1. Assessment information collected

This report presents data on learning outcomes for political science students in the period 2016-2018. The report focuses on graduating seniors, of whom there were nine. 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).

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

Senior Surveys

Eight students completed exit surveys, five for 2016-2017 and three for 2017-2018. The survey is available electronically or in paper and is anonymous. Survey results inform us of student perceptions of the curriculum, including skills acquired, the faculty, and program strengths and weaknesses.

Curriculum. Most students (4 of 8) 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 8 wanted to have had additional courses, mentioning courses on developing nations.

Comparing upper-division PS courses to those in other disciplines, most (5) respondents thought PS courses were “about right in rigor,” while 1 found them too rigorous (with the comment that the response was comparative to other courses at UAF and I not rigorous enough. The constitutional law courses were thought to be among the most difficult for students, with others mentioned: International Political Economy, Research Methods, and Theory and international law. The only courses described as insufficiently challenging were each only mentioned once: Ethics and Society, American Presidency (respondent says this is compared to other PS courses), Research Methods (though the respondent said the course “was a must!”), Peace War and Security, Democracy and Global Society (though respondent notes it is a 200 level course).

All respondents believed (marking invaluable, majority respondents, or somewhat
valuable) that PS courses helped them develop capacity for critical thinking and helped them analyze and identify possible solutions to complex political problems. Three found Invaluable the contribution of PS courses to practical knowledge of real world political relationships, institutions and behavior in the U.S. and elsewhere. Four found this Very Good and 1 Good. Six students strongly agreed or agreed that PS courses exposed them to different ways of thinking and/or different cultures; but two respondents mildly disagreed this prompts us to consider more carefully how we might teach about different cultures and their modes of knowledge.
Skills acquisition. Seven of eight 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, 4 students said it improved their writing “a little,” and 4 thought it had improved writing “a great deal.” This question is in need of change now based on the shift away from “W” courses.

All eight students thought that the emphasis of PS courses on oral communication skills through reports, debates and discussion was appropriate. Seven respondents believed their practice of oral communication skills in classes had “modestly” or “greatly” improved their skills; two checked the option “If nothing else, it gave me the opportunity to sharpen them daily with my classmates.” No one picked “no impact.”

Six of the students took either PS475 Internship in Public Affairs or participated in the Ted Stevens Legislative Internship in Juneau.

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. Four of the eight described their interactions as “Extremely positive.” Of the eight respondents, four sought out faculty “often,” one “a great deal,” two wanted to meet them only “sometimes”, and one “rarely.”

Weaknesses and Strengths of the Program. Seven of the eight students would recommend the major to others and the 8th respondent simply didn’t answer the question. Students spelled out areas where they thought improvements could be made, quoted verbatim:

- Teachers should not have their own personal twitter feeds on online course blog pages
- I feel that there are some instructors that push their own political opinions and beliefs on students.
- I think people think it is a easy major and not very academically challenging
- Opportunities to study Arctic, Alaska, and local-centered politics.
- Professor assign too much reading. I felt like I was teaching myself.
- Structuring of course schedules could be improved.

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

- Professors in the department are friendly and welcoming. It was always so easy to make an appointment to talk about questions on assignments or papers and grades.
- TWO respondents highlighted our teaching of Arctic policy as a strength.
- The faculty is excellent.
- More diverse scope of political theory. Non-western traditions should be utilized more.
- The professors are very professional and amicable. However, they are always busy and do not always have the time to support. More T.A.s would be great!
- The small class sizes and approachability of the professors made each class a personal
experience.

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:

- Take more initiative with its Honors Program Pi Sigma Alpha
- Emphasize the role of the Arctic, Indigenous peoples, and the environment in our program as it relates to current issues
- Improve the advertisement of the internship program
- “Don’t be afraid to leverage the attractiveness of politics.”
- Work harder to be welcoming to Alaska Native students and others from villages
- 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 that 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.

Capstones: Senior Theses and Internships

**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 five majors and 1 minor completed a Senior thesis. The faculty reviewed theses not supervised by themselves across all 6 and the evaluation grades’ average ranging from B- to A- with the one minor student having an average of D+.

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.

**Internships:** 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 15-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, 4 graduating students have taken PS 475 and two participated in the Ted Stevens Legislative Internship in Juneau. This evaluation is ad hoc though completed by the department Chair. We know have a department policy that the responsibility for PS475 will follow the Chair of the department.
Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Summary

In each case, the instructor-of-record, the Chair in this last two year cycle, 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 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.

2. Conclusions drawn from the information summarized above

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, and now that it is electronically available we had a high return rate 8/9. It needs to be reviewed 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.

3. Curricular changes resulting from conclusions drawn above

We have four areas where curricular changes are warranted from our assessment process (1) Reassess how we ensure oral and written competence now that the GER mode is in full swing (2) Create a more formal approach to the internships of PS475 and advertise this service learning option more (3) Think more carefully about our approach to cultural knowledge and how we teach it (4) It may be time to revisit the PS499 rubric to ensure all faculty member are on the same page in regards to the process.

4. Identify the faculty members involved in reaching the conclusions drawn above and agreeing upon the curricular changes resulting

The faculty members who submitted materials related to this review and its conclusions are A.L. Lovecraft (Chair, author, major conclusion drawer), Drs. Meek, Boylan, and Speight.

5. Has your SLOA plan been updated to include assessment of the program’s Communication Plan, as required by Faculty Senate motion? Yes.