: “One of the goals of the politics program is to teach students basic facts about the workings of political institutions in the United States and around the world. In general, how well do you think the politics program as a whole prepared you with basic knowledge about</p>

<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 the acceptable level of student performance.</i></p>	<p>Data Collection <i>Discuss the process for collecting this data: who conducted the assessment, when, and how?</i></p>	<p>Result <i>Did you meet your target? What was the result?</i></p>
		<p>learning outcomes. In 2019, 10 out of 13 students responded to the survey.</p>	<p>politics?” Students were presented with a 1 to 5 scale. Of the 10 students who responded to the survey, 5 of them chose “5,” 4 chose “4,” and 1 left it blank, for an average score of 4.6, exceeding our target.</p>

Interpretation of Results

Analysis and Implications: *What does this result tell you about the extent to which your students achieved this outcome? What are the strengths and weaknesses that this result highlights, and what are the implications for your curriculum or your program?*

In general, students performed strongly on this assessment. We noted in particular that students were correctly incorporating into their theses facts about the world that we had not introduced to them in class. We concluded from this that the students were mostly effective at finding factual material about the world using appropriate sources, and were not being led astray either by their own hubris or by low quality or deceptive online resources.

We had been concerned that at least some of our students would be taken in by fake news sources, conspiracy theories, uncorroborated social media postings, and so on. Note that some political science research suggests that even (and, in some situations, *especially*) broadly-informed people with an interest in politics can be susceptible to misinformation that appeals to their biases. But that seems not to have been the case.

One possible explanation for this is that most knowledge deficits or misinformation is likely to be exposed and fixed during the intensive peer-review and faculty-review processes that students in senior seminar go through. Another is that students are selecting their own topics to research and generally choose topics they are already more familiar with.

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

In both POL 250 and in senior seminar we instruct students in the proper sourcing of information, and lead discussions with them about misinformation and confirmation bias. We will continue doing this, but we will take the following considerations under advisement:

1. We will *not* at this time go ahead with expanded units designed to help students counter deception, in order to save time for higher priorities.
 2. We *may* consider reducing the total amount of time we spend in class covering facts about political institutions in order to spend more time on active analysis and inquiry.
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Appendices (please only include items that will help reviewers understand your process – for example, test questions, rubrics, survey questions, more detailed description of assessment measures, summary tables of survey results, etc.)

Thesis rubric.

Learning outcome - Review

Rubric for assessing facility with reviewing political science literature. Each thesis will be evaluated on a scale ranging from 4 to 16, based on 4 categories each scored 1, 2, 3, or 4.

	Accomplished (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Novice (1)
Identifying appropriate sources	Student consistently selects studies to review from high-quality, peer-reviewed scholarly journals (e.g. <i>American Political Science Review</i>).	Student selects some studies to review from high-quality, peer-reviewed scholarly journals but mixes in low-quality, marginal articles	Student uses sources that are compilations, review articles, or unpublished reports that are not peer-reviewed scholarly journals	Student consistently uses inappropriate sources such as popular press articles and trade publications (e.g. <i>Foreign Affairs</i>).
Identifying core studies in a literature	Student identifies articles that are relatively recent, widely-cited, and that are central to research question, with few omissions.	Student identifies articles that are relatively recent, widely-cited, and that are central to research question, but with some omissions of articles central to topic.	Student identifies articles that are not central to topic, but are still relevant to research question.	Student misses most relevant articles on topic, and uses sources that are not relevant to research question.
Correctly understanding and critically evaluating existing literature	Student correctly understands logic of research articles, including key variables and observations, and critically evaluates research designs.	Student correctly understands logic of research articles, including key variables and observations, but does not critically engage with research designs.	Student correctly understands parts of research articles, such as key variables and observations, but misunderstands others.	Student consistently misunderstands parts of research articles, such as key variables and observations.
Critically evaluating connections among existing studies	Student consistently describes connections between articles, critically engaging methodological and conceptual differences.	Student sometimes describes connections between articles, critically engaging methodological and conceptual differences.	Student rarely describes connections between articles, critically engaging methodological and conceptual differences.	Student does not describe connections between articles, critically engaging methodological and conceptual differences.

Thesis rubric.

Learning outcome – Knowledge

Rubric for assessing facility with reviewing political science literature. Each thesis will be evaluated on a scale ranging from 4 to 16, based on 4 categories each scored 1, 2, 3, or 4.

	Accomplished (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Novice (1)
Researching and applying factual material when appropriate	Student consistently applies correct descriptions of events and institutions when appropriate.	Student often applies correct descriptions of events and institutions when appropriate, with some obvious omissions.	Student seldom applies correct descriptions of events and institutions when appropriate, with some errors.	Student makes consistent or major errors in descriptions of events and institutions.
Identifying appropriate sources for factual material	Student consistently identifies sources for factual information that are recent, authoritative, and correct.	Student sometimes identifies sources for factual information that are recent, authoritative, and correct.	Student uses poor sources for factual information.	Student does not cite sources for factual information or uses dubious sources.
Filtering out deceptive claims or misinformation	Student appropriately filters out or refutes deceptive claims or misinformation.	(not used)	Student uses deceptive claims or misinformation for minor parts of project.	Student consistently uses deceptive claims or misinformation for major parts of project.
Categorizing objects properly	Student consistently categorizes factual descriptions using appropriate terminology (e.g. the German Bundestag is a “parliament”) across similar items.	Student sometimes categorizes factual descriptions using appropriate terminology, with some omissions.	Student sometimes categorizes factual descriptions using appropriate terminology, with some errors.	Student fails to categorize factual descriptions using appropriate terminology, or makes systematic errors.