

## STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT REPORT

**PROGRAM: POL**

**SUBMITTED BY:** Chad Rector

**DATE:** September 29, 2020

### 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	Y	-
Research Acquire factual knowledge about the world by finding and interpreting information from appropriate sources	2015-16	Y	-
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	2018-19		2022-23
Knowledge Demonstrate a command of basic facts about the workings of political institutions in the United States and around the world	2018-19		2022-23

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 continued making progress on all of those major goals last year, through the campus closure.

Due to a staffing shortage in 2018-19 that resulted in most of our courses being taught by temporary adjuncts, we did not make progress on some of the goals from that year's assessment cycle. We caught up on those in 2019-20 and in the current year (2020-21). So, in the "closing the loop" section below, we include some of the planned improvements from the previous year (just the ones that we didn't complete then).

### 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
<b>Application - Use analytic concepts and models to understand novel situations. (From 2018 report.)</b>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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</li> </ul>	Done

Outcome	Planned Improvement	Update
	applications out of context.	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.)</li> </ul>	Done
<b>Knowledge</b> <b>Demonstrate a command of basic facts about the workings of political institutions in the United States and around the world</b>	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:	We changed our minds and ended up adding the extra module on misinformation anyway in spring 2020, but on assessing it we decided that we were probably right the first time and will not include it in the future.

Outcome	Planned Improvement	Update
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will <i>not</i> at this time go ahead with expanded units designed to help students counter deception, in order to save time for higher priorities.</li> <li>• We <i>may</i> 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.</li> </ul>	
<b>Review</b>  <b>Find and interpret the structure, arguments, and conclusions of scholarly studies in social science</b>	<p>This will be a specific area of focus for us in the next two years. We will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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).</li> <li>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</li> </ol>	<p>Done.</p> <p>Because this is an extremely high priority for us, we will continue to reassess and revise these assignments internally. (This continues to be a more pressing concern for us than anything else in this report.)</p>

Outcome	Planned Improvement	Update
	<p>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.</p> <p>3. Same as #2, but for other advanced electives that have the WI designation.</p>	

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

The one substantive comment from last year was with respect to the "review" outcome: "You might consider reinforcing your assessment of the first outcome with an assessment at the senior level rather than relying solely on a sophomore level course. Use of the senior capstone thesis was well done."

Response: Our assessments were based on the senior capstone project, which ties together work students typically do throughout their time at Marymount, as well as a survey. This comment may be referring to the specific improvement we proposed (and implemented), about expanding the way we teach review skills in the sophomore-level methods course. We feel that the sophomore-level course is a good place to make that intervention, however, since that is the foundational course that is supposed to be teaching those skills anyway. As we explained in last year's report, we are also including more "literature review" assignments in other courses as well, although not as extensively. (Note that this year, because of the pandemic and the changes in the mode of delivery for all of our courses, our ability to add assignments in most courses is going to be severely limited.)

## Outcomes Assessment 2019-2020

**Learning Outcome 1: Concepts - explain the internal logic of basic political science concepts such as power, institutions, political systems, the state, conflict, and citizenship.**

<b>Outcome Measures</b> <i>Explain how student learning will be measured and indicate whether it is direct or indirect.</i>	<b>Performance Standard</b> <i>Define the acceptable level of student performance.</i>	<b>Data Collection</b> <i>Discuss the process for collecting this data: who conducted the assessment, when, and how?</i>	<b>Result</b> <i>Did you meet your target? What was the result?</i>																		
Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they derive and discuss a hypothesis or conceptual framework that is grounded in political science theory.	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 (so, 12 overall) and our target as a program is for at least 80% of students to meet that "proficient" target.	We reviewed the 16 senior theses from POL 420 (there were no honors theses in politics this year). These represent all graduating seniors in politics.	<p>The rubric is enclosed as Appendix B in the assessment plan. Of the 16 students, the breakdown in scores was:</p> <table border="0" data-bbox="1160 707 1545 992"> <tr><td>(Score)</td><td>number of students:</td></tr> <tr><td>(16)</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>(15)</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr><td>(14)</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr><td>(13)</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>(12)</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr><td>(11)</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>(10)</td><td>1</td></tr> <tr><td>(09)</td><td>1</td></tr> </table> <p>87.5% of the students (all but 2) were in the "proficient" range.</p>	(Score)	number of students:	(16)	4	(15)	2	(14)	2	(13)	4	(12)	2	(11)	0	(10)	1	(09)	1
(Score)	number of students:																				
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(10)	1																				
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Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.	The survey asks students to rank on a 1-5 scale (1=poor, 5=excellent) how well the department teaches concepts. Our target as a program is for an average score of at least 4.	All seniors graduating in politics were given a survey in spring, asking them to rate the program in all 8 learning outcomes. In spring 2020, 12 out of 16 students answered the survey.	<p>The specific question was: "One of the goals of the politics program is to help students understand basic concepts in politics, so that students have an understanding of concepts like "rights," "democracy," "representation," "justice," "citizenship," "institutions," and so on. In general, how well do you think the politics program as a whole prepared you to understand those basic concepts?" Students were presented with a 1 to 5 scale. Of the 12 students who responded to the survey, 9 of them chose "5" and 3 chose "4," for an average score of 4.75, 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, we feel like the program met this target, while acknowledging that two students (out of the sixteen) had theses that did not meet our standard.

Our experience is that most students who complete the thesis proficiently – including almost all the students who complete a *strong* thesis – worked on a topic that they developed in prior coursework. We have encouraged students to take papers they have written in previous politics courses, especially writing-intensive courses, and use these as the basis for their theses. Our sense is that this continuity accounts for the relative strength of the conceptual foundations of what most students accomplish in the thesis.

This year, the two students who did not meet the target both had senior theses that they had started from scratch. As a result, they did not have the opportunity to reflect on a set of concepts from prior coursework and deepen their understanding as they did their research. We feel this is not simply a measurement issue – by missing the chance to develop a project in depth, the students did not have a chance to gain critical insight into key concepts.

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

We will take the following steps to develop more continuity between the sophomore / junior level courses and senior seminar (the thesis class) by:

- Having students begin, their sophomore year, to develop a personal electronic portfolio of research notes, concept memos, and research papers that they carry through their college career.
- Use our “transformative advising” sessions with students to identify core interests for each of them, with a routinely-updated statement of interest that they keep in their portfolios and use as guides when considering research projects in all writing-intensive courses.

**Learning Outcome 2: Research acquire factual knowledge using appropriate sources.**

Outcome Measures	Performance Standard	Data Collection	Result
Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they derive and discuss a hypothesis or conceptual framework that is grounded in political science theory.	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 (so, 12 overall) and our target as a program is for at least 80% of students to meet that “proficient” target.	We reviewed the 16 senior theses from POL 420 (there were no honors theses in politics this year). These represent all graduating seniors in politics.	<p>The rubric is enclosed as Appendix B in the assessment plan. Of the 16 students, the breakdown in scores was:</p> <p>(Score) number of students:            (16) 5            (15) 3            (14) 2            (13) 3            (12) 3            (11) 0            (10) 1         </p> <p>93.75% of the students (all but 1) were in the “proficient” range.</p>
Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.	The survey asks students to rank on a 1-5 scale (1=poor, 5=excellent) how well the department teaches research. Our target as a	All seniors graduating in politics were given a survey in spring, asking them to rate the program in all 8 learning outcomes. In spring	The specific question was: “One of the goals of the politics program is to help students learn how to acquire factual knowledge about the world by finding and interpreting

Outcome Measures	Performance Standard	Data Collection	Result
	program is for an average score of at least 4.	2020, 12 out of 16 students answered the survey.	information from appropriate sources. In general, how well do you think the politics program as a whole prepared you to find out facts about the world?" Students were presented with a 1 to 5 scale. Of the 12 students who responded to the survey, 8 of them chose "5" and 1 chose "4," and 3 chose "3," for an average score of 4.41, exceeding our target.

#### **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?*

The difference between the survey results and the assessment was interesting. In reviewing the theses, we thought that the students in general showed a good grasp of research methods, with a few exceptions, while at least some of the students (although not most) thought they did not learn as much as they should have. (We do not think that the selection effect that students only write about topics in a thesis they know something about affects the results; in our experience, the students who do better on this measure are also the same ones that do better in course exams throughout their studies at Marymount.)

We suspect that one thing that might be going on here is that some students do not necessarily draw a connection between the more concept-specific analytical coursework that mostly takes place in class and the more knowledge-intensive application coursework that mostly takes place during group and individual research projects.

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

We plan to expand the connection between group and individual research projects and course content, by having students do more to present their research to the class as part of collaborative projects where students do more to share what they have learned in their own research.

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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.)

Enclosed is our 4-year cycle assessment plan, the thesis rubrics for “concepts” and “research”



**Marymount University**  
**Politics Program**  
**Undergraduate Program Learning Outcomes Assessment Plan**  
**Contact Person: Chad Rector**

This memo summarizes our assessment plan for the next four years, beginning with our assessment of students in the 2015-16 school year (AY 2015) and continuing through the 2018-19 year (AY 2018).

**Summary**

The Politics program will assess two different learning outcomes each year, eight total over the next four years. Each year, these outcomes will be assessed through an independent examination of the senior theses all politics majors produce and through a survey administered to graduating seniors. The eight learning outcomes are each specific to the academic study of politics, and are explained in detail in the next section. Students should demonstrate these understandings and abilities:

1. *Concepts* - explain the internal logic of basic political science concepts such as power, institutions, political systems, the state, conflict, and citizenship. (AY 2015.)
2. *Research* - acquire factual knowledge using appropriate sources. (AY 2015.)
3. *Analysis* - interpret information as a way to evaluate abstract or conceptual ideas. (AY 2016.)
4. *Empathy* - understand the motivations and beliefs of political actors from their own perspectives. (AY 2016.)
5. *Application* - use conceptual ideas to evaluate novel situations. (AY 2017.)
6. *Writing* - express analysis and conclusions in clear writing. (AY 2017.)
7. *Review* - understand the structure and conclusions of scholarly articles in political science. (AY 2018.)
8. *Knowledge* - understand, correctly, the basic working of political institutions in the United States and around the world. (AY 2018.)

These eight independent learning outcomes are summarized in a table in Appendix A.

**Assessment Process**

Each year in May and June, the politics program will assess two learning outcomes using two sources.

1. Senior thesis. As a capstone project, all politics majors are required to enroll in POL 420 and complete a thesis. In writing a thesis, students typically build on work they have completed over multiple courses. The thesis project is therefore both an assessable, standalone project that students are significantly invested in and also a project that reflects work done in more than one course. The thesis is completed in a seminar class. Each year, after the thesis projects have been completed, two faculty



members (the POL 420 instructor and one other) will assess the theses using the rubrics for the two learning outcomes for that year; the rubrics for the first two learning outcomes (for AY 2015-16) are enclosed as Appendix B.

2. Exit survey. The program will contact all graduating seniors and ask them to complete a short survey. Part of the survey is not related to assessment (we ask for contact information, data about jobs, and willingness to be available to chat with prospective students or visit future politics courses meetings on campus). Each year, the survey will also ask one question about each of the eight learning outcomes; these questions are enclosed as Appendix C.



## Appendix A. Learning outcomes.

Student Learning Outcome	Assessment Measures	Assessment Schedule
<i>Concepts</i> Explain the internal logic of basic political science concepts such as power, institutions, political systems, the state, conflict, and citizenship	Measure 1, Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they derive and discuss a hypothesis or conceptual framework that is grounded in political science theory.  Measure 2, Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.	AY 2015-16 Report in Fall 2016
<i>Research</i> Acquire factual knowledge about the world by finding and interpreting information from appropriate sources	Measure 1, Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they present facts and information as a test of their hypothesis or explanation of their framework.  Measure 2, Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.	AY 2015-16 Report in Fall 2016
<i>Analysis</i> Interpret information about the world by using it to evaluate abstract concepts	Measure 1, Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they critically evaluate hypotheses or analytic concepts.  Measure 2, Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.	AY 2016-17 Report in Fall 2017
<i>Empathy</i> Explain the connection between motivations and actions, including for political actors or organizations with different values	Measure 1, Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which explain the motivations of political actors and groups in light of the goals and values those actors or groups hold.  Measure 2, Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.	AY 2016-17 Report in Fall 2017



<i>Application</i> Use analytic concepts and models to understand novel situations	Measure 1, Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they use a hypothesis or conceptual framework to explain or forecast novel situations.  Measure 2, Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.	AY 2017-18 Report in Fall 2018
<i>Writing</i> Express written analysis and conclusions in a clear, coherent way.	Measure 1, Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they write in a way that is clear, succinct, fluid, and grammatically-correct.  Measure 2, Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.	AY 2017-18 Report in Fall 2018
<i>Review</i> Find and interpret the structure, arguments, and conclusions of scholarly studies in social science	Measure 1, Thesis: Students complete a thesis in which they describe and evaluate published academic scholarship in political science.  Measure 2, Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.	AY 2018-19 Report in Fall 2019
<i>Knowledge</i> Demonstrate a command of basic facts about the workings of political institutions in the United States and around the world	Measure 1, Thesis: Students complete a thesis that includes accurate descriptions of political institutions, rules, movements, or processes.  Measure 2, Survey: Students assess the program through a question on the departmental exit survey.	AY 2018-19 Report in Fall 2019



## Appendix B. Thesis rubrics.

### Learning outcome - Concepts

Rubric for assessing understanding of political science concepts using a thesis. 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)
Goals and actions	Student consistently distinguishes between the preferences the actors hold and the strategies they employ to achieve them	Student shows recognition of conceptual difference but in practice sometimes fails to distinguish	Student shows limited recognition of conceptual difference and often fails to distinguish in practice	Student consistently conflates goals and actions; assumes that actions always reflect disposition
Institutions	Student accounts for role of institutions in shaping options open to actors	Student sometimes accounts for effects of institutions	Student rarely account for effects of institutions	Student does not account for effects of institutions
Theory informed	Thesis is informed by at least one theoretical model of politics, correctly explained	These attempts to explain an existing theoretical model, but usage is not always appropriate or correctly explained	Thesis is not systemically informed by theory, but contains some elements	Thesis is not informed by theory
Conceptual framework	Thesis has a clear conceptual framework, explained in general	Thesis has a conceptual framework but is unclear in places	Thesis has a conceptual framework that is inconsistent or	Thesis does not have a conceptual framework



	terms		contradictory	
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## Appendix B, continued. Thesis rubrics.

### Learning outcome - Research

Rubric for assessing the ability to acquire factual knowledge about the world by finding and interpreting information from appropriate sources. 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)
Use sources for factual material when appropriate	Student consistently uses sources to back up factual claims	Student often uses sources to back up factual claims	Student rarely uses sources to back up factual claims	Student does not use sources to back up factual claims
Use appropriate sources	Student consistently uses sources that are appropriate and authoritative	Student often uses sources that are appropriate and authoritative but also uses some that are dubious	Student rarely uses sources that are appropriate and authoritative and uses many of dubious quality	Student consistently uses dubious sources or does not use sources
Evaluate evidence	Student compares evidence from different sources and makes sound judgments about measurement and reliability as appropriate	Student engages in some comparison and judgment about reliability	Student engages in limited comparison and judgment about reliability	Student does not compare evidence or discuss issues of measurement or reliability
Reference sources appropriately	Student consistently references sources using complete citations	Student often but not always references sources using complete citations	Student rarely references sources using complete citations	Student does not reference sources using complete citations



## Appendix C. Survey Questions

Plan for assessing understanding of political science concepts using student self-assessment on a departmental exit survey administered to recently-graduated seniors. Each learning outcome is assessed with a question on the survey, in which students are asked to rate the success of the program in teaching that particular learning objective on a 1-5 scale.

1. Concepts. One of the goals of the politics program is to help students understand basic concepts in politics, so that students have an understanding of concepts like “rights,” “democracy,” “representation,” “justice,” “citizenship,” “institutions,” and so on. In general, how well do you think the politics program as a whole prepared you to understand those basic concepts?  
(1) poor (2) fair (3) good (4) great (5) excellent
  
2. Research. One of the goals of the politics program is to help students learn how to acquire factual knowledge about the world by finding and interpreting information from appropriate sources. In general, how well do you think the politics program as a whole prepared you to find out facts about the world?  
(1) poor (2) fair (3) good (4) great (5) excellent
  
3. Analysis. One of the goals of the politics program is to help students learn how to interpret information about the world, by using facts about the world it to evaluate abstract concepts or theories. In general, how well do you think the politics program as a whole prepared you to use facts to test theories?  
(1) poor (2) fair (3) good (4) great (5) excellent
  
4. Empathy. One of the goals of the politics program is to help students understand the connection between motivations and actions, including for political actors or organizations with different values than they have. In general, how well do you think the politics program as a whole prepared you to understand the political motivations of others?



- (1) poor (2) fair (3) good (4) great (5) excellent
5. Application. 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?
- (1) poor (2) fair (3) good (4) great (5) excellent
6. Writing. One of the goals of the politics program is to teach students to write analysis and conclusions in a clear, coherent way. In general, how well do you think the politics program prepared you to write well?
- (1) poor (2) fair (3) good (4) great (5) excellent
7. Review. 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 politics program as a whole prepared you to find and read academic social science articles?
- (1) poor (2) fair (3) good (4) great (5) excellent
8. Knowledge. 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 politics?
- (1) poor (2) fair (3) good (4) great (5) excellent