

Hendrix College, Department of Politics

2020 Assessment of Learning Goals 1 and 2

POLI 100; POLI 497; Senior Exit Surveys

This brief report summarizes the assessment of Departmental Learning Goals 1 and 2 using three different instruments. The Learning Goals are:

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

We used three metrics for this part of our assessment:

- POLI 100 pre- and post-test (four sections over the past two years)
- Grading rubric for POLI 497 *Senior Research Seminar* projects (from 2019-2020)
- Responses to the Department's Senior Exit Survey (2019 and 2020)

POLI 100 *Issues in Politics* pre- and post-tests

POLI 100 is a fresher-level course designed to introduce students to the study of politics. The course is taught by everyone in the Department, each one of whom chooses their own theme or topic around which the course is structured. Topics have included, e.g., Education; Rights; Democracy; Civil Society; Equality; and Climate Change.

These brief instruments ask students several open-ended questions to determine the extent to which the course's learning goals (which hew closely to the Department's overall goals) are being met. The pre-test is administered on the first day of class; the post-test on or near the last day of class. The responses are anonymous. The qualitative data are reviewed and each response is given a score:

- 0 = no answer or completely wrong
- 1 = basic understanding
- 2 = advanced understanding
- 3 = capstone understanding (deep, rich, nuanced)

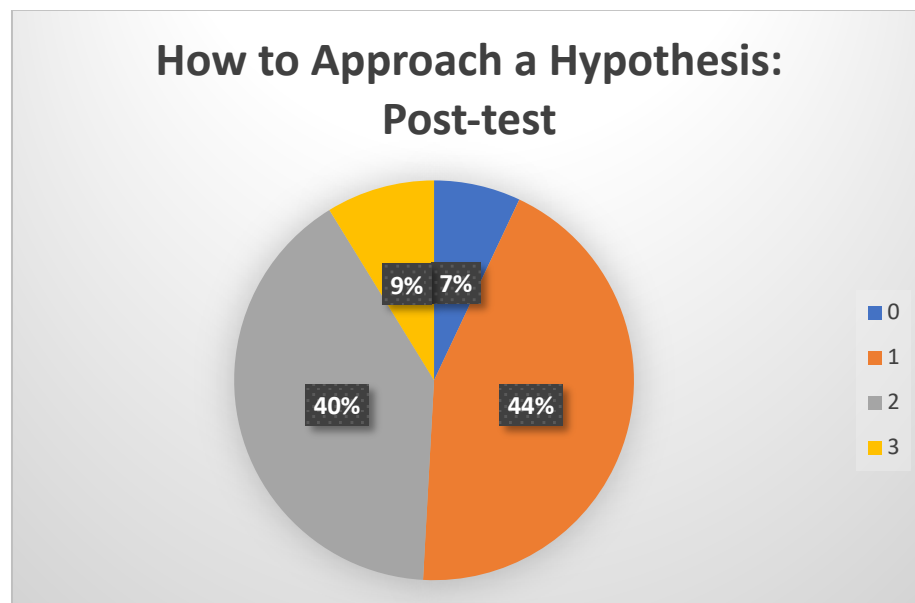
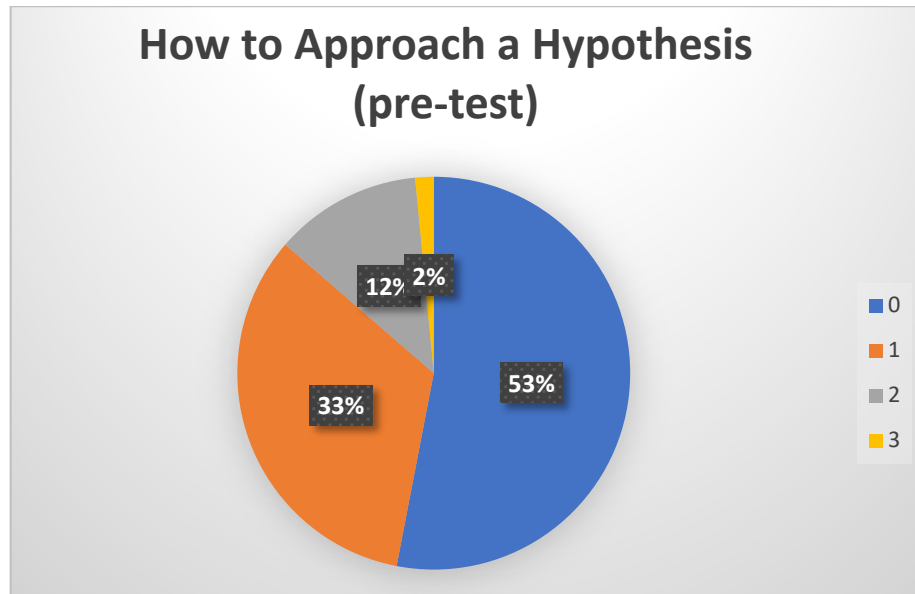
We then compare the scores, in aggregate, between the pre- and post-test to determine the extent to which there has been upward movement.

We chose two of the questions on the pre/post-test for each of the two learning goals:

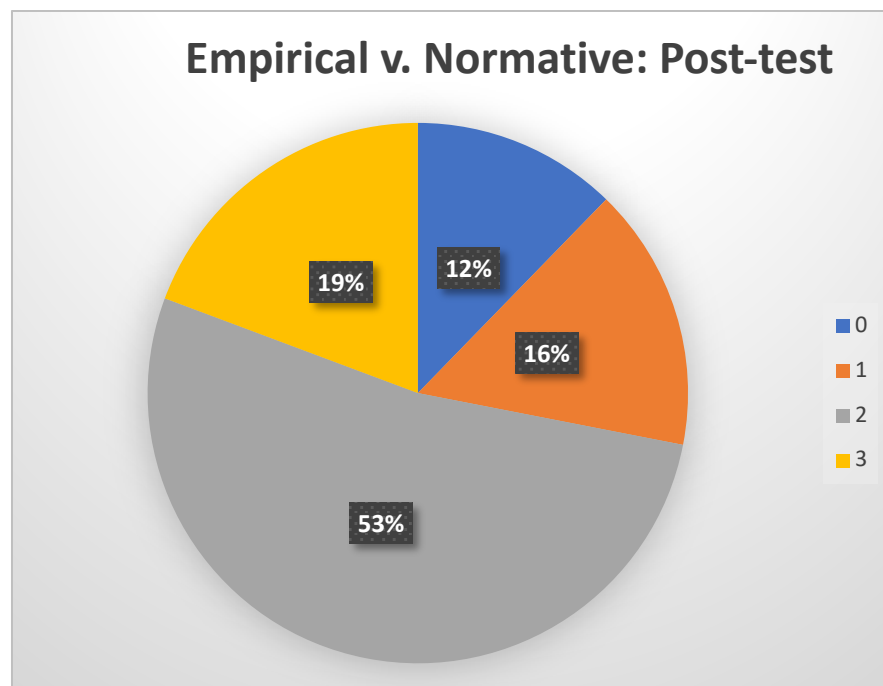
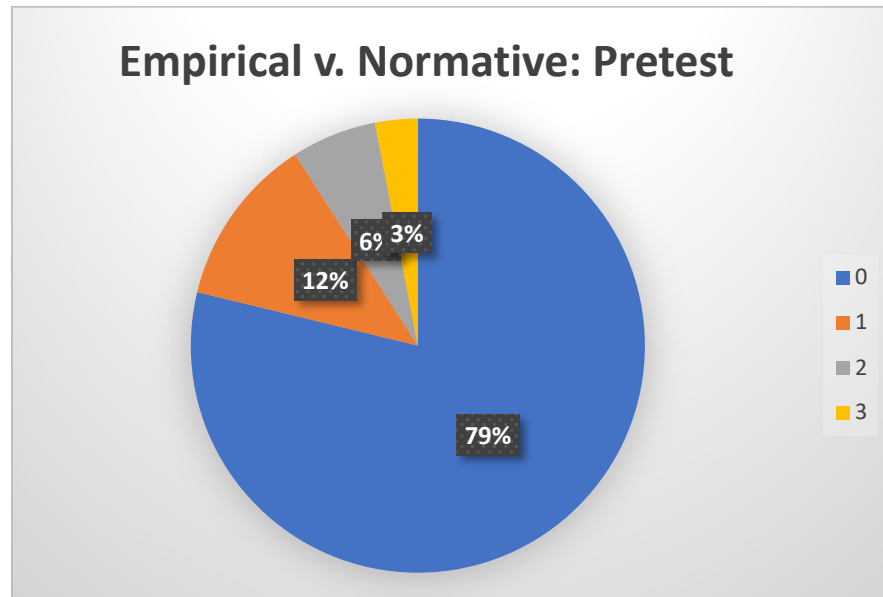
- Goal 1: Some people argue that more Americans carrying handguns would result in a safer society. Outline the steps you would take to examine this statement employing the social scientific method.

- Goal 2: Using one of the four perspectives [meaning the four main subfields of political science] as an example briefly explain how normative and empirical perspectives on [the topic of the course] would differ in their approach.

Results: Goal 1



Results: Goal 2



Analysis

On the pre-test, fewer than half the students could articulate even the basic steps in hypothesis formation; nearly 80 percent could not articulate the basic distinctions between normative and empirical perspectives on the topic at hand. So clearly we see significant advancement in both results, but because the instrument is an aggregate measure, we cannot know how many *individual* students went from, e.g., 0 to 2 in on either question.

At the end of the course, the new modal category for empirical v. normative questions is 2, which probably indicates the student could construct either an empirical or normative question and perhaps struggled with the other.

In terms of methodology there is a pretty even split between categories 1 and 2. Almost no one is still left in the 'no idea' category at the end of course, it is one student per section.

Suggestions

We may need to agree that all POLI 100 sections include specific, targeted class sessions or assignments, whose results could give us more granular data to supplement these two metrics, e.g.:

- Include a question on some kind of testing instrument or assignment on empirical/normative questions.
- Include either a mini-lecture on method/process AND a question on some kind of testing instrument or assignment regarding process.
- In light of the fact that these are all process-related questions to which students are introduced in POLI 100, re-pose similar questions in POLI 202 and 203 to further evaluate progress toward these learning goals.
- [This relates to Learning Goal 3, but I'll include it here as a prompt] The learning goal that deals with different approaches to the discipline (institutionalism, behavioralism, etc.) is most clearly happening in POLI 203.

POLI 497 *Senior Research Seminar* -- Senior Thesis Project Rubric

In Fall 2018 we developed a rubric of ten evaluation elements that are part and parcel of the senior thesis project and process (including seven research elements; writing/referencing, and responsiveness to feedback). The levels of achievement for each are:

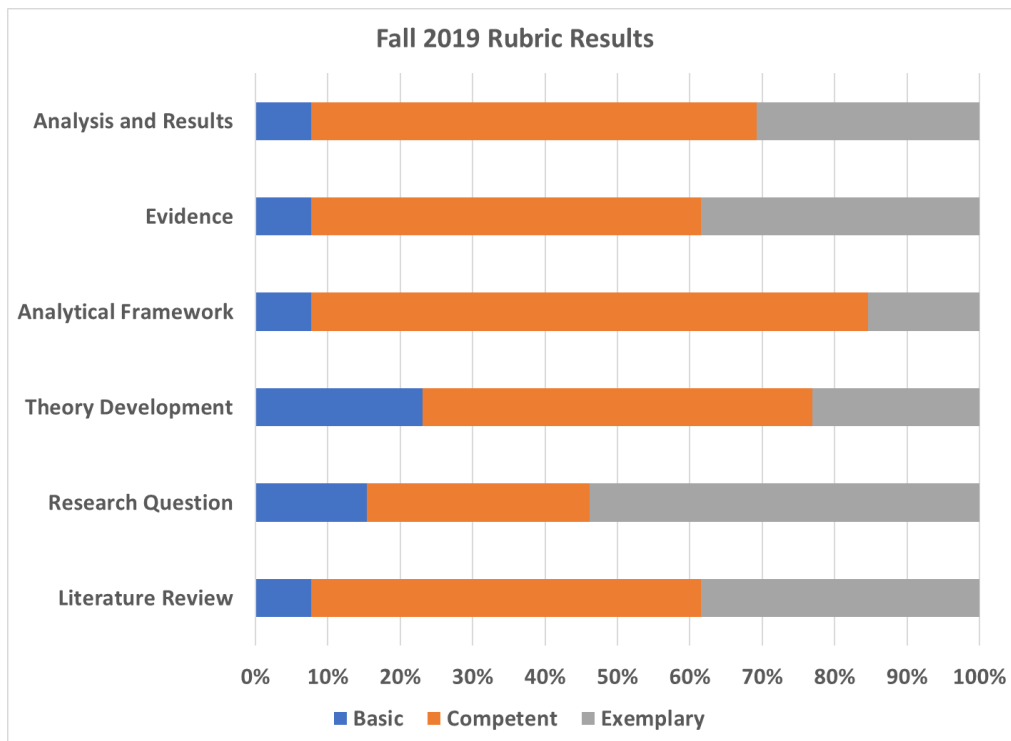
- Basic
- Competent
- Exemplary

For our evaluation of these two learning goals, we chose the following elements. Thirteen Senior Thesis projects submitted in Fall 2019 were included:

- Literature review (Goal 1)

- Research question (Goal 1)
- Theory Development (Goals 1 and 2 [also relevant to Goal 3])
- Analytical Framework (Goal 1)
- Evidence (Goal 1)
- Analysis/Results (Goal 1)

Results



Analysis and Suggestions

Overall, students performed well. We should consider a placement of “Competent” or “Exemplary” as meeting Goals 1 and 2, at least as assessed by the POLI 497 rubric. Obviously, we would like as few students as possible to be “Basic,” and as many as possible to be “Exemplary.”

In order to move more students into the “Exemplary” category, we may want to think about:

- Literature Review: students do a good job summarizing relevant literature, and even organizing it by schools of thought, approaches, history, etc. However, many students have trouble moving beyond a simple regurgitation of what other scholars have said. We need to find ways to help students synthesize using their own voices.
- Research Question: We note some substantial improvement here (compared to previous years).

- Theory Development: this is still a weak area for most students. They especially have trouble expressing causal linkages in describing the relations between independent and dependent variables. Could this be better examined throughout the curriculum, starting with POLI 100? For example, through more reading and discussion of empirical and theoretical scholarship, practice describing relationships, etc.
- Analytical Framework: most students are “Competent” here, with only one “Basic.” But only two are “Exemplary.” Students do not spend much time “grappling with methodological approaches and tradeoffs” or “consideration of alternatives.” If they are relying on a research design from POLI 303, they have presumably already done this grappling. Therefore, do these markers for “Exemplary” make sense here?
- Evidence: if students struggle here, it is to find evidence to adjudicate among different explanations and to identify shortcomings in the data. However, the evidence is usually appropriate to answering the research question.
- Analysis and Results: fewer students are “Exemplary” than “Competent.” The biggest challenges are “considering alternatives” and “interpreting and not just presenting evidence.” We might want to think about pedagogy to help students use their voices to interpret and synthesize results.

Senior Exit Surveys

This survey instrument is intended to capture a wide variety of data with respect to the major as a whole and students’ experiences in the Department during their time at Hendrix. For Learning Goals 1 and 2, we examined the both quantitative and qualitative data from the last two graduating cohort surveys (2019 and 2020) for the following questions:

- Assess on a scale of 1-5 (1=almost nothing; 5=immensely) the degree to which Politics/IR courses have contributed to your development of
 - (Q2) Knowledge of the discipline (LG 2)
 - (Q4a) Analytical skills (LG 1)
 - (Q4b) Research and methodological skills (LG1)
 - (Q4c) Critical thinking skills (LG1)
- Thinking of the different subfields in politics (American; theory; comparative; international) does the curriculum adequately address each one? Are there holes or gaps in the curriculum? (open-ended response question)

Results

Quantitative Assessments (score 1-5)

Question	LG Assessed	2018-2019	2019-2020
2	2	4.61	5
4 a	1	4.5	4.67
4 b	1	4.35	4.6

4 c	1	4.65	4.67
14	2	3.8	Qualitative Only

Qualitative Feedback

Question 2

3	anonymous	Under knowledge of the discipline, I think it would be helpful to integrate more economic requirements or options into the program and major.
4	anonymous	Research methods + statistics guidance during the major must be improved

Question 4a

1	anonymous	My analytical skills were more thoroughly addressed in my Econometrics course. My IR courses taught me the theoretical approach to analytics without rigorously putting it into practice. More rigor in POLI 303 could definitely be a good thing to lead into the senior capstone.
2	anonymous	develop a politics specific stats course + weave research methods more into each 303 course

Questions 4b and 4c

No qualitative feedback

Question 14

ID	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	I had a fantastic experiences in each one of the sub fields across my four years at Hendrix. Although I am most interested in American politics, I really enjoyed taking Issues: Security, Model UN, and Contemporary Global Issues. Each one of these classes enhanced my understanding of international issues and comparative politics, subfields I wasn't really interested in before coming here.
2	anonymous	As I've said, some coursework on non-Western IR thinkers and practice could be helpful in the IR major. Besides that, I think the IR curriculum was pretty great.
3	anonymous	I think the biggest gap is in comparative politics, and depending on the semester, IR. I would have loved to take a few more comparative courses with Dr. Kolev, but my schedule didn't work out due to study abroad. Many of our professors also serve in administrative duties, and therefore teach fewer classes, so courses are somewhat sporadic at times.
4	anonymous	I think more comparative courses could be offered within the department itself.

Analysis

The Department achieves very high marks when it comes to Learning Goal 1, according to responses to Questions 4a (analytical skills), 4b (research and methodological skills), and 4c (critical thinking skills). However, qualitative feedback points to a long-lasting conversation within the Department about our approach to teaching Statistics/Econometrics. There are two elements of the student critique. The first suggests a discussion about whether Statistics should be taught within the department – something we have revisited many times before. The second identifies some issues with POLI 303 and whether or not it is adequately implementing methodological and empirical knowledge in preparation for the senior thesis.

Learning Goal 2 also receives very high scores by seniors (Question 2). In the most recent iteration of the survey, all six respondents gave the department perfect marks on its approach to developing knowledge of the discipline. However, the more open-ended Question 14 does identify student concerns about the number of offerings in Comparative Politics.

Conclusion

With respect to the Department's Learning Goals 1 and 2, analysis of these three instruments, which cover the beginning and the end of the curriculum, strongly suggests we are successful at advancing students toward meeting these goals. We also conclude that, for the most part, we have sufficient confidence that these instruments are appropriately mapped to our Learning Goals – in other words, that we are able to measure what we want to measure. However, we should think about making some modifications to the entire model, and especially do some more thinking about how to redesign the POLI 100 instrument as part of a scaffold (it was designed long before the recent changes we've made to the rest of the curriculum, especially POLI 202/203 and 303), or coming up with a master instrument into which the individual POLI 100, 202/203, 303 and 497 instruments are plugged.

Hendrix College, Department of Politics

2020 Assessment of Learning Goals 1 and 2

Annual Retreat Summary
May 27, 2020

Overview

The Department of Politics held its annual retreat on May 26-27, 2020. Our assessment work focused on Learning Goals 1 and 2. Prior to the meeting, members of the department had compiled data summaries based on the three instruments that are relevant to the three learning goals (See *POLI Assessment Report 2020*). This is a brief summary of the discussion of the data. More detailed summaries appear in the report itself.

Learning Goal 1

Demonstrate critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills with primary reference to political science and the social sciences more generally.

We were encouraged by our POLI 100 direct assessment results (see Page 2 of report) that demonstrated improvement in students' ability to formulate a hypothesis. We noticed that most students demonstrated a 1-point improvement (from no understanding to basic or advanced). This reminded us that we should perhaps track whether this information is retained and further enhanced in subsequent courses (such as POLI 202 and POLI 303, for example). **Scaffolding of student learning** was the most important takeaway from our discussions: We agreed that we need to deliberately return to the learning goals and assess them between the introductory and capstone courses in the future.

The POLI 497 capstone rubric was the other instrument that we used to analyze more specific aspects of analytical reasoning and critical thinking. We noted very good outcomes when it comes to the students' ability to do a literature review and a vast improvement in their ability to state a research question relative to previous years. We attributed this to the introduction of POLI 303 as a course that specifically develops these skills earlier in the curriculum. We did establish that the theory development and analytical framework components continue to fare the worst in the capstone process. We decided that we need to be more deliberate in mapping out causal arguments that appear in material assigned for lower-level course. In particular, we decided it is appropriate for faculty to be doing most of this mapping at the 200 level and gradually shift expectations to students performing such tasks at the 300 level.

Finally, the senior exit survey filled out by our majors showed extremely high evaluations of the questions that pertain to Learning Goal 1 (4a, 4b, and 4c). The qualitative feedback, which focused on developing proficiency in quantitative analysis, reassured us that returning MATH 215 as a major requirement (starting in 2020-21) was the right decision.

Learning Goal 2

Identify and explain the major concepts and theoretical traditions in political science

The POLI 100 direct assessment of the key disciplinary distinction between normative and empirical approaches demonstrated substantial improvement (See Page 3). We nonetheless discussed ways to make this more explicit among students by introducing a small assignment that asks them to identify statements that exemplify each approach. We also discussed using similar assessments in POLI 202 (for empirical) and POLI 203 (normative) to test whether students are retaining and building on knowledge obtained in POLI 100.

When discussing the POLI 497 rubric results, we thought that students are sometimes confused by the use of the term “theory” in political science more broadly (which is not unique to our department). The term is used to refer to the subfield of Political Theory (which represents the normative approach to the discipline), as well as the part of a research project that introduces hypotheses (an empirical approach). Making the distinctions more apparent in classes will be a focus going forward.

Finally, the senior exit surveys demonstrate very high level of student satisfaction with the extent to which we have developed their knowledge of the discipline.

Concluding Remarks

We finished the assessment discussion by going over the qualitative responses from the senior exit survey. There is little to be done here given staffing challenges and administrative responsibilities. However, it was clear that recent developments have limited student exposure to the subfield of Comparative Politics, which could undermine Learning Goal 2 going forward.