

**Department of Political Science
Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs
College of Arts and Sciences**

**Documenting the Assessment of Student Learning: Undergraduate
Major in Political Science**

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1. ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

Introduction

The Political Science major is one of the most popular at Syracuse, and the largest by far of the social science majors. We currently have over 700 majors and teach more than 12,000 credit hours each year (we also provide much of the course work for the interdisciplinary International Relations major, which has over 200 majors). The size of our major presents a number of challenges for assessing the quality of student learning in the program. For one thing, our resources simply do not allow us to require a senior seminar or capstone course of all seniors (228 graduated this year), which would allow for the sort of assessment of individual student competencies that, for example, the History department uses. We have ruled out any sort of standardized tests for a number of reasons. Constructing fair tests, given the range of courses taken by students and the lack of a required core of courses,¹ would be nearly impossible. Even if we could do this, administering the exams to approximately 200 seniors each year would be an unfair extra burden on an already-burdened faculty. Finally, as a department we do not believe that standardized tests focusing on facts are good measures of the learning objectives we have identified as central to the political science major. During 2006-07 we plan to consider other options for faculty assessment of student learning.

Assessment Committee

The Undergraduate Studies Committee of the Department serves as the Assessment Committee for the undergraduate program. During 2005-2006, that committee consisted of the following members:

- Kristi Andersen, Laura J. and R. Douglas Meredith Professor of Teaching Excellence, Chair
- Robert McClure, Chapple Family Professor of Citizenship and Democracy in the Department of Political Science
- Grant Reeher, Associate Professor
- Sarah Pralle, Assistant Professor
- Karen Allen, Graduate Student

¹ The major requirements are included at the end of this section.

Program description/overview

During 2004-2005, the committee developed a mission statement and an assessment plan, which were discussed and approved by the faculty of the department and approved in the winter of 2005.

Mission Statement

Students majoring in Political Science are expected to graduate with the capacity to act effectively as responsible citizens of a democratic republic. They should have a basic knowledge of the workings of political systems at local, national and global levels. They are expected to be careful, reasoned thinkers and equally careful, clear writers. Finally, they should critically engage the political world from a normative perspective.

ASSESSMENT PLAN

- 1. Set an overall goal.*
- 2. Construct an agreed-upon list of learning objectives*
- 3. Assess courses in terms of their individual (and the program's overall) emphasis on these learning objectives.*
- 4. Develop ways for students to evaluate their own learning.*
- 5. Develop ways to allow faculty to evaluate students' attainment of the objectives.*

Our **goal** is simple: we aim to generate information that can help us improve our undergraduate program. "Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement. Educational values should drive not only *what* we choose to assess but also *how* we do so" (AAHE, <http://www.aahe.org/assessment/princip1.htm>).

2. STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Introduction

The department faculty approved these student learning outcomes in the spring of 2005. During the fall semester of 2005, the Undergraduate Studies Committee worked to map learning objectives to courses. This was done by examining course syllabi and by communicating with individual faculty about their objectives for their courses. A draft of the “map” was presented to the faculty in spring 2006; the document which follows represents our best attempt to map courses to learning objectives as of spring 2006.

Program Learning Outcomes

The department learning outcomes (we have customarily referred to these as “learning objectives”) are listed here:

Skills and abilities specific to the Political Science major:

- Solid knowledge of American government and politics.
- Knowledge of the politics and government of some other nations and of the international system.
- Some knowledge of different political philosophies and ideologies.
- Familiarity with current political issues and policy debates.
- An understanding of the ways that individuals can have an impact on politics.

General skill and abilities:

- Writing skills: ability to organize ideas, create and defend a thesis, use clear and appropriate prose, good grammar, and proper citation of sources.
- Reading skills: ability to critically read and understand important works about public issues.
- Research skills: ability to use primary and secondary sources; ability to use library resources; ability to use web-based resources appropriately; ability to interpret quantitative data.
- Speaking skills: ability to express oneself and present material orally.
- Critical thinking skills: ability to identify and question assumptions, determine the difference between well-reasoned and poorly-reasoned arguments, and understand trade-offs.

Program Outcomes Mapped to Courses (see following three pages)

		121/129	122	123	124	125	202	304	305	306	307	309	311	312	313	316
Solid Knowledge of American govt and politics	*	*						*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Knowledge of the politics and govt of some other nations and of the International system			*	*							*					*
Some knowledge of diff. political philosophies and ideologies	*		*	*	*						*					
Familiarity with current political issues and policy debates							*		*	*	*	*				
An understanding of the ways that individuals can have impact on politics	*								*			*				
Writing Skills: ability to organize ideas, create and defend a thesis, use clear and approp. prose, good grammar, and proper citation of sources							*							*		*
Reading Skills: ability to critically read and understand important works about public issues					*		*									*
Research Skills: ability to use primary and secondary sources, library resources, web-based resources, and interpret quantitative data																
Speaking Skills: ability to express oneself and present material orally							*		*			*		*	*	*
Critical thinking skills: ability to identify and question assumptions, determine the diff. between well-reasoned and poorly-reasoned arguments, and understand trade-offs	*				*							*		*	*	*

	317	324	325	326	328	329	333	339	341	344	346	347	348	350	352
Solid Knowledge of American gov't and politics	*	*	*	*	*	*						*	*	*	
Knowledge of the politics and gov't of some other nations and of the International system							*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Some knowledge of diff. political philosophies and ideologies		*	*	*				*				*	*	*	*
Familiarity with current political issues and policy debates										*			*	*	
An understanding of the ways that individuals can have impact on politics	*				*										
<u>Writing Skills:</u> ability to organize ideas, create and defend a thesis, use clear and approp. prose, good grammar, and proper citation of sources				*	*	*				*			*	*	*
<u>Reading Skills:</u> ability to critically read and understand important works about public issues				*		*	*			*		*	*	*	*
<u>Research Skills:</u> ability to use primary and secondary sources, library resources, web-based resources, and interpret quantitative data										*		*	*		
<u>Speaking Skills:</u> ability to express oneself and present material orally					*							*			
<u>Critical thinking skills:</u> ability to identify and question assumptions, determine the diff. between well-reasoned and poorly-reasoned arguments, and understand trade-offs				*								*	*	*	

	353	355	356	357	358	361	363	364	365	371	372	373	374	377	382	38
Solid Knowledge of American gov't and politics			*	*		*	*			*			*			
Knowledge of the politics and gov't of some other nations and of the International system	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*				*			
Some knowledge of diff. political philosophies and ideologies			*						*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Familiarity with current political issues and policy debates			*							*			*			
An understanding of the ways that individuals can have impact on politics						*										
Writing Skills: ability to organize ideas, create and defend a thesis, use clear and approp. prose, good grammar, and proper citation of sources														*		
Reading Skills: ability to critically read and understand important works about public issues										*						
Research Skills: ability to use primary and secondary sources, library resources, web-based resources, and interpret quantitative data			*			*										
Speaking Skills: ability to express oneself and present material orally			*													
Critical thinking skills: ability to identify and question assumptions, determine the diff. between well-reasoned and poorly-reasoned arguments, and understand trade-offs						*				*					*	

3. ASSESSMENT METHODS

Introduction

The fourth and fifth steps of our assessment plan are to *develop ways for students to evaluate their own learning*; and to *develop ways to allow faculty to evaluate students' attainment of the objectives*.

At this point we have mainly been working on the first task. The latter, faculty assessment of student attainment of learning objectives, poses particular challenges to a department with over 700 majors and a wide variety of courses. As discussed above, we do not believe standardized tests are appropriate to our situation. At this point, we have in mind two possible means of assessing student attainment of learning outcomes, and we will be working on these (and/or other options) during 2006-2007.

The first is modeled on the History Department's faculty assessment form. Of course they are able to require each senior major to take a research seminar, and that faculty member is then able to confidently assess the students' work and their skills. It would be impossible for us to institute such a requirement, but a variation might involve a) identifying a sample of graduating seniors (say, 10%) and b) asking faculty members who are teaching these students in their final semester to assess the extent to which the students have mastered the skills we have identified. There are many problems with this, including the fact that our courses tend to be large and not all of them would require students to demonstrate, for example, public speaking skills; and though we aim to have each student acquire a basic knowledge of American politics, those taking a comparative politics course would not necessarily be required to demonstrate their knowledge.

The second would again 1) identify a sample of graduating seniors and 2) would ask these students to submit to the department several writing samples (three?) that they had produced for political science courses. We would ask them to select writing that they believed demonstrated their attainment of our learning objectives. 3) We would then ask a faculty committee to evaluate these portfolios based on our learning objectives. This method might produce a more valid assessment of student skills, but would require quite a bit of administrative work and preparation for faculty to be able to make confident (and calibrated) judgments.

Student evaluations of learning:

Course evaluation instrument

The Political Science Department has long required that all instructors administer course evaluations (“Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness”). Many faculty members commonly supplement the closed-ended questionnaires with open-ended questions tailored to the specific course. Over the past several years the faculty had been increasingly dissatisfied with our closed-ended questionnaire; and since we also needed to re-design the instrument to include questions about the department’s learning objectives, the Undergraduate Studies undertook a complete redesign during the 2005-2006 academic year. We worked closely with the Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning (CSTL) to develop the new instrument, which was pilot tested in three courses (whose instructors also administered the old form) at the end of spring semester 2006. We will evaluate the pilot test and make any necessary changes before switching to the new form in fall 2007. This will allow us to assess students’ perceptions of course contribution to our general learning objectives. The new form is attached.

Surveys of graduating seniors

We have developed a survey instrument to be administered to graduating seniors. This survey includes questions about student evaluations of the two required courses; students’ study abroad and/or internships; dual and double majors; best and worst courses in the department; post-graduate and long-term career plans. We also ask students to rate (in general) the department’s teaching, the office staff, and the advising. Finally, the survey asks if students had suggestions for improving the major (survey is attached). Though we made every effort to get students to fill out the survey (candy bars to those who completed it; email reminders; offering the survey to everyone who came in the office), we ended up with only 38 completed surveys. Next year Tess Slater, in our Undergraduate Office, will make students fill out the survey before she does their degree check (necessary to make sure they have completed major requirements before graduation).

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

MAKE YOUR MARKS HEAVY AND DARK.

USE #2 PENCIL OR BLUE/BLACK INK.

EXAMPLE



ERASE COMPLETELY WHEN NECESSARY.

Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness

Course Name: _____ Course Number _____

Instructor: _____ Date _____

Maxwell faculty are continually seeking to improve undergraduate teaching and this survey is critical to helping faculty understand how their course might be improved. Participation is voluntary and responses will be confidential. Your instructor will not see any report of these responses until after final grades have been submitted. Please complete the questionnaire completely and honestly so future students can benefit from your evaluations.

0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9

Please respond to the items below using the following scale:

- 1=strongly disagree 2=disagree 3=neither agree nor disagree
- 4=agree 5=strongly agree

Learning Outcomes

In concrete and significant ways, this course helped me to further develop my:

1. Writing skills, so that I can organize ideas, create and defend a thesis, use clear and appropriate prose.
2. Reading skills, so that I am able to critically read and understand important works about public issues.
3. Research skills including using primary and secondary sources, library and web resources, and interpreting quantitative data.
4. Speaking skills.
5. Critical thinking skills, including identifying assumptions and distinguishing between well-reasoned and poorly-reasoned arguments.
6. This course helped me understand how individuals can have an impact on politics.

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

Teaching Practice

7. The objectives of the course were clear.
8. The instructor was enthusiastic in presenting course content.
9. When appropriate, the instructor presented divergent viewpoints.
10. The instructor treated students with respect.
11. Class discussions contributed to my understanding of the subject.
12. I was comfortable asking questions in this class.
13. The instructor was available for help outside of class.
14. The instructor inspired me to perform up to my potential in this class.

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

Course Characteristics

15. I understood how my grade was determined for this course.
16. The instructor provided helpful feedback on my work.
17. The reading material helped me to understand the course content.
18. Completing assignments contributed to my learning in this course.

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

Senior Survey - Political Science
Undergraduate Exit Survey
2005-2006

The Political Science department seeks your help to improve our curriculum, advising, and administrative services. Please complete and submit this survey via e-mail or in print to 100 Eggers Hall. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

1. For demographic information to help our assessment, please check all that apply:

<input type="checkbox"/> Male	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian/Pacific Islander
<input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Latino
<input type="checkbox"/> White/Caucasian	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
<input type="checkbox"/> African American	

2. Did you have a double or dual major while attending SU? Yes No
Newhouse History Philosophy Public Affairs Other

3. Did you use transfer credits toward your PSC major? Yes No
What course(s) and from where

4. Did you study abroad? Yes No
Where _____

5. Did you do a semester in the Albany program or Washington program?
Yes No
Were your courses and experiences beneficial? _____

6. What was your overall GPA _____

7. Two Political Science courses are required for your major, PSC 121 American National Government & Politics, and PSC 202 Political Argument & Reasoning. Did you find them helpful for future course requirements?
Yes No Why? _____

18. What are your immediate post-graduate plans?
Law School Graduate School Work Other
Where? _____

19. What are your long-term career plans? _____

20. How could the PSC major be more pertinent to your career goals?

21. Do you have other suggestions as to how the PSC program can be improved? _____

Thank you. Your name is optional: _____

4. GATHERING, ANALYZING, AND REPORTING INFORMATION ON STUDENT LEARNING

Overview

The Undergraduate Studies Committee, along with the Department Chair, will be responsible for gathering and analyzing assessment information and making recommendations for program changes in light of the analysis. This responsibility will continue to be part of the UGS Committee's yearly agenda. At this point, the only data we have are the preliminary results from the senior survey, as summarized below.

Preliminary Analysis, Senior Survey

Though we expect to have better and more representative results at the end of 2006-2007, the results obtained this year suggest that our students have positive evaluations of their experience with the political science major. They used only the top two response choices on a five-point scale to evaluate the department's teaching and their experience declaring a major, and were nearly as positive in their reactions to the department office staff. The somewhat less positive results for the quality of advising raises an issue on which we are currently working.

Graduating Seniors' Evaluations of Aspects of PSC Major				
	Overall		Declaring	
	Teaching	Office Staff	Major	Advising
average score	4.41	4.47	4.59	3.82
% "excellent"	41.20%	64.71%	58.82%	47.06%
% 4 or 5	100.00%	88.20%	100.00%	64.70%

Note: responses range from 1(poor) to 5(excellent)

Student suggestions for "improving the PSC major experience" included requiring a broader spectrum of courses, specifically non-US courses (we only require one course of this nature) and eliminating the requirement of PSC 202, Political Argument and Reasoning (see next section for discussion of this course).

5. USING ASSESSMENT RESULTS TO CREATE CHANGE

Overview

As a department, we anticipate discussing possible changes in the major over the next several years. This is based on our mapping of learning objectives to courses and related analysis of the patterns of courses taken by our majors, on senior survey feedback, and on discussions with faculty members about how best to improve student learning in their courses. For example, we plan to include suggested prerequisites for a number of upper-level classes, and may either require or encourage (during the advising process) students to select a mix of courses which will more help them achieve all the department's learning objectives.

Example of Using Feedback: PSC 202

As an example of the department's use of student, faculty, and teaching assistant feedback to improve the major, we include information about the Undergraduate Studies Committee's assessment of PSC 202, Political Argument and Reasoning. The memo distributed to the department at the end of this process, with suggested "best practices" for improving course delivery, is included.

Date: April 2006
To: Political Science Department Faculty
From: Undergraduate Studies Committee
(K. Andersen, B. McClure, G. Reeher, S. Pralle, K. Allen)
Subject: PSC 202

202 is one of the two required courses in our major (the other is PSC 121), and has been a major requirement for the past decade. The committee aimed to assess the extent to which PSC 202 was achieving its objectives and to summarize what seem to be “best practices” in teaching the course.

Background. PSC 202, Political Argument and Reasoning, was initially developed by members of the department faculty in the early 1990s. Since 1995, it has been a required course for all PSC majors. Between 1998 and 2005, the course has been taught by ten different faculty members. For the past six or seven years, PSC 202 has been taught in a “team” format with either four or five 25-person sections (two taught by faculty, the remainder by Ph.D. students). The team uses one syllabus and generally one set of assignments. The sections meet together in “plenary sessions” for one-fourth to one-third of the class sessions, and in individual sections for the remainder of the sessions. Given the high number of PSC majors, students are required to obtain permission to register for the course; they must be declared majors to take the course; and some eligible students (perhaps about 10) do get closed out each semester and must take it in a later semester.

Course objectives. At the most basic level we can probably all agree that “PSC 202 is designed to improve students’ ability to develop, articulate, and critique political arguments” (from the Spring 05 syllabus of Andersen & Bybee). But how this is best done has never been thoroughly discussed by the department – and most of the syllabi since 1998 don’t go much beyond this in their statement of objectives.

Approaches to PSC 202. It is thus perhaps not surprising that faculty have taken a variety of approaches to PSC 202. Sometimes the course has mainly been about *substantive political arguments* (readings often include books on contemporary ideologies and the “Taking Sides” readers or something similar) and sometimes it has been more about *the logic of argumentation*. Within the latter category syllabi have varied substantially in terms of the amount of formal logic they have included. Finally, different versions of PSC 202 have varied a great deal in terms of their requirements. In recent years, as faculty seem to have converged on a model which teaches some sort of formal logic and argumentation during the first half, and applies those principles and skills during the second half, the requirements almost always include a logic-based midterm. Beyond that, some have based much of the students’ grade on a single long

paper, while others have had more and shorter writing assignments. Sometimes presentations, debates, and other activities are part of the mix.

Analysis of course evaluations. We undertook an analysis of the closed-ended evaluations of PSC 202 for all available semesters between F98 and F04, and also collected information from course syllabi as to how much the course depended on formal logic and how many written assignments there were. We looked at faculty vs. graduate student evaluations; evaluations of courses with more vs. less logic; and the impact of number of assignments. We reached the following conclusions:

- The most significant conclusion: students evaluate PSC 202 significantly below the department means on all questions except the “I learned analytic skills” question.
- There are no systematic differences on measures evaluating the readings, learning of analytic skills, “course worth taking,” “understanding of the subject increased” between those sections taught by faculty and those taught by graduate students.
- Graduate students seem to do slightly better (in terms of evaluations) with a logic approach, and faculty with a non- or less-logic approach; *but*
- There is no significant difference in evaluations, overall, between the two modes of teaching.
- There is a moderate positive correlation between the number of writing assignments and students’ perceptions that “the course is worth taking” and that they “learned analytic skills.”

Analysis of open-ended responses. We looked at open-ended responses as well. This was difficult to do systematically, as some teachers gave separate open-ended questionnaires, while some provided only the closed-ended forms (and students are unlikely to write comments on those). Common, repeated themes from the open-ended responses include:

- The course really didn’t provide much value added. This is particularly the case when students take the course late in their four years: they then feel they’ve already learned many of the skills of argumentation and presentation.
- In the “Taking Sides” version of the course, students found that there was “just arguing, no skills.” The teaching of more formal logic underlying argument was difficult but valued by many students.
- In both versions of the course, students frequently found that the course seemed to lack coherence and clear objectives. Students complained that the “logic” part of the course didn’t seem to connect to the “argument” or “issues” part of the course.
- Students enjoyed opportunities to participate in formal and informal debates with their classmates.
- Students generally liked the “sections” much more than the plenaries. Plenary lectures were seen as boring and not very useful.
- Students appreciated having a number of written assignments and getting feedback on those assignments.

Recommendations and “best practices”

- The course has been a reasonably good way to provide supported/mentored teaching experiences for Ph.D. students and to prepare them for teaching on their own. The benefits of the team approach are increased with regular meetings of the team and the availability of faculty members for help and support. *Advanced* graduate students with substantial teaching experience should be selected to be a part of the PSC 202 instructional teams.
- The class should be taken as early as possible after the student declares his or her major. This can be accomplished to some extent through assertive advising, but there will always be “late declarers,” those for whom study abroad delays them in taking the course, etc.
- We need to establish clear, agreed-upon course objectives. The Undergraduate Studies Committee will develop and circulate a draft document.
- Make clearer connections between the logical structure of arguments and the practice of argumentation. This might be accomplished through shorter, more frequent writing assignments, designed to practice particular skills or types of arguments that have been learned in the course.
- Increase opportunities for structured discussions and debates, and for student presentations of arguments.
- Plenary sessions should probably be minimized and used for clear purposes, such as staging a debate between instructors, showing films, or introducing new and possibly complex topics. Students seem to benefit more from the sections.

6
~~7.~~ **COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

We will include our learning objectives in Arts and Sciences' "Major Insights," on the handout we distribute to students detailing the requirements for the major, and on the department website.