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Spring 2015

### Political Science Discipline Assessment Report 2014/2015

Political Science Discipline

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To: Janet Erickson,

From: Roger Rose, Political Science Discipline Coordinator

Re: Assessment of Program Student Learning Outcomes (PSLOs) as requested by Assessment of Student Learning Committee (memo dated March 24, 2014)

Date: April 7, 2015

**I. The Measure:** For several years, the Political Science discipline has collectively assessed the learning outcomes of students in two ways that go beyond grading normal course assignments. First, we have been conducting an exit survey of graduating seniors that ask for their rating and reflection on a variety of academic –related outcomes, many of which are related to our PSLOs. However, as participation in that survey has not been mandatory, there are gaps in this data series.

Our second avenue is a an annual faculty assessment of student senior thesis projects coming out of POL 4905, Senior Research Seminar in Political Science. To pass this course, a student must build on a shorter research paper from an earlier political science course and produce an original 20 page senior thesis on a topic of their choosing. At the conclusion of the course, all Political Science faculty attend the students’ oral presentations or poster session and then the discipline faculty meet to evaluate each written thesis project using a nine item evaluation form, with scores ranging from 1 to 10.<sup>1</sup> The criteria that the faculty discuss and reach collective decisions on are as follows:

1. Purpose and thesis: Clear statement of the project’s purpose (e.g., research question) and appropriate hypothesis or thesis
2. Logical structure: Coherent logical sequence to present evidence and arguments
3. Literature review: Integrated, accurate attention to key scholars and relevant existing literature; evidence of strong knowledge of the field
4. Methodology: Accurate use and explanation of appropriate quantitative, qualitative and/or argumentative methods
5. Defense of hypothesis/thesis: Hypothesis/thesis fully supported through presentation of evidence, analysis and argumentation
6. Writing: Coherent, articulate writing without mechanical errors
7. Documentation: Thorough, accurate use of appropriate, recognized citation style
8. Oral presentation: Well-organized, concise, articulate summary of project; strong use of visual aids; knowledgeable responses to audience questions
9. Contribution to the field: Persuasive evidence that project makes a valuable contribution to prevailing understandings of the topic

For each item, a score from 1-3 is considered “below expectations,” while a score from 4-7 “meets expectations” and a score from 8-10 “exceeds expectations.” (See appendix 2.)

This 2-credit course, developed to replace 4-credit 4000-level subfield seminars, has been taught since 2009-2010, thus providing five years of data that Political Science can use to both assess changes in the quality of student academic performance over time and to gauge whether our seniors have met our PSLO category 1 in a satisfactory way. Our discipline’s PSLO category 1 calls for students “To be able to critically analyze, interpret and synthesize the major theories that are prevalent in a major subfield of political science.” In particular, items 1-3 and 6 from our collective seminar evaluation are strongly connected to PSLO #1. This evaluation, moreover, can also suggest whether our students are meeting PSLO outcome # 3, “to be adequately prepared for entrance into graduate or professional school.” Students who can meet our collective expectations on a major research project, we would argue, are prepared to meet the intellectual rigor of graduate and professional schools.

**II. Summary of Evaluation:** Our data on POL 4905 student performance over five years reveals several positive outcomes of the course. (See Appendix 1.) First, we note that students showed a strong

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<sup>1</sup> The actual grade a student receives is determined by the faculty member who taught the course and guided the student’s research, and a particular grade is not affected by the collective evaluation process.

improvement in average total score of the nine items, compared to old seminar format last used in 2008-2009. (As a prelude to the switch to POL 4905, faculty did collectively review POL 4902, 4903 and 4904 seminar papers.) Whereas in 2008-2009, students collectively scored 38.7 (out of 90 points), indicating that many students were not meeting our expectations for a senior thesis project, by 2010-2011, student scores had risen nearly 13 points to 51.2 and have remained between 45 and 50 since that time. Thus the “typical” student, whether measured by the mean or median, meets our expectations. Further, whereas 21% of the students in the earlier subfield seminar format failed to meet expectations—i.e., scoring 30 or lower—during 2008-2009, only 8% failed to meet expectations just two years later, and the number of students “below expectations” has not exceeded 20% since then. Finally, in no year after the year of 2008-2009 did our students average “below expectations” in any of the 9 categories of evaluation.

Turning to superior performances in this course, while no student “exceeded expectations” in the former seminar format, more than 20% did in all the years that followed. Several of these superior works have been published in various undergraduate research venues, most notably two papers in the prestigious *Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics*.

Looking at items 1, 2, 3 and 6, which bear most directly on PSLO Objective 1, the data reveal that both the average and median score for students was at least 5.0 or above for 2009-2014. We interpret this to mean students are meeting our expectations for this PSLO learning objective.

From our discussion of these trends, we attribute the overall improvement in student performance to two factors. First, the introduction of POL 4905 in 2009-2010 made the senior seminar more focused on original, high quality research writing and Sheri Breen excelled at teaching and guiding the students through this challenging intellectual effort. Second, the discipline introduced POL 2001, Research Methods in Political Science, which trained students directly in writing literature reviews, creating effective research designs, and collecting and presenting both quantitative and qualitative data. The impact of this course was seen in the last four years of the data.

Connection to UMM Learning Objectives: We can also use this data help us assess whether our students are meeting UMM’s CSLOs, notably objectives 2d1, written communication and 2d3, oral presentation, from category 2 (Intellectual and Practical Skills). Between 80 and 90 percent of Political Science seniors demonstrate an ability to meet our faculty’s expectations to write an extensive, original research paper and to effectively present this work orally to a larger audience.

Conclusion: Using the prism of POL 4905 senior seminar course, which all political science graduates must complete, we are pleased to report that more 80 percent of our students are meeting our PSLO Objective 1. Given this high quality of writing, we also would contend that these students are meeting PSLO Objective 3, in that they have demonstrated that they are intellectually prepared to enter graduate or professional school programs that demand higher levels of sophistication in research, writing and analytical ability. Indeed, in several instances graduating majors have submitted their senior thesis projects as part of their successful graduate school application packets

Based in part on student feedback and a desire to share seminar experience across the faculty, Political Science has decided to introduce subject oriented seminars (POL 4205, POL 4305 & POL 4405) over the next two years in lieu of Pol 4905 and other 4xxx-level subfield seminars. These seminars will build upon the success of POL 4905--in that they will maintain a central focus on an original research project-- but they respond to the desire of students and faculty to build those papers around high-level readings on a broad topic within a subfield of the political science discipline. We have every expectation that students will continue to meet or exceed our expectations for objectives #1 and #3 of our PSLOs. Since we will continue to collectively evaluate these seminar papers, we will retain the ability to assess whether they are indeed continuing to do so.



## Appendix 2: Assessment of Senior Research Seminar in Political Science

At the end of each academic year, faculty of the Political Science Discipline will review senior majors' research projects, including written work and oral presentations, to determine the extent to which each student's work meets the discipline's graduation standards. The discipline will publish a summary of the review session and its empirical findings and use this information to help determine the need for overall program changes.

Student: \_\_\_\_\_

Standard	Failed to meet expectations	Met expectations	Exceeded expectations
1. Purpose and thesis: Clear statement of the project's purpose (e.g., research question) and appropriate hypothesis or thesis	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
2. Logical structure: Coherent logical sequence to present evidence and arguments	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
3. Literature review: Integrated, accurate attention to key scholars and relevant existing literature; evidence of strong knowledge of the field	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
4. Methodology: Accurate use and explanation of appropriate quantitative, qualitative and/or argumentative methods	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
5. Defense of hypothesis/thesis: Hypothesis/thesis fully supported through presentation of evidence, analysis and argumentation	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
6. Writing: Coherent, articulate writing without mechanical errors	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
7. Documentation: Thorough, accurate use of appropriate, recognized citation style	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
8. Oral presentation: Well-organized, concise, articulate summary of project; strong use of visual aids; knowledgeable responses to audience questions	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
9. Contribution to the field: Persuasive evidence that project makes a valuable contribution to prevailing understandings of the topic	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10

## Appendix 3: Political Science Discipline

### UNIT MISSION/GOAL(S)

The mission of the political science discipline is to help students develop and use strong analytical skills and critical thinking in their analysis of theories, institutions, and processes in political science. The program prepares students for work in government, non-profit organizations, and private business, and it prepares students for additional training in graduate and professional programs.

### Unit Mission/goal(s) and the Institutional Mission Relation

The Political Science Discipline at UMM is a rigorous program that offers students a solid background in a Key liberal arts major. The program instills in students a lifelong love of learning about government and encourages participation in that process. The Political Science program also encourages the students to participate in their community by many means, including seeking internships in and around the community.

### STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES, EXPECTED OUTCOMES, ASSESSMENT METHODS & TOOLS, TIMELINE

#### Learning Objective 1

To be able to critically analyze, interpret and synthesize the major theories that are prevalent in a major subfield of political science.

#### Expected Outcome 1

To be able , in writing, to explain and critique major competing theories in a subfield of political science.

#### Method(s), Measure(s), and Instrument(s) for Expected Outcome 1

Comprehensive exam in major or construction of a portfolio that includes a professional paper, annotated bibliography of books read, etc.

#### Timeline for the Outcome 1

Starting Date for the Implementation: In Progress

Anticipated Date for the First Results: In Progress

#### Learning Objective 2

To become more empowered to participate in government due to increased familiarity with politics and government.

#### Expected Outcome 2

To believe that one is competent to participate in government, whether by voting, discussing policy with others, or even working in government or on a campaign.

**Method(s), Measure(s), and Instrument(s) for Expected Outcome 2**

Student attitude survey that measures confidence to participate in political discussion and participate in political activity.

**Timeline for the Outcome 2**

Starting Date for the Implementation: In Progress

Anticipated Date for the First Results: In Progress

**Learning Objective 3**

To be adequately prepared for entrance into graduate or professional school.

**Expected Outcome 3**

To demonstrate skills that are necessary for success in graduate and professional school.

**Method(s), Measure(s), and Instrument(s) for Expected Outcome 3**

Graduate/professional school admission test.

**Timeline for the Outcome 3**

Starting Date for the Implementation: In Progress

Anticipated Date for the First Results: In Progress