

Student Assessment Plan

Last updated: February 23, 2020

Departmental Learning Goals

*This section was revised to reflect feedback we received from the Assessment Committee. In particular, goals were revised to be more student-centric.

Upon successful completion of the requirements for the Politics major, students will be able to

1. Demonstrate critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills with primary reference to political science and the social sciences more generally
2. Identify and explain the major concepts and theoretical traditions in political science
3. Recognize and classify the content of the five subfields in political science: methodology, American politics, political theory, international relations, and comparative politics
4. Understand and appreciate the inter- and multi-disciplinary nature of the study of political, economic, and social phenomena
5. Demonstrate enhanced oral and written communication skills
6. Discern areas in which they desire and are prepared to be engaged citizens

Evidence Used in Assessment

There are four primary tools of assessment that The Politics and International Relations department uses every year with respect to our departmental learning goals.

POLI 100, our gateway course, features an initial assessment of student knowledge of the discipline on the first day of class. This same instrument is used at the end of the class to assess the extent to which student knowledge has increased after taking the course. During our departmental summer retreats, we compile and evaluate the results and discuss strategies for improvement. This instrument asks students to:

- Elaborate on how the topic of their particular section of POLI 100 (which varies across instructors¹) can be approached by the five subfields of political science. This task directly relates to Learning Goal 3.
- Identify how normative and empirical approaches to the discipline enable us to understand the topic of the course differently. This task relates to Learning Goal 2.
- Entertain the steps that need to be taken to test a hypothesis using the social scientific method. This task aims at addressing Learning Goal 1.
- Discuss how disciplines outside of political science can supplement our understanding of the topic of the course. This is consistent with Learning Goal 4.

¹ For example, in 2018-2019, there were four sections of POLI 100 that focused on climate change, democracy, criminal justice, and gender.

POLI 100 also features several writing assignments that culminate in an initial research paper, which is assessed with respect to writing skills ([Learning Goal 5](#)).

POLI 497, our capstone course, requires students to produce original research that consists of posing a research question, surveying existing literature, developing a theoretical argument, testing the argument using evidence, and reflecting on the implications of the findings. In many ways, this course concludes student development that started in POLI 100 and has unfolded as students have gone through the curriculum. The research paper itself directly relates to [Learning Goals 1, 2, and 3](#). During course meetings, students are expected to provide review to the projects of their peers as they themselves develop their projects. This discussion-based environment relates to [Learning Goal 5](#) too. This objective is further bolstered by the “UR” module and “W2” coding for the course. Students who choose to gain “UR” credit for their capstone are required to deliver a formal presentation at a conference. On the other hand, the heavy writing and constant revision of work relates well to the writing development objective that we have as a department.

The assessment of how students perform in the senior capstone course goes beyond the traditional instructor evaluation. In fact, course instructors meet throughout the semester to calibrate their expectations and share the results they are getting. We gather once more as a department before final grades are assigned to get a sense of how the class went and assess the most exceptional and least satisfactory projects.

POLI 100 and POLI 497 serve as bookends to our student development and have therefore featured considerable assessment that directly relates to our learning goals. They have also been a constant feature of our curriculum for at least a decade now. At the same time, we have continuously assessed how we guide students between the POLI 100 and POLI 497 courses. To accomplish this, we have relied heavily on our senior exit survey, as well as our distinction interviews.

The exit survey instrument directly asks students to provide feedback on questions that relate to our departmental learning goals. Respondents are asked to evaluate the extent to which the department prepared them with respect to their analytical, critical thinking, writing and oral skills; their knowledge of the discipline; the development of cross-cultural appreciation and ethical values; their understanding of political science subfields; and their ability to get involved in engaged learning opportunities.

The distinction interviews are another assessment tool that has proven to be rather helpful. Every April, pairs of faculty members spend about an hour with each graduating senior that has earned an overall GPA of 3.4, a major GPA of 3.6 and at least a B+ on the senior thesis. While a bit more open-ended, these conversations always seek to understand the extent to which some of our best students think we have accomplished our departmental goals. We have received a lot of valuable feedback that has been used to guide new course development and curriculum changes in the last five years.

Assessment Cycle

*This section was added to reflect feedback we received from the Assessment Committee.

In preparation for implementing a regular assessment cycle, we focused on four elements of our assessment processes: **course evaluations**, **the senior thesis course**, and **the senior survey**, and

distinction interviews. We will begin the first formal cycle of evaluation in 2020-21, after spending the Summer 2020 retreat focusing on the details of the schedule and making sure that we have direct and indirect assessments for each instrument that appears below and making sure we have procedures for faculty to share relevant feedback from their courses.

Evaluation Cycle	Goals	Tools
1: 2020-21	2 and 3	<p>Goal 2 (Political science concepts and theoretical traditions):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • POLI 100 (Issues in Politics) • POLI 203 (Philosophy of Political Inquiry) • Senior survey • Distinction Interviews <p>Goal 3 (Familiarity with subfields):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • POLI 100 (Issues in Politics) • Senior survey
2: 2021-22	1 and 4	<p>Goal 1 (Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • POLI 202 (Empirical Research Methods) • POLI 303 (Analyzing Politics) • POLI 497 (Senior Thesis) • Senior survey <p>Goal 4 (Inter- and multi-disciplinarity):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • POLI 100 (Issues in Politics) • POLI 210 (American Political Institutions) • POLI 310 (American Presidency) • POLI 305 (Arkansas Politics and Government Seminar) • Senior survey
3: 2022-23	5 and 6	<p>Goal 5 (Oral and written communication skills):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • POLI 235 (Public Policy) • POLI 283 (Model UN) • POLI 340 (U.S. Congress) • POLI 321 (American Constitutional Law) • POLI 497 (Senior Thesis) • Senior survey <p>Goal 6 (Engaged citizenship):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • POLI 305: Arkansas Politics and Government Seminar • POLI 321: American Constitutional Law • Senior survey • Distinction interviews