SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

Program-Level Assessment: Annual Report

Program Name (no acronyms): MA in Political Science and Public Affairs	Department: Political Science
Degree or Certificate Level: MA	College/School: CAS
Date (Month/Year): June 2023	Assessment Contact: Morgan Hazelton

In what year was the data upon which this report is based collected? 2022-23

In what year was the program's assessment plan most recently reviewed/updated?

Is this program accredited by an external program/disciplinary/specialized accrediting organization or subject to state/licensure requirements?

If yes, please share how this affects the program's assessment process (e.g., number of learning outcomes assessed, mandated exams or other assessment methods, schedule or timing of assessment, etc.):

1. **Student Learning Outcomes**
   Which of the program's student learning outcomes were assessed in this annual assessment cycle? (Please provide the complete list of the program's learning outcome statements and **bold** the SLOs assessed in this cycle.)

   Students will be able to design original research and seminar projects that investigate political processes with appropriate methodologies and contribute to ongoing scholarly debates.

2. **Assessment Methods: Artifacts of Student Learning**
   Which artifacts of student learning were used to determine if students achieved the outcome(s)? Please describe the artifacts in detail, identify the course(s) in which they were collected, and if they are from program majors/graduates and/or other students. Clarify if any such courses were offered a) online, b) at the Madrid campus, or c) at any other off-campus location.

   Students in POLS 5650 War, Peace, and Politics spent the summer writing an independent research paper (4,500-6,000 words). All students wrote the paper regardless of major/program status, but evaluations of the artifacts in subsequent questions differentiate between majors and non-majors (this is true of all artifacts listed here).

   In POLS 5530 Authoritarian Politics, students completed two short papers throughout the semester in which they assessed the research from that week and then proposed a research design to build on existing research.

   In POLS 5171 Law, Policy, and Society, graduate students submit a draft research plan and either executed research or research design and appropriate information for an IRB application in final form.

   For POLS 5670 Politics of International Trade and Finance, the main tool for assessing the outcome was the final paper. The students are required to write a 4500-6500-word-long final paper during the semester. Before they write the final paper, students met with the instructor decide on a research project. Following this meeting, they submitted a research proposal/outline with an annotated bibliography, then a literature review, then a rough draft, which is blindly reviewed by one of their peers (and they review one of their peer's draft), which is followed by a research presentation, and the final paper. After each step, they receive detailed feedback from the instructor in writing.

   The instructor for POLS 5730 used a research paper as the main artifact for measuring students' ability to situate their research in the context to scholarly debates. Students were evaluated on whether the paper explained the larger problem area, how existing scholarly opinion falls short, and how this research will add to it.

In POLS 5510 Democratization, students wrote a research paper for which they came up with their own question and methodology. The paper included a literature review.

POLS 5610, which is taught in Madrid, included the following assignment: students were asked to submit a 2,000 words paper proposal that included (prompt): a research question, relevance of the topic, a hypothesis, a literature review that maps existing debates and identifies a gap or area for a potential contribution, a tentative research design specifying the appropriate methodology and types of data, accompanied by a bibliography. The literature review entails an in-depth presentation and analysis/evaluation of the relevant scholarly works on your chosen topic.

3. Assessment Methods: Evaluation Process

What process was used to evaluate the artifacts of student learning, and by whom? Please identify the tools(s) (e.g., a rubric) used in the process and **include them in/with this report document** (please do not just refer to the assessment plan).

Artifacts were evaluated primarily by the instructors of courses selected due to their relevance to this SLO. Instructors used a standardized rubric developed by the department in August 2022 for this explicit purpose. In each selected course, instructors used the standardized rubric to analyze the artifacts listed above and then provided their aggregate scores along with the artifacts themselves to the department assessment coordinator.

4. Data/Results

What were the results of the assessment of the learning outcome(s)? Please be specific. Does achievement differ by teaching modality (e.g., online vs. face-to-face) or on-ground location (e.g., STL campus, Madrid campus, other off-campus site)?

All courses were taught in person. No systematic differences were identified between the St. Louis and Madrid campuses, although the small sample size makes it nearly impossible to detect such differences.

In general, faculty noted several strengths among our majors (MA students in our program). First, once they identified a topic, students were adept at incorporating material from their previous classes as well as the current class to build their research projects. Second, students did a good job identifying limitations in existing research. Third, when researching source material, students used not just the material assigned in class but also additional sources found via the library and appropriate online databases. Fourth, while students were not always sure which method to use for their research (as is appropriate at the MA level), once pointed towards an appropriate method they did a good job executing it.

On the other hand, there were some areas where students struggled. First, some students seemed a bit blindsided at first by the assignment to choose their own research topic. For many, this was the first time they had the opportunity to choose a topic of their own rather than being assigned a topic. Once they did land on a topic, translating the topic into a viable research question proved challenging. Some students struggled to move from the general topic in which they were interested to a more specific question. Finally, students had difficulty distinguishing between empirical and normative questions. Those who were more comfortable ex-ante with a normative approach found it difficult to address phenomena from an empirical perspective.

Nevertheless, the systematic evidence we collected from the artifacts with our rubric shows that most students achieved or exceeded expectations for the MA level. Our rubric asked faculty to evaluate student artifacts on several intermediate questions related to this SLO. The aggregated distribution of results for these items is reported here:
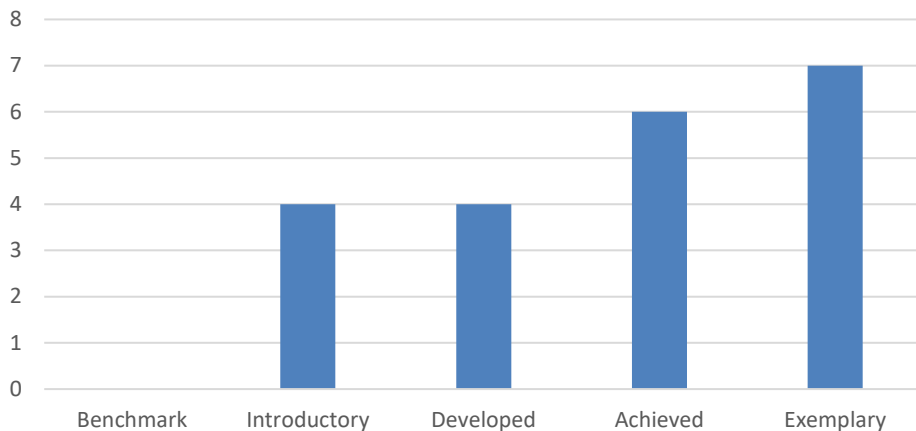
Students were able to raise questions with the potential to move knowledge forward.
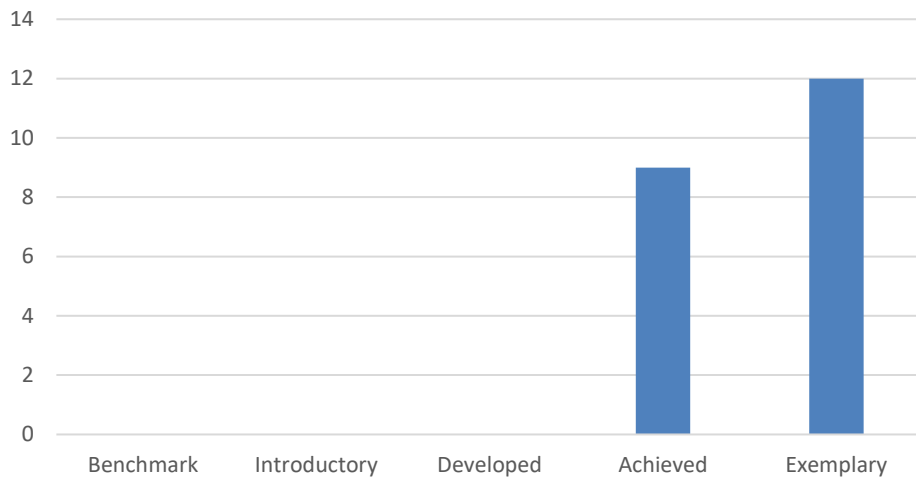
Benchmark	1
Introductory	0
Developed	4
Achieved	11
Exemplary	5
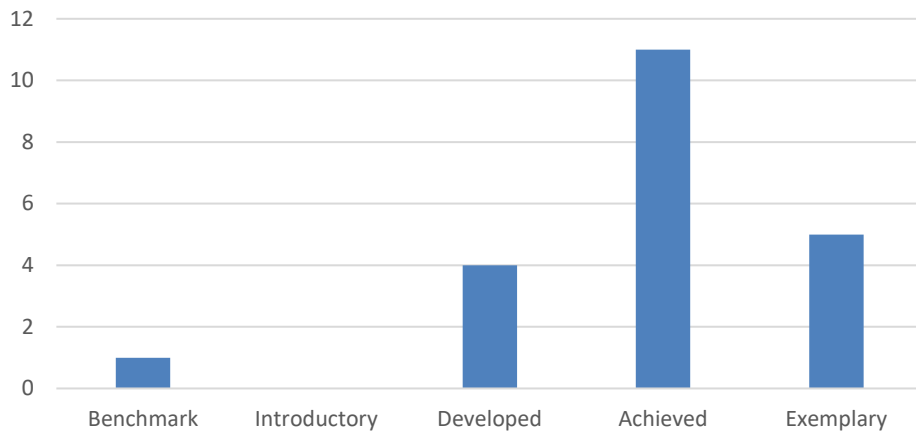
Students were able to assess the efficacy of a methodological approach to answer a specific question.

Benchmark	1
Introductory	1
Developed	6
Achieved	10
Exemplary	3
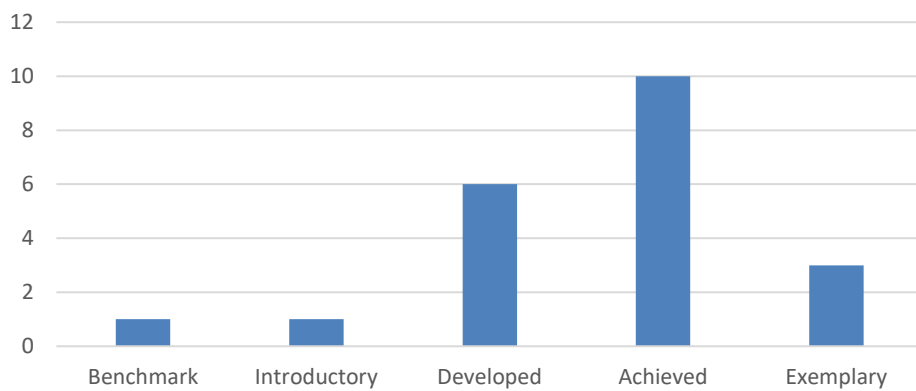
Students were able to identify ways their project contributes to ongoing scholarly debates

Benchmark	0
Introductory	4
Developed	4
Achieved	6
Exemplary	7

Students were able to cite sources correctly.

Category	Value
Benchmark	0
Introductory	0
Developed	0
Achieved	9
Exemplary	12

5. Findings: Interpretations & Conclusions

What have you learned from these results? What does the data tell you? Address both a) learning gaps and possible curricular or pedagogical remedies, and b) strengths of curriculum and pedagogy.

Our main takeaway is that the overwhelming majority of our students are achieving or exceeding expectations on this SLO. Furthermore, faculty expressed that majors performed as well as or better than non-majors, on average.

Nevertheless, faculty identified a number of specific areas for improvement. Most have to do with the creative processes of research rather than the application of skills and tools, for example developing research questions both in terms of choosing a topic and progressing from a topic to a feasible research question.

Multiple faculty noted that one-on-one discussions between the student and the instructor are critical for developing this part of the research project. Since every research project is unique, it stands to reason that individualized feedback is necessary. One of the strengths of our program continues to be that our small classes allow for this type of individualized feedback and development. Even so, faculty suggested the need for even more faculty-student interaction in a one-on-one setting conducive to workshopping individual research projects.

Faculty also noted that students responded well to "chunking" assignments into smaller pieces rather than simply handing in a complete research paper at the end of the semester. This strategy was discussed at length during our meeting in August 2022, and faculty put it to good use this year. When students receive timely feedback on one part of their research project, they are able to apply it to subsequent aspects of their projects, correcting problems and building on strengths while it is still possible.

The instructor in one course which was not explicitly a research design course said that s/he may add a half class early in the semester in which they explicitly talk about the research design process. Unfortunately the small size of our program does not allow us to teach research methods every year, meaning that some students don't take it until their second year in the program. Consequently, there is significant divergence between the students who had already taken the research methods course and those who had not yet taken it. Covering key content on research design in the substantive classes can help reduce that gap.

6. Closing the Loop: Dissemination and Use of Current Assessment Findings

A. When and how did your program faculty share and discuss the results and findings from this cycle of assessment?

Faculty received a draft of this report which was then discussed at our department "retreat" meeting in August 2023.

Key points of this discussion included:
- Faculty found the assessment rubrics helpful and plan to continue using them
- Students' struggles with specific stages of the research process can be addressed through structural changes to our curriculum, including sequencing of existing courses and the addition of new "skills" courses (see 6B for details).
- Faculty reiterated the importance of one-on-one feedback and discussions with students throughout the research process, not just class-based discussions throughout the semester followed by individualized feedback at the end of the semester.

B. How specifically have you decided to use these findings to improve teaching and learning in your program? For example, perhaps you've initiated one or more of the following:

Changes to the Curriculum or Pedagogies	• Course content • Teaching techniques • Improvements in technology • Prerequisites	• Course sequence • New courses • Deletion of courses • Changes in frequency or scheduling of course offerings
Changes to the Assessment Plan	• Student learning outcomes • Artifacts of student learning • Evaluation process	• Evaluation tools (e.g., rubrics) • Data collection methods • Frequency of data collection

Please describe the actions you are taking as a result of these findings.

The department will be proposing several curricular changes to our program to take effect in Fall 2024. The following proposed changes are in direct response to this assessment:
- Offer POLS 5020, our required advanced research methods course, every year – ideally in the fall – so that students have the foundation they need to succeed in their research projects in other courses. Previously the course has been taught every 3-4 semesters, resulting in some students not having the training they need to generate research until the end of their time in the program.
- Incorporate a new "skills course" requirement, in which student take a 3 hour course from an extensive list of courses across the university that teach specific methodological or research-related skills. While some of these are advanced statistics courses that continue what is started in POLS 5020, others teach entirely new skills like program design and evaluation, literary research, geospatial analysis, or qualitative methods of inquiry. The goals are twofold. First, the skills course allows students to specialize in a method or methods that fits their specific research goals. Second, by shifting some of the technical skills out of POLS 5020, we can devote more time to issues like choosing a research topic or distinguishing between normative and empirical questions, which faculty identified as potential areas for improvement in this assessment.
- While a 6 hour thesis will be remain an option for our MA students, those who do not pursue a thesis will be required to do a 3 hour "independent research" course in which they work with a faculty mentor to produce an original research paper, either from scratch of as a continuation of work they began in another seminar. This course – to be taught under our existing POLS 5980 course number – will provide the individualized feedback that faculty identified as critical for student development.

If no changes are being made, please explain why.

7. Closing the Loop: Review of _Previous_ Assessment Findings and Changes

A. What is at least one change your program has implemented in recent years **as a result of previous assessment data**?

> 1) Several faculty report "chunking" assignments that build towards a final paper, a strategy that we discussed at length as a result of the 2022 assessment.
> 2) The POLS assessment director responded to feedback from University assessment director on a previous assessment by developing rubrics for faculty to fill out for every student. Faculty agreed to use the rubric and discuss what did or did not make sense for their classes. For the 2023 assessment, all instructors used the rubric.

B. How has the change/have these changes identified in 7A been assessed?

> 1) Faculty examined the artifacts described above, including both final papers and intermediate assignments, for evidence that students were incorporating feedback from intermediate assignments into future or culminating assignments
> 2) Faculty responses to rubrics

C. What were the findings of the assessment?

> Faculty found ample evidence of students taking feedback from intermediate assignments and incorporating it successfully into future assignments.

D. How do you plan to (continue to) use this information moving forward?

> Faculty will continue to divided large research projects into a series of intermediate assignments, and will provide timely individualized feedback on each component assignment that can be incorporated into the overall product.

IMPORTANT: Please submit any assessment tools (e.g., artifact prompts, rubrics) with this report as separate attachments or copied and pasted/appended into this Word document. Please do not just refer to the assessment plan; the report should serve as a stand-alone document. Thank you.