

PLSCBA Program Assessment Plan and Program Review Report 2015-16

Academic Assessment Plan with Reported Outcomes

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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B.A. in Political Science

Departmental Goals for the BA program

PLSC prepares its students to develop:

- ✓ **a thorough understanding of selected topics in domestic or international affairs**
- ✓ **a comprehension of diversity politics and policy**
- ✓ **an understanding of appropriate methodologies to study issues and topics associated with political science**
- ✓ **a thorough career oriented skill set**

The B.A. in Political Science is a 39 hour four-year program. Currently, the department offers regular courses among three related subfields that include American Politics, Comparative Politics/International Relations, and Public Administration/Policy. Students with interest in international relations or comparative politics must take a foreign language to satisfy the requirements of the major. Students are encouraged to seek out complementary majors or minors to round out their education (examples are majors in International Studies, Economics, or Communications or minors in Legal Studies, Planning (Urban and Regional Planning) or Southern Studies. In addition, PLSC is an active participant in the Fulbright College Honors Studies program.

At the end of their studies students should be able to:

- (1) understand the linkage between political, social, economic and other issues with special attention to diversity
- (2) apply that knowledge to the analysis of “real world” domestic and international political and policy issues
- (3) write, analyze and communicate in a professionally competent manner
- (4) grasp the role of institutions and organizations in the shaping of politics and policy in both domestic as well and international settings

Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

Departmental faculty evaluate these educational goals by:

- offering students assignments that advance the goals noted above
- designing meaningful assessments appropriate to the various sub-fields of the discipline
- supporting students through internships, study abroad and other experiential assignments
- requiring a high quality senior writing assignment by which students demonstrate their writing and analytical capabilities and which is reviewed critically by a faculty member
- engaging students in individual research projects around student interests (where appropriate)
- supporting students with diverse or international backgrounds to find suitable mentors

Because Political Science students can pursue different academic emphases, a generalization across the entire student body is not possible. A student in comparative politics, for example, will be assigned different projects than a student in American politics.

The following provide examples of processes used to determine student competency aligned with those departmental goals.

Goal 1 may be evaluated by faculty in the following ways: (1) by administering essay tests that assess students' ability to articulate links between political, economic or social issues, (2) employing assigned readings and examples, and (3) by assigning substantial research papers by which students demonstrate their ability to recognize linkages and appreciate the complexity of finding political or policy solutions.

Goal 2 may be evaluated by conducting research that involves a "client" in the public or nonprofit sector, attending public meetings, or incorporating the use of case studies/media reports as part of the student's assignments. Another way the department assesses students' knowledge in that regard is by encouraging them to participate in study abroad programs and provide written assessments of their experiences.

Goal 3 is assessed by establishing clear expectations of the level of writing and analysis required for a specific class. Students may be required to repeat an assignment if the expected quality is not achieved. Many classes require that students give oral presentations or individuals/groups give PowerPoint presentations.

Goal 4 is most readily assessed when students participate in internships, or other experiential assignments that bring them in contact with institutions and organizations which they have analyzed in their class readings. Another way some faculty assess students' understanding is by offering simulations (e.g. of the US Congress; the domestic politics of a foreign country etc.) that requires students to apply their knowledge to a specific real—world setting.

A Report is annually submitted to the Dean of the college and reports the following:

- Results of analysis of assessment of Student Learning Outcome
- Any changes to degree/certificate planned or made on the basis of the assessment and analysis
- Any changes to the assessment process made or planned.

Results of Assessment of Level of Achievement of Program Learning Outcomes

Ultimately one of the critical indicators of retention and graduation are the data collected by the Office of Institutional Research (http://oir.uark.edu/students/degrees_college.html);

<http://oir.uark.edu/students/retention/retention%20by%20major%2010032014.pdf>)

Results of the assessment of the achievement level in specific program learning outcomes by students *close to the end of their degree program* involves the following products or processes:

Senior writing assignment: through the completion of an acceptable senior writing requirement (or honors essay) students demonstrate their ability to write and analyze political issues, construct a well-designed argument using appropriate academic literature, and communicate in a professional manner. The department continuously reviews its senior writing assignment policy, resulting in major revisions in 2010 and again in 2014). See: http://plsc.uark.edu/SWR_Guidelines.pdf

Regular advising: currently departmental advisors are working with students on an “on-need” basis as all advising requirements have been assumed by Fulbright College advising. A separate advisor has been assigned to the legal studies minor and the departmental Honors students. Each time a new honors advisor assumes these responsibilities, he or she must be trained by a staff member in the Fulbright College Honors program. The department also utilizes an undergraduate advisor who engages students in extracurricular activities through Pi Sigma Alpha, which is the national honor society for Political Science.

Team teaching: through the generous support of our Honors College, departmental faculty members have received grants to develop interdisciplinary courses for our undergraduate students. These unique classes will offer students novel insights into materials they have been exposed to in other classes by revealing connections across disciplinary areas.

On-line teaching: the College and the university are continuing to assess the feasibility of an on-line presence in most colleges. PLSC is offering sections of the American National Government class on-line during the semester and the summer.

Some of our undergraduate and graduate classes have featured hybrid teaching. As collaborations with universities in other countries become possible, we anticipate that on-line activities might increase.

Executive in Residence: This program is designed to expose students to various career opportunities and provide them with a sense of career progression. The department hosts, when possible, a senior manager in various public service careers each year (Kay Goss 2013; Dean Kruthoff, city management-2014; Suze Francois-international focus 2015; Ray Gosack, city management 2016).

Intersessions: In May 2013, the University began with a new program of intersession classes to accelerate student graduation. The department has offered a limited number of such classes. We are very judicious in the selection of course topics in order to maintain the high quality of instruction we believe our students deserve.

Internships: to foster professional development of our students, the department strongly encourages students to pursue internships in offices of elected officials, government agencies or nonprofit organizations. To receive credit, students in these internships must meet specified academic requirements. Our students also participate on a regular basis in the Washington Center

internship programs as well as other opportunities on our campus or in internships across the country. We have developed a formal internship document to insure consistent use across different faculty and internship placements

Exit surveys: We conducted an exit survey of graduating seniors on-line for the first time in 2014. The returns were not sufficiently large to allow for a generalized assessment of the quality of our undergraduate program.

Job placement: One of our biggest challenges remains to track students after they leave our programs. We have created Facebook and LinkedIn pages that allow us to track some alumni. However, we lack the means to track our graduates in a systematic fashion and this impedes our ability to provide accurate feedback on this issue. Contacts with the Alumni Association which we established in 2014 might be able to assist us further.

Of the students who we have been able to track the overwhelming majority has found admission to a graduate program, law school, or placement in public, nonprofit or private employment.

Analysis of Results

Assessment of barriers to timely graduation

According to OIR graduation rates for departmental students in the most current cohort is 70% for students who started in the major.

Assessment of career readiness

This goal can be met in numerous ways (internships; study abroad; service learning; programs with specific career tracks). The graduation survey revealed that some students were not sure what to do with their degree or how to link learning in classes with various career options

Internationalizing our curriculum

This has been identified as a high priority based on feedback from students but will require collaboration among multiple units/programs and additional faculty. A faculty committee has been formed to identify specific, sustainable steps to achieve this goal. As a first initiative we began an International Careers Symposium in the fall 2015 (planning for 2016 is underway) in collaboration with the director of International Studies and other units on campus.

Changes to Degree Program Made or Planned on the Basis of Results

The results of this assessment indicate that the program learning outcomes are by and large achieved through continuous improvements of departmental processes.

Continued faculty shortages in critical areas (international affairs and public policy/affairs) to teach required classes and inability to supervise students' internships limit our ability to grow new programs around student interests. As faculty members balance their own career goals with college and university goals to improve the university's institutional standing, limited improvements can be achieved without a substantial infusion of additional resources.

The department hired a new International Relations faculty member who will begin teaching in the fall 2016. As part of this plan we have also been given approval for additional lecturers to teach introductory classes in international relations and comparative politics.

The department has asked for a conversion of a VAP to a clinical instructor line to secure teaching services in another vital area of our undergraduate program, but have not received a response at this point.

The department has made significant commitments to:

Improving graduation rates by

- Instituting a graduation survey to identify barriers to timely graduation (such as lack of junior- and senior-level classes to complete majors and minors)
- Continue to send frequent reminders to students to submit the senior writing assignment (a graduation requirement); helping students early to improve papers they wish to submit in a timely fashion; reviewing and streamlining requirements (linked on our departmental website)
- Working with our PLSC advisor in the Dean's office to apprise him of any changes in the program that might impede timely graduation
- Attempting to determine why students may be leaving PLSC before graduating. This is an ongoing effort where the department is working with student services and our undergraduate advisors. Preliminary results suggest that these issues have been remedied as far as teaching in our department is concerned.

Improving career readiness by

- Strengthening our curricular offerings (Legal Studies minor, Southern Studies minor, Planning minor and collaboration with other colleges). The department, in conjunction with the Law School and Fulbright College, launched a new initiative in 2015-2016 to improve the director of the Legal Studies Minor's ability to manage the heavy administrative load of more than 140 students, many of whom come to the director for both undergraduate curricular guidance and advice regarding the law school admissions process. The Law School is currently providing a graduate assistant from their L.L.M. program to teach Judicial Process (PLSC 3243) during Spring semesters. This will allow the Legal Studies minor director to be placed on a 2-1 load so the director can spend more time advising these students. . The department and/or the Dean's office have also agreed to share \$1000 RIF for the director for the contract period (3 years) after which the arrangements with the Law School will be revisited. .
- Increasing professional development (securing high quality internships; the introduction of an Executive-in-Residence; revitalization of Pi Sigma Alpha in 2014, the departmental honors society and the Prelaw Society; supporting students interested in attending academic conferences or participating in faculty research, etc.
- Improving internship preparation (streamlined admission and reporting process) and increasing participation in internships by raising student awareness of their availability and value
- Collaborating closely with the UA Employer Relations Office to alert students of career fairs and other career opportunities. An assessment of these efforts is ongoing.

- Adding an additional section of the undergraduate methods class (PLSC 3603) so that we can teach the class in both Fall and Spring semesters. The addition of a second section during the academic year, which we were able to do in 2015-16, will improve our students' exposure to data analysis skills.
- In the absence of a Teaching and Research lab, the department has made major investments in our departmental library to provide research space for our students and faculty members collaborating with them. In addition, the department acquired 10 I-PADs and set up a mobile computer lab.
- Encouraging students to apply for study abroad (we have seen an increase in numbers of students planning to take advantage of these opportunities). However, there continues to be barriers such as the lack of funding for lower-income students. A new study-abroad fund for political science undergraduates was endowed at 50K to help address this issue in future years.
- Encouraging faculty to develop experiential learning/service learning projects as more students have expressed interest in such options (but the department has not yet developed a systematic process to link students to such experiences or have identified resources)—This is part of an ongoing effort with several classes beginning to incorporate these elements; The next step is for the department to develop better assessment tools to determine the impact of such efforts.
- Continuing to develop the *Executive-in-Residence* program to provide students opportunities to interact with experienced administrative and policy practitioners and to help them envision career trajectories with a degree in political science—the department emphasized improving career opportunities for international affairs students in 2015 by securing the services of a Walmart Executive and former student in our MPA program to engage students in various conversations about international careers. The department spearheaded an internationally themed fall 2015 event that included participation from a variety of different programs across campus.