

Knowledge Goals

Students majoring in political science will be exposed to a wide range of substantive information about the world of politics, covering subjects such as (corresponding “blue ribbon” competencies are listed in parentheses):

- 1) The history, characteristics, and impact of political institutions and systems, including international, national, state, and local governments (Historical Consciousness, Social and Cultural Awareness, International Awareness)
- 2) The behavior of individual actors at both the mass and elite levels (Social and Cultural Awareness, International Consciousness)
- 3) The processes involved in creating government policy and the impact of those policies (Social and Cultural Awareness, International Consciousness)
- 4) The debates over the normative foundations of the state, the scope of its activities, and the nature of justice (Ethical and Moral Consciousness, Critical Thinking)

Skill Goals

Students majoring in political science will develop practical and marketable skills which will help them to apply that knowledge to any number of career paths. These skills include:

- 5) Critical thinking – the ability to read and evaluate primary texts, ideas, theories, and political analysis (Critical Thinking, Verbal Literacy)
- 6) Analysis/Research – the ability to pose and answer questions effectively (Critical Thinking, Philosophy and Methods of Science, Information Technology)
- 7) Argumentation/Persuasion – the ability to use logic and evidence to build a persuasive argument (Critical Thinking, Verbal Literacy, Ethical and Moral Consciousness, Information Technology)
- 8) Written and Verbal Communication – the ability to communicate ideas clearly on paper or through oral presentations (Verbal Literacy, Information Technology)
- 9) Working in Groups – the ability to effectively coordinate with others on a project (Critical Thinking, Ethical and Moral Consciousness)
- 10) Practical Applications – the ability to take information gained through coursework and uses it effectively in real world or simulated exercises (Critical Thinking, Verbal Literacy, Ethical and Moral Consciousness, Information Technology)

The specific **Learning Objectives** are associated with the following goals:

1	1) Knowledge of history, characteristics, and impact of political institutions and systems, including international, national, state, and local governments	<i>Student will know and understand the structure of the most important local and state, national, and international political institutions and systems</i>
2	2) Knowledge of behavior of individual actors at both the mass and elite levels	<i>Student will master structural and cultural constraints and motivations of individual actors at both the mass and elite levels of politics, nationally and internationally</i>
3	3) Knowledge of processes involved in creating government policy and the impact of those policies	<i>Student will know and understand the processes of creating the government policy and the impact of those policies</i>
4	4) Knowledge of over the normative foundations of the state, the scope of its activities, and the nature of justice	<i>Student will know and understand, and be able to critically evaluate, the normative foundations of the state, the scope of its activities, and the nature of justice</i>
5	5) Critical thinking - the ability to read and evaluate primary texts, ideas, theories, and political analysis	<i>Students will possess the ability to read and evaluate primary texts, ideas, theories, and political analysis</i>
6	6) Analysis/Research – the ability to pose and answer questions effectively	<i>Students will possess the ability to pose and answer questions effectively in Political Science research</i>
7	7) Argumentation/Persuasion – the ability to use logic and evidence to build a persuasive argument	<i>Students will possess the ability to use logic and evidence to build a persuasive argument</i>
8	8) Written and Verbal Communication – the ability to communicate ideas clearly in writing or through oral presentations	<i>Students will possess the ability to communicate ideas clearly in writing or through oral presentations</i>
9	9) Working in Groups – the ability to effectively coordinate with others on a project	<i>Students will possess the ability to effectively coordinate with others on a project</i>
10	10) Practical Applications – the ability to take information gained through coursework and uses it effectively in real world or simulated exercises	<i>Students will the ability to take information gained through coursework and uses it effectively in real world or simulated exercises</i>

The map of how the specific learning objectives are mapped on the curriculum is provided in the departmental assessment plan, and the reader should refer to that detailed distribution map, which does not fit into the official report due to page limits (10) on the length of the report. At this point it is sufficient to say that each course in the curriculum is associated with specific 3 to 6 learning objectives.

2. The above goals and objectives are normally assessed using the following comprehensive methods:

1) **The annual review serves as the pivotal point of discussion of the department assessment and for planning and assessing the results of curricular changes.** Information gathered in the course of annual review process is compiled and analyzed by the Departmental Assessment Committee to generate the annual assessment report and comments. The Departmental Assessment Committee will consist of three members of the department, under the leadership of the Departmental Assessment Leader. It is the duty of individual member of the department to provide the meaningful data for the annual assessment report, while the Assessment Committee drafts the report which is subsequently discussed and approved by the entire Department council

2) **During the review, we look at the spectrum of the materials provided by the faculty: syllabi, class grades, class materials, peer review reports, student evaluations, etc.** Each faculty member will report on the knowledge and skills goals and objectives that they teach in each class and discuss the spectrum of evidence that shows the attempt to teach these objectives and the actual results in terms of student learning. More specifically, the individual faculty need to provide the Assessment Committee with:

- a) with their class syllabi and the discussion how the departmental circular objectives are embodied in the class design
- b) evidence regarding whether the objectives were met in the course of a particular class including:
 - I. class grades and their analysis
 - II. class assignments, tests, and activities, and their analysis
 - III. results of student class evaluations and their analysis
 - IV. other supporting material regarding the quality of class experience, including peer review, class surveys, student testimonies, etc.

The following assessment methods are a part of the long-term assessment plan but still in the process of being implemented:

3) **We will design and test new course evaluation forms** to reflect the new departmental mission and the new assessment

4) **Short senior exit interviews will be conducted with graduating seniors.** Students will be asked about the following elements of the program:

- a) Program goals

- b) Program culture
- c) Advising
- d) Integration of courses
- e) POLS 1310
- f) POLS 2301
- g) Upper division courses
- h) Internships
- i) Faculty:

Results of the senior exit interviews will be compiled by the Assessment Committee and discussed by the department. Faculty who normally advise the students will conduct senior exit interviews. It will be preferred that the interviews are conducted after students graduate and grades are turned in, so that students provide honest information.

4) We will design and conduct an alumni survey and a major satisfaction survey.

The survey (based online using survey-money) was designed by the Assessment/Institutional Review Survey Committee in 2009 and is currently being conducted. The results will be available for the next assessment report.

5) We will design and conduct a critical thinking skills test and apply on pre- and post-basis in selected classes.

A pilot critical thinking test assessment was conducted by Rebecca Glazier in her POLS 2201 Introduction to Political Science class. Broader use of the test as an assessment tool is being discussed in the Department.

6) We will retrieve meaningful data on our classes and graduates from the Office of Registrar's, Institutional Research, and Alumni Office.

The Departmental Administrative Assistant will be charged with retrieving and compiling the meaningful data in a usable form.

7) Peer classroom faculty visits will be performed on volunteer basis for tenure track faculty, and on obligatory basis for the adjunct taught-classes, and their record will be included into assessment materials.

The pilot project of peer review visit has been pioneered by junior faculty members in the department and has worked very well. Written record of peer reviews is based on as simple form reporting the strengths, issues, and overall evaluation of the observed periods. It is important to extend our peer evaluation system to a greater range of classes in Political Science, especially adjunct-taught courses.

9) The department will meet at least twice a year to talk about the assessment results and implement an action plan to implement them.

10) **A department blog/website will be created to share and discuss the best practices.** Our assessment will involve the students and the results will be shared with the students and other shareholders.

11) **We will consider using student essays written in introductory classes and their comparison to essays written by the same students in upper-division/capstone courses as a way of gauging student progress in their writing skills.**

This idea was discussed during the departmental assessment meeting in February 2010.

3. UALR Political Science Narrative report based on 2009 assessment findings:

The annual reviews - based assessment process showcased some of the fantastic things that our department is doing regarding our new mission statement and long-term goals. We also discovered that we are already doing many of state-of-the-art activities that constitute the essence of a good learning organization dedicated to assessment.

It is apparent that our full-time faculty already created assessment processes and assessment loops for our individual upper division courses. Using course syllabi, evaluation forms, grades, and other forms of student feedback, each faculty member was able to reflect on what worked and what did not work in each of their particular courses and suggest individual ways of improving their classes. For example, Professor Art English, using feedback from his earlier POLS 4315 "Capitol Hill" seminar, where long final research projects proved to be ineffective, decided to use shorter research and reflection papers in his 2009 iteration of the course, which translated into a better student performance and better learning experience as reflected in course grades and feedback that the course received on the course evaluations. Similarly, the popularity and success of his POLS 3301 "Politics at the Movies" courses is clearly a reflection of his teaching and learning technique that emphasizes frequent, reflective essays, thus allowing for multiple points of feedback between student and teacher and creating a possibility of meaningful learning as a process of reflecting on the knowledge, not just mechanical acquisition of knowledge.¹ However, all of our full time faculty used similar to Art's processes to assess and improve their upper division courses.

Overall, our upper division courses taught by full-time faculty are not a problem – to the contrary, they represent the strongest part of the major. Moreover, we already have proper assessment and self-correcting mechanisms in place for the steady improvement of these courses. Also, given the typical caliber of students taking these courses – majors or non-majors – and their general satisfaction with their experience, as expressed in course evaluations, what we

¹ The sophistication of reflective approaches and assessment techniques used by Professor English is exemplary of the state of the art pedagogical literature – see Voparil, Christopher. "Assessing as Understanding: Toward a Theory of Assessment as Learning." In *Assessment in Political Science*, edited by Michelle Deardorff and John Ishiyama, Hamann, 17-37. Washington D.C.: American Political Science Association, 2009. New possibilities are created in this respect by modern technology. Thus in "Citizen Politics" course taught by Andy Drummond in the fall 2008 reflective blogs were used by students to comment on each other's idea and research, thus creating not only a reflective learning environment but also a learning community.

need to do with these courses is to continue doing what we are doing, while implementing new curricular visions that will only enhance the already existing excellent program.

It is also apparent we are already – to a large extent - achieving one of the learning goals of our newly formulated mission statement – and this is to teach “theory and practice” of politics. Thanks to an absolutely outstanding internship program created and supervised by Professor English, our students engage in practical activities of politics at the local, state, and national level. These activities are coupled to a process of self-reflection, creating a model learning experience. The only question that we perhaps need to ask is whether to require an internship of all the students. An internship requirement is indeed, a required element of the model state-of-the-art Political Science curriculum.² Requiring internships of all students would create workload problems – the current excellent program could most probably not be sustained if required of all the students. Nevertheless, literature and data collected in other schools and nationally indicate that political science graduates tend to look back at their internships as the single best, most effective and formative element of their Political Science education. As our Department continues to implement our new assessment plan and we ask survey questions of our students, alumni, and external stakeholders (employers of our former and current students, especially) it would be important to ask questions about our internship program and to assess how central it is to our major.

Another element of our program where we are already succeeding – or at least implementing proper programmatic elements – is the creation of learning community. First, there are student organizations embedded in our program that create a sort of “civil society” for the students: these are: the nationally recognized chapter Iota Mu of the Pi Sigma Alpha (with Art English as the advisor), the College Democrats (Art English), the College Republicans (Professor Joe Giammo), International Simulations Association (Jacek Lubecki), the college chapter of Amnesty International (Jacek Lubecki). Second, we organize department picnics. Third, as of recent junior faculty of the Department (Andy Drummond, Jacek Lubecki and Joe Giammo) have created a peer-review classroom visits program – mostly in their upper division courses, where they visited each other’s classes, evaluated their classroom performance, and created the proper process for these evaluations that allows for meaningful, thoughtful and . This improves the assessment process for upper division course, but even more importantly, reinforces our identity and image as a learning community. For instance, observing each other teaching gave us an idea about each other’s teaching styles, which in turn helps with departmental advising by giving us some notion about what we actually do in the classes. Second, our students noticed those visits, which tremendously improved our image as a department that takes the quality of its teaching seriously.

² As stated in the 1991 Wahlke Report, a model political science curriculum should include the following:

- 1) an introductory course
- 2) skill development courses
- 3) real-life experience (internship)
- 4) capstone

Our (UALR) current curriculum has elements 1 and 2. 3 is not required, and 4 is non-existent. See McClellan, Fletcher E. "An Overview of the Assessment Movement." In *Assessment in Political Science*, edited by Michelle Deardorff and John Ishiyama, Hamann, 39-57. Washington D.C.: American Political Science Association, 2009.

4. Conclusions based on the assessment findings

We could reinforce our learning community by involving the students more meaningfully in assessment activities. Several ideas were discussed in this respect including the following:

- 1) small group discussion with graduating/exiting students. As far, we have no meaningful alumni exit interview process. Experience of other departments and literature on assessment indicate that alumni and senior exit surveys, be it in summative quantitative form or qualitative form constitute the single most effective and parsimonious source of assessment data.
- 2) majors survey and class discussions on departmental learning
- 3) a blog dedicated to faculty and student reflection on the major and their learning experience. Andy Drummond already created this type of a blog.
- 4) alumni survey and interview..

Talking to external stakeholders (employers of our former) students would also fall under the “learning community” heading in our assessment plan – they, indeed, constitute an element of our learning community in the broadest possible sense.

The elements of our program that need serious assessment effort and discussion are lower division introductory courses and the question of retention and graduation rate.

It is in the lower division introductory courses (POLS 1310 and 2301) that our students are first exposed to the major. These are also our general education core courses. As such, these courses are beset by a typical set of issues:

- 1) Many of them are taught by adjuncts, and, as such, they are not covered by our assessment loop. Only if some major problems occur in these course, our Chair takes action, but even their course evaluation data are not a part of the departmental assessment process. This needs to be remedied.
- 2) Students taking these courses are often unprepared for college experience, and the failure and absenteeism rate in these courses is high. The problem seems to be compounded when these courses are offered online – unprepared and un-socialized weaker students taking an online course almost inevitably end up failing. Should entering freshmen be allowed to take online courses? Financial and other imperatives make it inevitable that they do, but pedagogically, it is wrong.
- 3) The courses’ large enrollment makes meaningful, learning-community and reflective type of pedagogical activities difficult. First-year experience courses were supposed to address the problem, by capping enrollment at the level that allows for more meaningful pedagogy to take place. However, the offering of these courses is running into financial constraints.

Thus the problem with our introductory and University core courses in many ways reflect the broader institutional problems of UALR and the community that we are serving. But, since our

concern is the major, let me focus on these elements of introductory courses that pertain to the major:

1) Most critically, we need to know how our students decide to become Political Science majors and how does the quality and nature of our introductory courses affect the process. Perhaps, students decide to become majors regardless of their experience in these courses, or perhaps the courses are critical in their decision. The point is – we don't know. A major and alumni survey, as well as examination of statistical (Institutional Research?) data on our courses should allow us to answer this question.

2) Since our goal is to, obviously, increase the number of majors and the quality of their learning (and therefore, our teaching), the critical question seems to be – how do we improve the quality of our introductory courses? Can these be improved at all?

The data pertaining to question 1) and discussion based on the data – and pertaining to question 2, needs to be undertaken by the department.

It is within the broader context of recruitment and retention that we also need to address the obvious fact that many students coming to UALR feel lost, and that sooner they feel an attachment to a departmental home and a particular faculty member – or a set of faculty members, the better. Some of our faculty who advised incoming freshmen in the summer 2008 noticed that students who from the very beginning feel attached to a particular departmental home seem to have vastly improved learning experience. Jacek Lubecki, who coordinates the International Studies program noticed the same fact about his majors. Clearly, UALR students should be encouraged to declare a major and find a departmental home as soon as possible, and institution-wide reform that would create this type of a reality is an imperative.

Discussion and Critical Issues:

We would like to reinvigorate the department focusing on the following objectives:

- 1) Increasing recruitment and retention. The critical issue will be to discover how students become political science majors and what variables account for the difference between successful and non-successful majors. We will also create a series of events that increase our campus and community visibility (a monthly forum on current issues, a website blog on the critical issues of the day, etc.)
- 2) Increase student success – what critical skills, values, and knowledge goals are important in explaining future professional student success?
- 3) Enhance career-planning and success elements of the major. We will bring in potential future employees and showcase successful graduates through activities such as an alumni forum.
- 4) We will invigorate our alumni relations and fundraising activities

- 5) We will engage our graduating seniors in activities such as senior exit interviews.

Time line:

Ideally, each course taught each year should be included into the assessment process. The existing annual review mechanism already creates an assessment system for courses taught by full-time faculty in the department, but there is no assessment system for the adjunct-taught courses. Per our assessment report for 2007/8, extension of the assessment system to cover adjunct-taught courses is our priority for the next year. Realistically, it will take us two academic years to implement the data-gathering mechanisms of the new assessment system. This reality also dictates a two-year assessment cycle that will start in 2009/10 academic year. Every two years (starting in 2010/11) the Department will gather to discuss the accumulated assessment reports and outcomes and decide on further reforms.