III. MISSION FULFILLMENT

Attach the most current Student Learning Outcomes (SLOA) plan and most recent SLOA summary.

Attached is the most current SLOA and summary (attachment 1).


OVERVIEW

This report presents data on learning outcomes for political science students for the academic terms 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. 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).

Based on the SLOA plan that has been in effect there 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 below. It should be noted that the department has undergone consolidation (one line is empty due to budget cuts), re-orientation (after the departure of two influential senior faculty Drs. McBeath and Rosenberg), and temporary disorientation (absence of an administrative assistant in Autumn 2014, Dr. Meek’s reduced workload and leave of absence Spring 2015-Autumn 2016, and Dr. Lovecraft’s medical leaves in Spring 2015). While this has not affected the quality of student learning outcomes, it created confusion over the exit surveys and the response rate is low. The department has decided to change several aspects of its SLOA in order to better capture our students’ learning outcome achievements. We explain this at the end of this report and note these changes in italics.

SENIOR SURVEYS

We had 10 PS graduates in this two-year cycle. Five students completed exit surveys. This number is low due to administrative assistant turnover, faculty departures, and the lack of
an administrative assistant for a semester. Furthermore, 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. *We are revising this survey and its format for 2016-2017. Also, as noted in our Communications Learning Outcomes Plan report we are redesigning the major in order to better capture graduating students’ learning outcomes through a new capstone and required Eportfolios.*

**Curriculum.** Most students (4 of 5) 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, but only 1 person mentioned specific subjects and these were courses that we have on the books but have been unable to teach due to faculty turnover.

Comparing upper-division PS courses to those in other disciplines, all respondents thought PS courses were “about right in rigor.” When asked about the most and least difficult courses PS468 Government and Politics of Russia, PS436 Constitutional Law II, and the PS222 Research Methods courses were each listed once as the most difficult course students took in the major.

The only courses described as “least challenging” were PS 101 American Government and Politics and PS314 Political Ideologies. But all three responses noted this was due to having had strong pre-university preparation in the subject or a keen interest.

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 in the U.S. and elsewhere; and exposed them to different ways of thinking and/or different cultures.

**Skills acquisition.** All five respondents believed the department’s emphasis on improvement of writing skills was “appropriate.” When asked whether experience of writing in PS courses had improved writing skills, 3 students said it had “improved their writing “a little,” and 2 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; especially now that “W” and “O” courses will be phased out.*

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

**Interactions with Faculty.** In general, students were complimentary regarding their interactions with faculty. Four of the five respondents described their interactions as “extremely positive.” 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. Two sought out faculty “often,” while the other three wanted to meet them only “sometimes.”
4 of the 5 students participated in the Model United Nations Club or Pi Sigma Alpha (the Political Science Honor Society).

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

- The only weakness I see are the lack of instructors;
- It’s a very small department. Having more faculty and more students would make the program stronger;
- The PS major seems to suffer from a lack of support from the university as a whole despite being a rigorous and successful degree program;
- I wish there had been better career guidance;

Five commented on strengths they had observed in the PS major at UAF, also quoted verbatim:

- ✓ Great expansion on political and historical knowledge;
- ✓ All the professors seem to work really well as a team. Other departments seem to have a lot more drama.
- ✓ The faculty was quite fully dedicated to ensuring that their students learned and were involved throughout the entirety of each course;
- ✓ The PS faculty are a singularly talented and varied team. They have an incredible breadth of knowledge and are dedicated to their students;
- ✓ How varied the sub-disciplines are with the types of courses offered.

Only two respondents made suggestions about improving the major. These were, also quoted verbatim:

- ❖ I think it would be very helpful if there was more emphasis on advertising internships, jobs, service opportunities etc.;
- ❖ I would suggest the PS department to offer courses regarding the legislative, executive, and judicial branch together in one semester for smooth understanding of how they work together. *It should be noted that we now have a Facebook page up and we post jobs, internships, and other legitimate offers we receive there. We have been sure to publicize this as a place for students to check for opportunities. We will be redesigning the webpage as well to reflect the GER and other changes at UAF and that should also become a better point of contact for students. In relation to the second point, it is a disciplinary norm to offer a course on each branch of government. However, depending on the outcomes of Special Program Review processes and the Strategic Pathways movement we may be collapsing course content.*

These exit survey results are similar to those of recent years. In this cycle all five gave enthusiastic recommendations of the program to other students as a choice of major. In general, they reveal a high degree of satisfaction in the existing curriculum, faculty and programs.

**CAPTSTONES**

**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, three students wrote senior theses, making it the least popular of the three options. A committee of four faculty members who had not supervised the students read the theses and evaluated them following an established rubric. One thesis, addressing China's relationship with the World Bank consistently scored a “failing” grade by all four reviewers. This was a thesis written with a term assistant professor who was with us in 2014-2015. We had some difficulty ensuring department norms of scholarship with this guest faculty member even though we made repeated efforts, and it is evident in the thesis he mentored. This is a failing that a more official “thesis packet” of documents explaining expectations may address. A second thesis explored “queer modalities” and combined political theory, literary criticism, and American politics. It attempted to use an ethnographic method to explore the lives of gender non-conformists. While the subject matter is significant, demonstrates student trust in his or her thesis supervisor, and the thesis models what a research project should do, the execution is poor and depth too shallow to serve as a passable thesis. Reviewers agreed it was an excellent draft. In fact it may be that the version made available to read was a mistakenly submitted draft. The third thesis compared the “resource curse” of oil development in the Niger Delta and on Alaska’s North Slope. It contained all the elements of a thesis (e.g., title page, table of contents, abstract) and was of significant length (41 pages). The research scope, while using two subfields as required (American and Comparative) was too broad for an effective senior thesis but the end product all reviewers agreed was passable.

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. Our current plan to add a 1 credit colloquium should help energize more students to write theses and the Eportfolio plan gives them a way to showcase their research. This should help with creating a stronger scholarly norm and excitement around a thesis project.

Internships

*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, often in consultation with colleagues and or the student.

In the two-year review period, 6 students have taken PS 475, twice as many as have taken PS 499, the internship had not been formally evaluated until Dr. McBeath decided to do this for the 2012-2014 SLOA. His evaluation was ad hoc as is mine below. Our department faculty will formalize the supervisors’ evaluations of interns through administration of a short questionnaire, as a means of improving the job-readiness of PS graduates.

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

- The Borgen Project [Anti-Poverty], Political Affairs Intern (2) Ana Fochesatto and Allyssa Garcia
- Chamber of Commerce, Fairbanks office (1) Marc Smith
- Mark Begich campaign (1) Alyssa Quintyne
- There were two other internships – Lachlan Gillispie and Grace Singh – however, their instructor of record for Autumn 2014 as Dr. Jonathan Rosenberg who has left UAF. It has not been possible to obtain their data. Quintyne was also enrolled in Autumn 2014 but I was able to get a copy of her internship report.

In each case, the instructor-of-record should have 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. I cannot speak for Dr. Rosenberg’s final semester (Autumn 2014, and whether this occurred with his three students). I have contacted the supervisors for the two current interns – Smith and Garcia - but have yet to hear back prior to the due date of this report to the Dean’s office.

Alaska Legislative Internship

This is a third option for our graduating majors, however, in this last cycle, while a PS major did complete the internship in 2015, he is not a graduating senior at this point. We do need to develop a clearer review process for those students who take this option. Similar to our need to formulate a questionnaire for internship supervisors we should do something similar for Glenn Wright to submit to us.

CONCLUSIONS

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 in this two-year cycle only 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 as noted above. Given our department’s recent contraction and upheaval we are now focused on revamping our curriculum, changing our capstone process, and creating stronger intra-department norms for expectations on thesis writing, internships, and communication learning outcomes.