

## SUNY Fredonia Department of Political Science Assessment

### I. Political Science Department Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

- 1) Knowledge of facts and history in the political science discipline. Students will acquire a foundation of knowledge concerning crucial facts, historical events, and structures of political institutions. This includes recognition and understanding of a common set of core topics including major political systems, ideas, values, and practices, political behavior, the role of law in civilizations and cultures, relations between nations, major political philosophies, and the ethical dimensions of government. Students will demonstrate familiarity with the demographic diversity of the world, the problems faced by different people, especially the impact of the process of globalization, and the interrelated nature of these problems.
- 2) Knowledge of major theories and explanations in political science. Students will demonstrate familiarity with the different assumptions, methods, and analytical approaches used by the discipline of political science. Students will demonstrate understanding of how political science theories have been applied to a variety of topics and questions in the discipline, particularly in the core areas of American Politics, World Politics, and Law and Politics. Students will be able to identify strengths and weaknesses of the various theories, and evaluate their usefulness to particular phenomena.
- 3) Written communication of political science theories and findings. Students will demonstrate writing skills appropriate for a well-educated college graduate, including the ability to write in a concise, organized, social science style, proper use of sources, citations, quotations, and correct grammar. Students will demonstrate skills in explanatory and argumentative writing sufficient to express their understandings of political science arguments, and to interpret and communicate the results of both quantitative and qualitative analysis.
- 4) Oral presentation of political science concepts and arguments. In oral presentations students will demonstrate the ability to introduce a set of concepts to the audience, and to develop an argument so the audience can follow it.
- 5) Systematic gathering and evaluation of social scientific evidence. Students will learn how political science knowledge is acquired and evaluated. This includes an introductory level of statistical analysis. It also includes fundamentals of research design and evaluation, and how to acquire information using electronic and library resources. Students will learn how to evaluate methodological elements of social science arguments, and consequently, the strengths and limitations of the information that is presented to them in papers, books, and presentations.
- 6) Critical evaluation, integrating knowledge, theory, and methods. Students will learn how to critically integrate knowledge, theory, research methods, and presentation in a systematic manner. Students will demonstrate the ability to identify theories applicable to a chosen topic, select a method to test an aspect of that theory, and critically evaluate the data collected in relation to the proffered theories. Students will demonstrate an ability to apply disciplinary knowledge and skills to real world situations and indicate an understanding of both empirical and normative consequences of this application.

## II. Program Design to Meet Learning Outcomes

The department is structured with the following elements: required core courses, statistics, political theory, upper-level concentration, upper-level complementary courses, the Capstone, and optional student engagement opportunities.

1. Introductory Core Courses. At introductory and upper division levels, students acquire a foundation and broad understanding of the essential theories, processes, institutions, facts, and methods of inquiry in the discipline with a particular focus on the core introductory areas of American politics, international relations, and comparative politics. The foundation courses prepare students for upper-level courses in political science, and the breadth of literature and research across the discipline. SLOs 1 & 2.

2. Statistics. The Department offers one course in statistics, and it is a core course taken by all students. Usually taken in the freshman or sophomore year, statistics introduces the students to probability, the use of quantitative analysis, the introduction to statistical modeling, and the use of computerized statistical programs to manipulate numbers. The political science statistics course uses political phenomena for examples. However, this requirement is fulfilled with designated “200” courses from other departments, from community college courses, and advanced placement courses in high school; those courses introduce similar concepts, but use different examples. The department has somewhat less control over learning of students who take the course out of the department. SLO 5.

3. Political Theory. All students take at least one course in political theory. This concerns the formation and evaluation of political values, norms. Courses in political theory study major political philosophies, and the ethical dimension of government and human action. It concerns the influence of these values on the formation of governing institutions. Students may opt to study formal theory to fulfill this requirement. This introduces them to the analysis of strategic behavior, including theories seeking to model various forms of human motivation, and the interaction of strategically placed actors in conjunction with collection behavior. SLOs 1-3.

4. Upper-level Concentration. As students progress in the major, they expand and deepen their knowledge of the discipline and sub-fields as students choose to concentrate in American Politics, Law and Politics, and/or World Politics. World Politics combines two traditional fields in Political Science: Comparative Politics and International Relations. Students who wish to concentrate in political theory may do so, with approval of the department chair. The concentration allows the students to specialize in a broad area of Political Science, and to provide a depth of theoretical and applied knowledge in that area. Students will learn major issues, approaches, and theories that have captivated scholars in recent years. At the same time, students will take some coursework in a second field, and in political theory. SLOs 1-5.

5. Upper-level Complementary. Students in the American and Law and Politics concentrations must take at least two courses in World Politics. Students in World Politics must take at least one course in American politics. This provides some breadth to the major, increasing students’ knowledge of diversity in the world (particularly for those concentrating in American and Law and Politics). Students are introduced historical facts, institutions, and processes, and to the connection of theories across sub-fields. SLOs 1-5.

6. Capstone. On graduation students should demonstrate an understanding of the discipline, in an identified area of concentration. The capstone is a research project that allows students to synthesize and apply the knowledge that they have gained across their political science courses. Students will demonstrate the ability to critically evaluate core theories, explanations, and evidence. The capstone project involves the selection and justification of a research topic, the writing of an extended annotated

bibliography, the framing of a research question, a related literature review, a research design to properly address the research question, offer a hypothesis, and test the hypothesis using social scientific methods. Alternatively, papers may be directed towards political philosophy, or contain a substantial historical focus. The written and oral presentation of the capstone paper includes an introduction, literature review, description of research design, presentation of evidence from research, and conclusions. SLOs 1-6.

7. Optional Student Applied Engagement Activities: Mock trial, Eurosims, Study Abroad, Washington Semester, Albany Semester. Students are encouraged to gain a more applied understanding of the field with academic credit through local, state and federal internship placements, including semester-long programs in Albany and Washington, and study abroad. Additional learning experiences include European Union simulation in the United States and Europe, and preparation for and participation in Mock Trial. Students are expected to already possess a core foundation of coursework in the discipline and related upper level coursework in order to take advantage of this learning opportunity. These experiential learning experiences serve to enhance students applied understanding of related theories, processes, institutions, critical figures, course material and also serve to stimulate research inquiry and focus for the capstone project. SLOs 1,2, & 5.

### **III. SLO Assessment Plan for 2010-11**

In 2010-2011, the Department is assessing SLO 4: "Oral presentation of political science concepts and arguments" and SLO 6: "Critical evaluation, integrating knowledge, theory, and methods." The primary focus will be evaluation of student progress in the Capstone, as we wish to follow up on our program changes. For this year we will evaluate the extent to which our redesign of the research methods component results in improved student research designs, and whether the redesign of the capstone to have students meet regularly will improve regular work, and hence outcomes. The Capstone Rubric will be used for the first time as an evaluative tool.

The Capstone process is used to both measure student learning, and to identify and improve the program as a whole. We feel this is particularly appropriate because we view the Capstone as a project where the students draw on skill learning earlier in the program, and then use them in a comprehensive manner. Thus weaknesses in student skills may be identified in a number of different areas. A brief history of how we have proceeded shows the manner in which we have used the capstone as an assessment tool.

Our capstone requires students to conduct an original piece of research. This involves topic selection, identification of a research question, review of literature, design of research, execution of that design, and reporting of the results. The paper was originally 35-50 pages (we have since shortened that to about 25-30). Students select their own topics. Initially, we designated an instructor for all students. The instructor was principally a coordinator; each student would select a topic, and be assigned a faculty advisor. They were responsible for meeting with their advisor, based on their research topic. It was the advisor's responsibility to help the student frame a research question, and supervise the research process. Students presented their work to the entire faculty. Two members of the faculty evaluated each paper.

Capstone Assessment and Implementation. Faculty identified several areas of concern in assessing student capstone projects. Three areas stood out for correction: knowledge in area of concentration, use of research methods, and student ability to do independent work. We implemented changes in curriculum design, how courses are taught, and how the capstone is taught.

a) Specialized Knowledge. Our initial assessment of the first two years of the Capstone was that students did not have enough specialized knowledge to be able to ask good questions. A research paper requires a base level of knowledge, and often the students only had had one course in an

area. However, we found that during the capstone project, many students often did not have sufficient grounding in a core area for substantive research questions and projects.

Implementation. After making this assessment a committee met over an academic year and devised substantial changes to the program curricula. After department review, these were then implemented. Previous curricula required students to take political science courses in a wide number of areas (American, Comparative, Public Policy, Political Theory, International Relations, Public Law). We redesigned the curricula, so that students were required to concentrate in one of three areas: World Politics, American Politics, or Law and Politics. As a result students would take at least 3 courses in the area of their concentration (4 for World Politics). Students would have to write their capstone in the area of their concentration. As the result the students are better prepared in terms of knowledge to write a capstone.

b) Research Methods. Although students were exposed to an introductory research methods course, we discovered that many students did not successfully retain and apply related methodological skills at the capstone stage.

Implementation. Therefore, we have replaced an introductory research methods course with a broader integration of research methodology across the upper level courses that is reinforcing in preparation for the capstone topic. For example, faculty are assigning research projects on the substantive area that focus on topic selection, writing summaries of the literature, and crafting research questions wherein the capstone is not the first time the student must think in these terms. The first part of the capstone will now focus on research methods and design, with the goal of helping each student craft a method for the research that they will conduct during the semester. At the end of the year we will assess whether this change improved student research design.

c) Independent Work. The earlier capstone process had a one-credit preparatory course in the fall, followed by a three-credit course in the spring. Students would largely work independently with different faculty advisors in the department rather than directly with the course instructor. The expected advantages to this plan was that students would get significant individual attention, from a professor who specialized in their topical area. However, many students have not been sufficiently self-disciplined as part of this more independent research process. They did not complete what we wanted during the one-credit course, and were not sufficiently advanced at the beginning of the three-credit course. Further, many students would not meet with their individual advisor for long stretches of time.

Implementation. Therefore, this year's capstone process consists of a three-credit seminar course divided into two sections with smaller enrollment per instructor, and twice weekly meetings. One of the capstone sections is intended for students with a focus in the areas of American Politics and Public Law. The other capstone section covers Comparative Politics and International Relations. This does mean that more has to be accomplished in a shorter time. Therefore, many professors are giving students the opportunity to write an extensive annotated bibliography in our upper level courses, such that it could be used as a basis for a capstone research project. Note that this is a change both at the curricular level, but also at the course level. When a student can use an assignment in an upper level course as the basis for capstone preparation, the program as a whole is better integrated as a coherent whole.

#### IV. Political Science Capstone Rubric

A scoring rubric has been constructed to provide instructors with a common measure to evaluate the capstone project. The rubric will also be used to evaluate students' papers in introductory core concentration courses and related upper level courses. Faculty evaluation of student performance at the introductory core level, in upper level concentration, and at the capstone provides for an assessment of student learning at early, more advanced and concluding stages of the major. The rubric includes:

##### 1. Knowledge in the Discipline, Area of Concentration (40 points possible)

Students should demonstrate knowledge of political facts, behavior, processes and institutions, including core explanations/theories relevant to American politics, comparative politics, international relations or political theory.

- (a) mastery of knowledge in their research area (20 points)
  - 18-20 points outstanding command of material
  - 15-17 points solid command of material
  - 12-14 points some good knowledge, but many gaps in knowledge
  - 9-11 points limited knowledge of material
  - 0-8 points poor knowledge of material
- (b) use of sources, properly cited (10 points)
  - 9-10 points excellent use of scholarly sources, properly cited
  - 7-8 points good use of sources, properly cited
  - 5-6 points adequate use of sources, some not properly cited
  - 3-4 points sources are improperly cited, but are identifiable
  - 1-2 points inadequate use of sources, poor citation
- (c) connecting their research to an existing theoretical literature (10 points)
  - 9-10 points explain existing theories and demonstrate connection of this project to the theory.
  - 7-8 points mention of existing literature, with tangential connection of research to it
  - 5-6 points mention of existing literature, but without connecting project to it
  - 3-4 points poor grasp of existing literature, little connection to it
  - 1-2 points no understanding of relation of project to theoretical literature

##### 2. Methods, Evidence, and Implications (20 points possible)

Students should be able to read, evaluate and use scientific evidence.

- (d) having a clear and workable research design (10 points)
  - 9-10 points has a fully workable research design built upon social scientific model
  - 7-8 points has a design built upon a social scientific model, but possesses some flaws
  - 5-6 points the design is not satisfactory, but is directed towards the question
  - 3-4 points the research design is poorly thought out
  - 1-2 points very little or no concept of research design
- (e) collecting evidence in a systematic manner (10 points)
  - 9-10 points evidence is gathered in systematic manner
  - 7-8 points evidence is gathered mostly systematically, but may have omissions or flaws
  - 5-6 points evidence is gathered, but only some is done systematically

3-4 points	evidence is gathered haphazardly
1-2 points	no evidence is gathered

### 3. Presentation and Integration (40 Points possible)

Students should be able to integrate facts, theories and evidence in answering questions. Students should be able to critically evaluate explanations, theories and evidence.

#### f) writing clearly and in an organized manner (20 points)

18-20 points	well-organized, logical construction, proper word choices, reader can easily grasp the writer's argument
15-17 points	organized in a way that reader can follow, word choice is mostly proper
12-14 points	generally smooth, organization has some problems, reader can follow with effort
9-11 points	not well organized, difficult to follow
1-8 points	no organizational scheme, hard to follow

#### g) oral presentation (20 points total: 5 from initial presentation, 15 from final presentation)

18-20 points	well-organized presentation, speaker's voice held audience, maintained eye contact.
15-17 points	organized and presented so listener can follow
12-14 points	organization has problems, but listener can follow with effort
9-11 points	not well organized, difficult to follow
1-8 points	poorly organized and presented

## **V. Duties and Timetable for Annual Review of Assessment**

1. The Department Chair will see that assessment is an agenda item at least once each semester.
2. The Chair of the Assessment Committee will see that data from the prior year assessment plan is gathered.
3. Each year the department will evaluate the assessment data generated from the prior year.
4. A plan to make necessary adjustment can then be formulated, including implantation of changes.
5. The assessment tools used will be evaluated once per year.
6. Each year one or two learning goals will be emphasized for study. Tools for assessing the learning goals will be identified in advance.
7. Each semester's capstone instructor will write a report assessing of the extent to which the learning goals of the Capstone were met by students in the capstone. This should be available to all members of the faculty.
8. The Chair of the Assessment Committee will see that an annual report is made concerning relevant department activities, measurements, and implementation of its assessment tools.