

Program-Level Assessment: Annual Report

Program: B.A., Political Science

Department: Political Science

Degree or Certificate Level: B.A.

College/School: Arts & Sciences

Date (Month/Year): July 2020

Primary Assessment Contact: Ellen Carnaghan, Ph.D.

In what year was the data upon which this report is based collected? 2019-2020

In what year was the program's assessment plan most recently reviewed/updated? 2019

1. Student Learning Outcomes

Which of the program's student learning outcomes were assessed in this annual assessment cycle?

Students will be able to design original research to test arguments and hypotheses with qualitative and/or quantitative approaches (outcome 5).

2. Assessment Methods: Student Artifacts

Which student artifacts were used to determine if students achieved this outcome? Please identify the course(s) in which these artifacts were collected. Clarify if any such courses were offered a) online, b) at the Madrid campus, or c) at any other off-campus location.

POLS 2000 Methods in Political Science (Saint Louis; fall and spring)
POLS 2000 Methods in Political Science (Madrid)
POLS 4140 Political Parties
POLS 4500 Russian Political Culture (Saint Louis)
POLS 4630 The European Union: Politics and Political Economy (Madrid)
POLS 4840 Global Health Politics and Policy (Saint Louis)
POLS 4930 International Contemporary Challenges (Madrid)
POLS 4991 Political Science Honors Thesis (No students)

Instructors of these classes responded to a Qualtrics survey that asked the following questions:

- This year, we agreed to examine this learning outcome: Students will be able to design original research to test arguments and hypotheses with qualitative and/or quantitative approaches. You can determine whether or not students achieved this outcome according to the goals and level of your class. How did your class contribute to this goal?
- Which instruments did you use to assess student learning for this report?
- By the end of class, students in my class could design original research to test arguments and hypotheses with qualitative and/or quantitative approaches, as appropriate for the level of the class.
- How well could students design original research to test arguments and hypotheses with qualitative and/or quantitative approaches? What could they do well in this regard? What could they do less well? Please address as many parts of the learning outcome as are relevant for your class.
- Were Political Science majors more likely than nonmajors to be able to design original research to test arguments and hypotheses with qualitative and/or quantitative approaches, as appropriate to the level of the class.
- What tactics were effective in enhancing students' ability to design original research to test arguments and

hypotheses with qualitative and/or quantitative approaches?

- Do you have suggestions for changing the BA curriculum or approaches in individual courses in order to make sure that students will be able to design original research to test arguments and hypotheses with qualitative and/or quantitative approaches?
- Is there anything you want to add about your students' learning?
- Do you have any comments to improve this reporting process?

Instructors were free to choose which instruments to evaluate to assess student learning. They reported using exam or test questions (5 instructors), a research paper (5), essays (4), a research design (3), in-class presentations (3), quizzes (3) and a research proposal (1).

3. Assessment Methods: Evaluation Process

What process was used to evaluate the student artifacts, and by whom? Please identify the tools(s) (e.g., a rubric) used in the process and include them in/with this report.

Instructors took a Qualtrics survey that asked them to identify the instruments they used to evaluate their students as well as their own personal evaluations of student performance. The data were then aggregated via Qualtrics. Analysis was conducted by William McCormick, undergraduate program director for Political Science.

4. Data/Results

What were the results of the assessment of the learning outcomes? 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)?

Most instructors agreed strongly (7) or somewhat (1) with the statement "By the end of class, students in my class could design original research to test arguments and hypotheses with qualitative and/or quantitative approaches, as appropriate for the level of the class."

Most further answered affirmatively the question "How well could students design original research to test arguments and hypotheses with qualitative and/or quantitative approaches? What could they do well in this regard? What could they do less well?"

About half (5) of instructors that Political Science majors and non-majors performed the same on this learning outcome; 3 said majors performed better than non-majors; and 1 did not know.

Three instructors noted that building feedback into assignments benefitted students.

All of our instructors had to switch to online teaching in March 2020, and several noted the difficulties involved. One instructor, noting the context, added "The majority of the students did sufficiently well given the extraordinary circumstances we faced." Another wrote, "Given the challenges set by the swift transition to online and a certain level of discontinuity between the face-to-face and remote part of the course, at least in terms of the lab contact and support, some performed worse than expected and final submissions were weaker than in other years." Finally, one wrote that "The majority of the students did sufficiently well given the extraordinary circumstances we faced."

5. Findings: Interpretations & Conclusions

What have you learned from these results? What does the data tell you?

The primary finding is that students in the program performed at a high level in their research methods. That said, many instructors also noted that their course was the first time students were asked to engage in significant research assignments. One instructor outlines the situation nicely: "The challenge is that teaching this process, at times, takes away much time from the contents of the course. Also, the capabilities and makeup of students in class tend to define the extent of this problem." It is significant that Political Science majors did not outperform non-majors in 5 of the 9

cases.

Instructors varied in their reports of what students could and could not do well. Instructors tended to think that students could do these things well:

- The basics of research design
- Analyzing a hypothesis given to them
- Constructing a “logical causal mechanism”
- Identifying data and approaches to test hypotheses
- Completing smaller assignments that focus on individual research steps

Areas of difficulty include:

- Narrowing broad topics and themes to a specific question
- Conducting independent literature reviews. Instructors noted that students were better at using literature given to them, sometimes from other classes.
- Theory Development. One instructor noted: “Some students did less well in synthesizing the arguments for the literature review and formulate their own arguments building on previous research.”
- Working on their own: “most of the students had a hard time applying concepts when they encountered them in unexpected places and in ways that are different than how the concepts are presented to them.”
- Quantitative analysis

Instructors were divided on whether student can formulate strong hypotheses. Some thought that students could do so, but others found that students developed weak hypotheses that were not clearly linked to previous literatures. Another instructor did not think students could “immediately recognize the importance of laying out an explanation or theory for their hypothesis.”

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

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

The department meets annually in the fall to discuss assessment results and determine whether curricular changes are necessary. We will address the issues raised in this report and consider ways to improve student research skills.

B. How specifically have you decided to use 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
- Student artifacts collected
- 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 the findings.

In the short term, we can encourage instructors to employ pedagogies and instruments that address students' abilities to engage in research. Within our survey, instructors identified the following as productive strategies:

- breaking research assignments down into multiple stages;
- incorporating “personal and timely” feedback into research assignments at each stage of assignments
- requiring one-on-one meetings with instructor;
- students presenting their material throughout the process;
- using different teaching media, e.g., lectures, videos, podcasts;
- inviting guest lecturers to speak on their particular research approaches and methods;
- encouraging students to apply for themselves theoretical approaches and methodologies;
- discussing illustrative examples of published research papers in class;
- asking students to outline published papers to identify strengths and weakness of papers; and
- using the same topic for two papers, asking the students to build on the work of the first one in writing the second.

In the long term, instructors offered several suggestions in the survey for how the Department might adapt the program to better serve the needs of this outcome. In some cases, the suggestions were complementary but differed in strategy:

- Introducing students to more research-oriented assignments in 2000- and 3000-level classes so that student can “critically assess research designs and even create smaller research designs before they take a 4000-level class.”
- Adding an element of research design in year one, to some of the introductory courses, and building more on the principles of design and methods studied in the upper level courses.
- Two instructors suggested a writing-heavy class in their freshman year, in which they learn how to “write” research papers, construct a thesis statement, form paragraphs, properly paraphrase and cite their papers, etc.
- A second research methods class in which students “apply the concepts they learn in the first class and spend at least half of the semester actually writing a research paper.”
- Another instructor questioned the place of the research methods: “Having the research methods class in the sophomore year has advantages and disadvantages. The class lays the foundations of research design and prepares students to be better consumers and producers of information for their more advanced classes. However, as students take it at a relatively early stage in the program, expecting them to thoroughly “test arguments and hypotheses with qualitative and/or quantitative approaches” is unreasonable. To truly reach this outcome, there should be an advanced research methods course that requires the students to write an actual research paper. Alternatively, this goal can be achieved in capstone courses.”

If no changes are being made, please explain why.

The department will discuss these results in the fall of 2020.

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 assessment data?

In response to our analysis of last year’s assessment of Outcome 3 (Students will be able to read carefully and

evaluate and construct analytical arguments in clear and logical prose), the Department has begun a review of syllabi to assess where and how we teach and assess skills related to writing and research.

B. How has this change/have these changes been assessed?

The syllabi review is ongoing.

C. What were the findings of the assessment?

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

We hope that the outcomes of the syllabi review will facilitate a conversation within the Department about how we can better teach and assess skills related to writing and research.

IMPORTANT: Please submit any assessment tools and/or revised/updated assessment plans along with this report.