Student Learning Outcomes Assessment: Department of Political Science

(AY 2012-13 & 2013-14); prepared by Jerry McBeath

Overview

This report presents data on learning outcomes for political science students in the period from mid-2012 to mid-2014. The report focuses on graduating seniors, of whom there were nearly two dozen in the reporting period. The analysis does not include data on individual academic courses, each of which specifies expected student learning outcomes (assessed by instructors based on measurements of student progress toward specified course goals). ¹

The three data sources are: 1) the department’s senior survey, administered to graduating seniors each spring, 2) senior theses, and 3) student internships. We discuss each in turn.

Senior Surveys

Seven students completed exit surveys, five in spring 2013 and just two in 2014 (when there were fewer graduates). Although available electronically, at nine pages the survey is too long, and the department has been unable to find the right mix of incentives to entice a majority of graduating seniors to complete it. Nevertheless, survey results inform us of student perceptions of the curriculum (including skills acquired), the faculty, and program strengths and weaknesses.

Curriculum. Most students (5 of 7) thought there were sufficient courses in their primary subfields, but they were divided as to whether other courses should have been available: 3 of the 7 wanted to have had additional courses, mentioning introduction to legal research writing, global terrorism and grand strategy.

Comparing upper-division PS courses to those in other disciplines, most (4) respondents thought PS courses were “about right in rigor,” while 1 found them too rigorous and 2 not rigorous enough. The constitutional law courses were thought to be among the most difficult for students, followed by political theory and international law. The only course described as insufficiently challenging was taught outside the department (PS 325). Other courses described as “less difficult” were introductory surveys, considered of less interest, or ones in which the student had previous preparation.

All respondents believed that PS courses helped them develop capacity for critical thinking; helped them analyze and identify possible solutions to complex political problems; contributed to practical knowledge of real world political relationships, institutions and behavior

¹ PS 100X (political economy) and PS 300X (ethics and society) are occasionally assessed separately for their contributions to the core curriculum.
in the U.S. and elsewhere; and exposed them to different ways of thinking and/or different cultures.

**Skills acquisition.** Six of seven respondents believed the department’s emphasis on improvement of writing skills was “appropriate.” As one student noted: “It’s hugely important. Every attempt should be made to improve writing skills.” However, when asked whether experience of writing in PS courses had improved writing skills, 4 students said it had “no impact,” 2 believed it had improved their writing “a little,” and 1 thought it had improved writing “a great deal.” (This question is ambiguous and needs to be clarified (for example, by asking students to identify the “W” course helping them, or specify other courses that had or had not helped improve their writing.)

All students thought that the emphasis of PS courses on oral communication skills through reports, debates and discussion was appropriate. All respondents believed their practice of oral communication skills in classes had at least “modestly” improved their skills.

All but one of the respondents had learned of the importance of internships from faculty, and five of the seven respondents had been legislative interns in Juneau, had taken PS 475, the internship course, or taken another program’s internship course.

**Interactions with Faculty.** In general, students were complimentary regarding their interactions with faculty. None reported problems meeting faculty when necessary. They received sufficient advice on ways to improve their course work, on course scheduling and degree issues and on career guidance. Three of the seven respondents sought out faculty “often,” while the other four wanted to meet them only “sometimes.”

**Weaknesses and Strengths of the Program.** Five students spelled out areas where they thought improvements could be made, quoted verbatim:

- Not enough staff and faculty;
- I think that it could have stronger student groups within the department;
- The small faculty that has relatively the same political outlook was sometimes very frustrating. Also, while the PS course listings are very extensive, the courses I wanted to take were not always offered on a regular basis making course planning difficult;
- I would have liked to been given more direction for the POST graduation terrors, I was also disappointed with the career services center who basically said: “Just go online;”
- Opportunities to work with faculty on research might be useful. Maybe I didn’t notice, but it seems that students generally only have access to programmatic opportunities. Even a small experience with real-world research or writing might be appealing to some students.

Six students commented on strengths they had observed in the PS major at UAF, also quoted verbatim:
Faculty who are still passionate about their work. Getting student input on potential faculty since we would be the ones most impacted by the hire;
The biggest strength is the faculty. I am lucky to have had such intelligent, caring professors;
The faculty was always helpful and invested in students’ success;
The faculty is so broad in their individual fields of knowledge and I feel I was able to attain a well-rounded understanding of the Poly Sci world as well as fantastic strengths within the sub-categories that interested me;
Effective teachers;
Ability to create critical thinkers is excellent. Developing the skills to be able to individually consider the variety of valid perspectives and question issues and processes usefully is invaluable.

Students were even-handed in their analysis of the department’s weaknesses and strengths. Nearly all had suggestions about ways to attract more PS majors and minors too. They acknowledged that as a liberal arts degree, there might not appear to be many employment opportunities, yet suggested that the department:

- Make known some influential people who have attained BA degrees in political science;
- Emphasize the many applications PS has and ways it helps develop critical thinking skills;
- Show prospective students what opportunities do exist for jobs;
- Explain the way that PS prepares students well in social awareness, political understanding, writing and communication skills—all attributes employers look for;
- Promote benefits of PS for better local to global understanding;
- Sponsor open, community-oriented events; involve students in conferences and research.

These exit survey results are similar to those of recent years. They make several constructive criticisms of departmental programs (for example, writing in PS courses), which may be of value as faculty alter the curriculum in the future. In general, they reveal a high degree of satisfaction in the existing curriculum, faculty and programs.

Senior Theses

When department faculty eliminated the mandatory capstone seminar more than 10 years ago, they gave students three choices. The senior thesis, taken under the course number PS 499, is one means to satisfy departmental requirements. During the course of a semester, the student writes an essay of 30 or more pages, under the direction of a faculty member whom the student selects. Department faculty have developed a common rubric for the evaluation of the research paper.

In this reporting period, four students wrote senior theses, making it the least popular of the three options. A committee of two faculty members who had not supervised the students read the theses and evaluated them following the rubric. One faculty member scored the theses from a high of 89 to a low of 74. More than half of the available points are assigned to the body of the essay, organization, development of the idea and conclusion (60 of 100 points), and this is where the greatest variation among the four essays occurred in the view of this faculty member.
To this evaluator, there was little variation across the papers in mechanics, usage, citation and bibliography.

The second faculty member scored the theses from a high of 83 to a low of 74. This evaluator found little variation in students’ work in body of the essay and in development of the thesis’s main idea. Instead, the evaluator found greater variation in thesis statement, conclusion, mechanics and bibliography. The evaluation process revealed a difference in judgment. The students whose essays scored in the order 1, 2, 3, 4 for the first evaluator were scored 2, 4, 1, and 3 by the second, notwithstanding the common rubric.

It is important to note that students select the faculty member they wish to work with, and faculty do not meet collectively to discuss their goals and objectives in PS 499. However, the scoring rubric for evaluating senior theses was developed and implemented by the faculty as a whole. Senior theses advisors share the rubric with students. When the department meets to discuss the capstone experience of PS students, it may wish to recommend more collective work in this area, to ensure that the department’s emphasis on critical thought and analysis is reflected in student writing. However, the future of the department’s capstone experience is awaiting changes in baccalaureate core, which, after three years of study, have not yet materialized.

**Internship in Public Affairs**

The second means for students to satisfy graduation requirements is to enroll in PS 475 and spend a semester at a government or nonprofit agency or office, working at least 10-hours a week under the guidance of an agency supervisor. Initially no written work was required of student interns, but when the capstone senior seminar was eliminated and more students elected this option than the senior thesis, PS 475 required that students read the equivalent of a book and write a 10-page paper. The objective of the paper was for students to summarize the internship experience and relate it to the professional literature of political science. It was the responsibility of the instructor-of-record to identify appropriate readings for the intern.

In the two-year review period, 12 students have taken PS 475, three times as many as have taken PS 499, but until now the internship has not been formally evaluated. This evaluation is ad hoc, and department faculty will need to decide whether it becomes a regular part of the department’s SLOA.

**Placements.** The following lists office, site and number of PS interns:

- Senator Lisa Murkowski, Washington DC, intern coordinator (2)
- Senator Mark Begich, Fairbanks office (2)
- Alaska DNR, Public Information Office, Anchorage (1)
- Alaska, Public Defender’s Office, Fairbanks (1)
- American Red Cross, Fairbanks (1)
- US FHWA/AK Tribal Assistance, Fairbanks (1)
- Alaska, Law, DA Office, Fairbanks (1)

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2 The Alaska Legislative Internship ordinarily attracts several UAF majors in political science, who receive 12 upper-division PS credits. To the present, it has not been formally evaluated. Statewide director Dr. Glenn Wright in a personal communication to McBeath (6/2/14) indicates he would be happy to supply information on UAF interns for the SLOA process.
In each case, the instructor-of-record made contact with the agency supervisors, monitored the interns’ progress through the semester, and at the end of the semester had evaluation meetings concerning the students’ work. Supervisors commented on students’ punctuality, reliability, performance of general and specific tasks, attire, interactions with supervisor, staff, the public and other issues.

For these 12 interns, supervisors were uniformly positive, believing students merited high grades for work in the agency. In the future, the department may wish to formalize the supervisors’ evaluations of interns through administration of a short questionnaire, as a means of improving the job-readiness of PS graduates.

Papers. Because only the instructor-of-record evaluated the 12 term papers, no formal rubric was used. The 12 papers fell into three categories. The first group of students wrote descriptive papers summarizing the activities engaged in during the internship. The second group attempted to draw upon the PS literature, but did not use it as a vehicle for the analysis of the internship experience. The third group of 3-4 students mastered the relevant literature and used it as a lens through which to observe and comment on the internship experience.

Conclusion

Using the exit survey, senior theses, and internships, we have assessed learning outcomes for most of the seniors who have graduated from the UAF political science department in the last two years. The most comprehensive instrument is the senior exit survey, but fewer than half of the graduating seniors complete it. It needs to be shortened, and the department will need to find incentives to motivate students to finish the survey. Evaluation of senior theses through use of rubrics has identified areas of strength and deficiencies, which can be pursued. In this SLOA cycle we have discussed an assessment tool incorporating an additional degree of objectivity (reference to agency supervisors who are not affiliated with the university). If this is combined with an evaluation of the political science students participating in the legislative internship program, then future reports will express outcomes for all students graduating from the political science program.