

Program Assessment: *Annual Report*

Program(s): B.A., Political Science

Department: Political Science

College/School: Arts and Sciences

Date: 2 July 2019

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1. Which program student learning outcomes were assessed in this annual assessment cycle?

Students will be able to read carefully and evaluate and construct analytical arguments in clear and logical prose (outcome 3).

2. What data/artifacts of student learning were collected for each assessed outcome? Were Madrid student artifacts included?

The department's assessment involved 11 undergraduate courses in both St. Louis and Madrid:

- POLS 1500 Introduction to Comparative Politics (Madrid)
- POLS 1700 Foundations of Political Theory (Madrid)
- POLS 2590 Politics of the Middle East and North Africa (Madrid)
- POLS 2691 Theory and Practice of Human Rights (Madrid)
- POLS 2710 Theories of Justice (St. Louis)
- POLS 3640 International Law (St. Louis)
- POLS 3650 International Relations of Africa (St. Louis)
- POLS 3710 Ancient and Medieval Political Theory (St. Louis)
- POLS 3740 Capitalism, Racism, Patriarchy (St. Louis)
- POLS 4630 The European Union: Politics and Political Economy (Madrid)
- POLS 4930 International Contemporary Challenges (Madrid)

Instructors of these classes responded to a Qualtrics survey that asked the following questions:

- How did your class contribute to this goal: Students will be able to read carefully and evaluate and construct analytical arguments in clear and logical prose?
- Which instruments did you use to assess student learning for this report?
- By the end of class, students in my class could **read carefully**, as appropriate for the level of the class.
- By the end of class, students in my class could **evaluate analytical arguments**, as appropriate for the level of the class.
- By the end of class, students in my class could **construct analytical arguments in clear and logical prose**, as appropriate for the level of the class.
- How well could students read carefully and evaluate and construct analytical arguments

in clear and logical prose? What could they do well in this regard? What could they do less well?

- How many students who are declared majors exceeded, met or did not meet expectations?
- How many students who are non-majors exceeded, met or did not meet expectations?
- What tactics were effective in enhancing students' ability to read carefully and evaluate and construct analytical arguments in clear and logical prose?
- Do you have suggestions for changing the BA curriculum or approaches in individual courses in order to make sure that students will be able to read carefully and evaluate and construct analytical arguments in clear and logical prose?
- Is there anything you want to add about your students' learning?
- Do you have any comments to improve this reporting process?

Instructors were free to choose which instruments to evaluate to assess student learning. They reported using essays (8 instructors), exam or test questions (7 instructors), a research paper (2), in class presentations (3), reading questions throughout the semester (1), class discussion (2), students serving as discussants (1).

3. How did you analyze the assessment data? What was the process? Who was involved?

NOTE: If you used rubrics as part of your analysis, please include them in an appendix.

Instructors took a Qualtrics survey that asked them to identify the instruments they used to evaluate their students as well as their own personal evaluations of student performance. The data were then aggregated via Qualtrics. Analysis was conducted by William McCormick, undergraduate program director for Political Science.

4. What did you learn from the data? Summarize the major findings of your analysis for each assessed outcome.

NOTE: If necessary, include any tables, charts, or graphs in an appendix.

Most instructors agreed strongly (7) or somewhat (2) with the statement "By the end of class, students in my class could read carefully, as appropriate for the level of the class."

Instructors were somewhat less supportive of statements about the ability of students to evaluate and construct arguments of their own. Six agreed strongly and two agreed somewhat that students could **evaluate** analytical arguments. Four agreed strongly and five agreed somewhat that students could **construct** analytical arguments.

One instructor estimates that 90 percent of majors did not meet expectations, though other instructors put the number between 10 and 15 percent. Similarly, the number of students who met expectations varied between courses from 10 to 80 percent, and the number of students who exceeded expectations varied between courses from 0 to 70 percent. It would seem that instructor expectations vary tremendously between courses.

Instructors varied in their reports of what students could and could not do well. Instructors tended to think that students could do these things well:

- Recall main arguments
- Reconstruct the main assumptions or building components
- Compare and contrast arguments
- Construct a thesis (problematic for some students)
- Explain why an argument was weak

- Move between different levels of abstraction

Areas of difficulty include:

- Students have to be both coaxed to read and guided in their reading; one instructor reported, “I gave students reading questions for every single assigned reading. They were able to read with the help of these questions. I have no sense that they would have been able to do so without them.”
- Students do not come into these courses with the developed skills of the outcome: “Some students have difficulty carrying out these learning objectives during the first weeks of class, as they often do not have these skills already fully developed. Ultimately, it is a matter of improving language skills, mental processes of dissecting arguments and the capacity to understand what is really at issue in an argument, thesis, hypothesis or position.” A key question is whether instructors design and teach courses that encourage the cultivation of these skills.
- Relatedly, there is a gap between the ability of students to stake a position about a claim and to articulate the grounds of their position or provide evidence. As an instructor noted: “Usually they could do well the following: know what they disagree with or dislike in an argument. They could do less well: explaining why the argument was faulty or weak. They could do well: arguing their position, until it was challenged or a different view was presented. They could do less well: rephrase their argument so as to overcome the shortcomings or weaknesses of their position.”
- Students have been trained to write differently than they need to write in some classes. One instructor said, “they have been trained to approach writing in a way that is just completely antithetical to actually thinking that something is true and making a case for why.”

5. How did your analysis inform meaningful change? How did you *use the analyzed data to make or implement recommendations for change* in pedagogy, curriculum design, or your assessment plan?

The department meets annually in the fall to discuss assessment results and determine whether curricular changes are necessary. We will address the issues raised in this report and consider ways to improve student reading and writing.

In the short term, we can encourage instructors to employ pedagogies and instruments that meet students where they are in terms of their ability to engage in sophisticated manners with arguments. Instructors identified the following as productive strategies:

- providing students questions to guide their readings;
- requiring students to outline readings;
- mapping arguments to help students see the evolution of political thought
- class discussions in which analytical reading techniques are modeled and incentivized;
- projects like debates and oral presentations that require deeper student engagement with the material;
- more writing assignments with substantive feedback from the professors;
- avoiding over-reliance on multiple-choice evaluation instruments;
- teaching them how to employ political science tools like a literature review;

- meeting individually with students to discuss practice papers or drafts;
- using a simulation exercise to help weaker students see how arguments are constructed and to understand their implications for political practice;
- thinking collectively about how skills are scaffolded, building in complexity as students progress through the curriculum.

In the long term, the Department can consider ways to ensure that courses relevant to this outcome, and perhaps other courses, as well, not only assess students on this outcome, but prepare them in the relevant skills. This goal could be pursued while preserving the autonomy of instructors. For instance, perhaps students majoring in Political Science should be required to write a certain number of papers before advancing to seminars, without requiring that any specific course include papers.

Additionally, students can be given incentives to sharpen such skills. The faculty has recently discussed, for instance, the need to facilitate greater participation in the Department's research symposium. Such opportunities might give students more motivation to develop their analytic skills.

It might also be advantageous to ensure that at least some lower-level Political Science courses include a full presentation from University Writing Services, rather than just the miniature version some see as part of "Mentoring Matters". One instructor suggested that courses include training specifically in writing in the discipline.

Ultimately, upper-level seminars should not be the first time students are challenged in their abilities around analytical arguments, but should rather be opportunities for them to grow in skills they have been developing over the course of the major.

6. Did you follow up ("close the loop") on past assessment work? If so, what did you learn? *(For example, has that curriculum change you made two years ago manifested in improved student learning today, as evidenced in your recent assessment data and analysis?)*

One point that emerged from our discussion of assessment results last year was that the outcome being assessed was poorly worded, with the result that instructors interpreted it very differently (outcome 2: Students will be able to distinguish among the diversity of traditions in the discipline). Consequently, it was very difficult to make coherent sense of their answers. The department discussed rewording of the outcome and agreed on a new version (Students will be able to distinguish among various approaches to studying political phenomena). A revised assessment plan, with the new wording, is being submitted with this report.

Our discussion of assessment results last year also led to the conclusion that faculty wanted to think more about how political and social engagement could be linked to the Jesuit tradition. Dr. McCormick shared an ACJU booklet about Ignatian education and information on the Jesuit and Catholic identity of SLU. This will be a continuing discussion in the department.

We also discussed ways to ensure that more student benefit from opportunities outside the classroom. This discussion led to improved efforts to publicize internship opportunities, though the department's Facebook page, through Mentoring Matters events, and through dedicated meetings. We are working with SLU's administration to set up a formal exchange with Marquette's Les Aspin Center in Washington DC. We have proposed diverting part of a large donation that is used to provide tuition scholarships to Political Science students (the Dwyer scholarship) to support for students conducting internships out of St. Louis.

IMPORTANT: Please submit any revised/updated assessment plans to the University Assessment Coordinator along with this report.

Political Science BA assessment

Outcome 3: Students will be able to read carefully and evaluate and construct analytical arguments in clear and logical prose.

This rubric is intended to help you think about components of the outcome being assessed. Your course may address some of these components, or you may want to alter the components to make them more applicable to how the outcome is reached in your class. If you choose to use the rubric, you will fill in one rubric for each student for each assignment you are using to measure the outcome. You will only need to report summary results – whether students meet expectations for the outcome as a whole.

<i>Student is able to:</i>	Does not meet expectations	Meets expectations	Exceeds expectations
Read carefully			
Recall main arguments in course readings			
List supporting evidence in course readings			
Evaluate arguments			
Distinguish between argument and evidence (or thesis and argument)			
Identify underlying assumptions			
Judge the persuasiveness of arguments			
Compare arguments across readings			
Construct arguments			
Formulate a thesis			
Compose coherent arguments			
Move comfortably between different levels of abstraction			
Select persuasive evidence			
SUMMARY SCORE			