

Hendrix College Politics Department
Annual Assessment Report, 2020-21

The Politics Student Assessment Plan, Annual Assessment Cycle, calls for departmental learning goals 2 and 3 to be assessed during the 2020-21 academic year. These goals, and the corresponding evidence used for assessing them:

2. Identify and explain the major concepts and theoretical traditions in political science (POLI 100 Issues in Politics, POLI 203 Philosophy of Political Inquiry, Senior Exit Survey, Distinction Interviews).
3. Recognize and classify the content of the five subfields in political science: methodology, American politics, political theory, international relations, and comparative politics (POLI 100 Issues in Politics, Senior Exit Survey).

Additionally, all members of the department (Gess, Kolev, Maslin, Shanks, Whelan) met twice, via Teams, to discuss the 2020-21 assessment:

- April 16, 12:30-1:30 p.m.
- April 30, 12:30-1:30 p.m.

The Evidence

POLI 100 Issues in Politics

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. Recent topics have included Liberalism, Pandemics, Civil Society, New Authoritarianism, Inequality, Gender, Democracy, and Climate Change.

The department utilizes two instruments—one direct and one indirect—to assess student learning in POLI 100 and achievement of departmental learning goals. The direct assessment consists of a pretest (administered on the first day of class) and a post-test (administered on or near the last day of class). The brief instrument asks 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 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 pretest and post-test to determine the extent to which there has been upward movement.

The indirect assessment consists of five additional standard student feedback form questions which all instructors add to the standard ten questions. Not all departmental learning goals are covered by these five questions.

POLI 203 Philosophy of Political Inquiry

POLI 203 is required of all majors. It introduces students to the philosophical foundations of the study of politics. It explores a variety of ontological and epistemological approaches to the study of politics, including positivism, behavioralism, interpretivism, institutionalism, and post-positivism.

For direct assessment, the instructor, Kim Maslin, explored student achievement on department learning goal 2 by evaluating each student at the end of the semester. She also indirectly assessed student achievement by asking students a series of questions on the student feedback form for the course.

Senior Exit Survey

The department administers a survey to graduating seniors every March/April. The survey is anonymous and 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. Many of the questions are a self-assessment on the learning goals.

Distinction Interviews

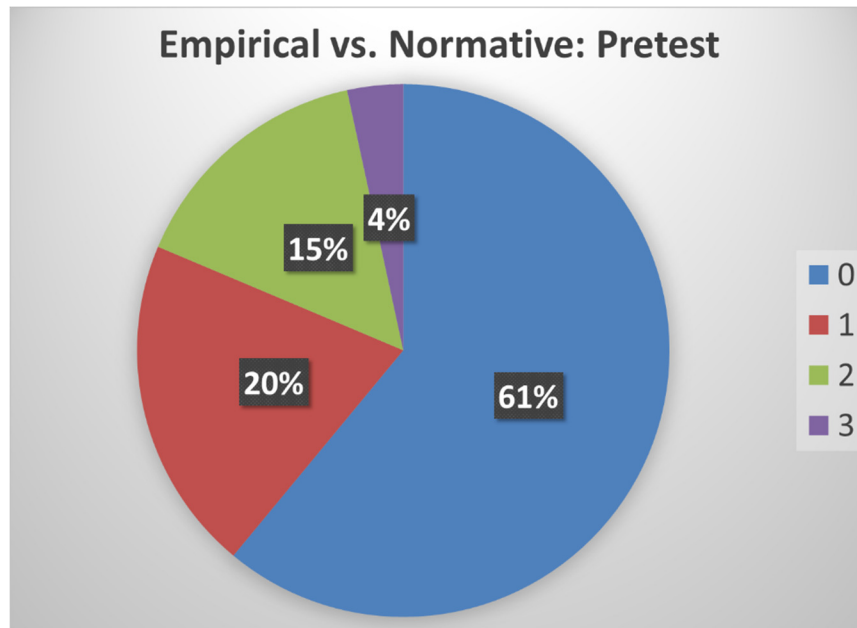
The department has a set of basic criteria (GPA in the major, GPA overall, high mark on senior thesis) which qualify a student for "graduation with distinction" in the major. The final step is an interview with faculty representatives from the department. The student defends the thesis, speaks more broadly about the field of politics as study and practice, discusses vocation and life after Hendrix, and critiques the department.

Analysis: Goal 2

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

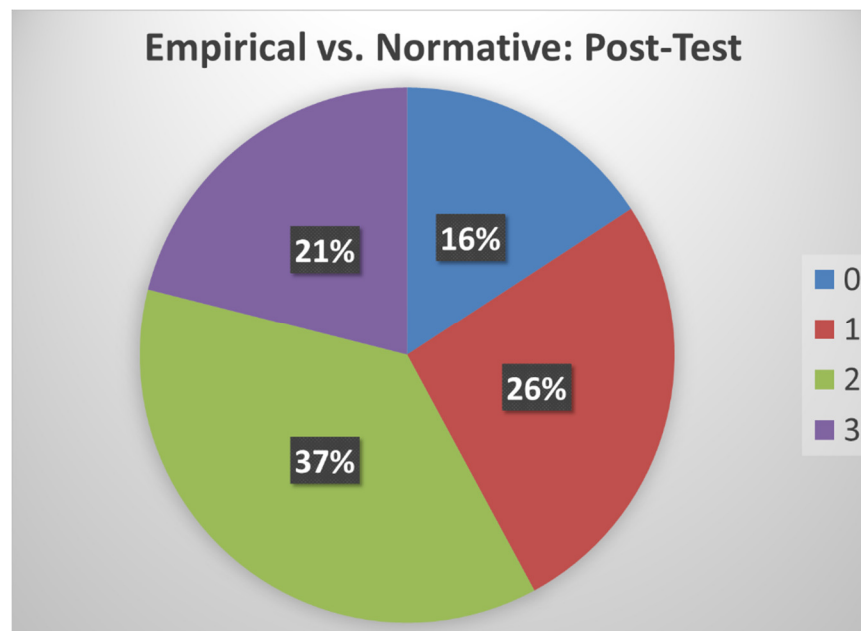
POLI 100 Direct Assessment

The POLI 100 pretest and post-test ask students to explain how normative and empirical perspectives would differ by applying one of the political science subfields to the specific topic of the course. Recall that students are evaluated on a scale from 0 (no or incorrect response) to 3 (nuanced and deep understanding). We have data on three of the four POLI 100 courses offered in 2020-21. The results for the pretest:



Note that a full 61% are unable to answer the question, and only 4% achieve capstone understanding.

And now the results for the post-test:



Here there is significant upward movement, with only 16% remaining in the “no or incorrect answer” category. However, we would hope all students score a 1 or higher. Still, this is a significant reduction from the 61% in the 0 category at the start of the course. Further, 58% of students score a 2 or 3 on this assessment.

POLI 100 Indirect Assessment

The POLI 100 student feedback form asks students to self-assess with the question, “This course introduced me to different methodologies in Political Science.” This question is related to Goal 2 as understanding research methods helps students explore the major theoretical concepts in the field.

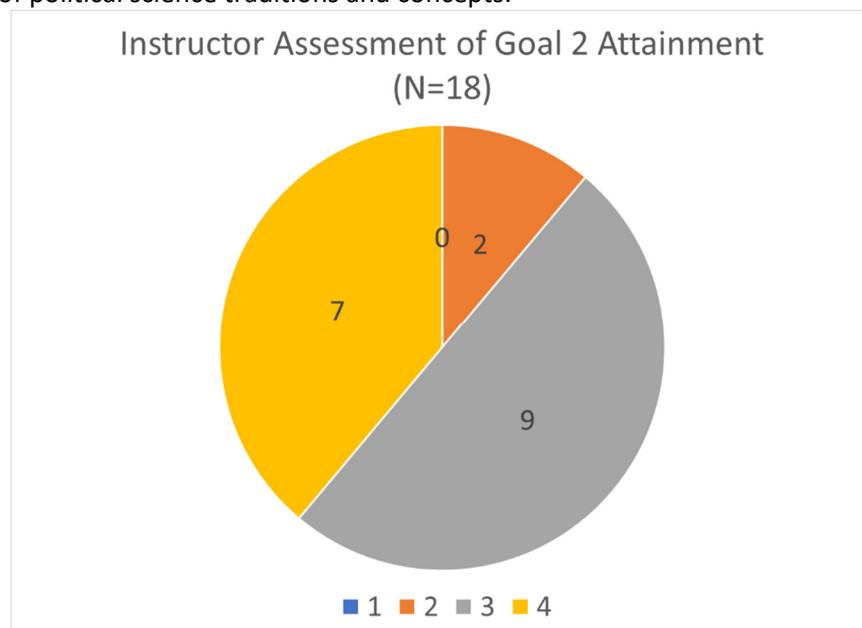
For the 2020-21 academic year, we have data on this question for three of the four offered POLI 100 courses. For the students in those three courses, the result is a 4.12 on the standard 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). This compares to a 4.29 average over the 13 previous offerings of POLI 100. While this decrease is disappointing, it is not significantly lower and may be partially explained by the pandemic (two of the three examined 2020-21 courses occurred fall semester, while we were teaching remotely).

POLI 203 Direct Assessment

The instructor, Kim Maslin, identified how well each student can explain the major concepts and theoretical traditions in the field of political science according to:

- 1 = the student can identify a theoretical tradition
- 2 = the student can identify two theoretical traditions
- 3 = the student can explain how a research question could be approached from a single theoretical tradition
- 4 = the student can explain how a research question could be studied from two different theoretical traditions

An instructor-assigned score of 3 or 4 equates to a student being able to move beyond being able to identify a theoretical tradition or two to understanding the nuances of *applying* those theoretical traditions to new and relevant research questions in the field of political science. In other words, students who score a 3 or 4 can examine and analyze current, important, political phenomena with an understanding of political science traditions and concepts.



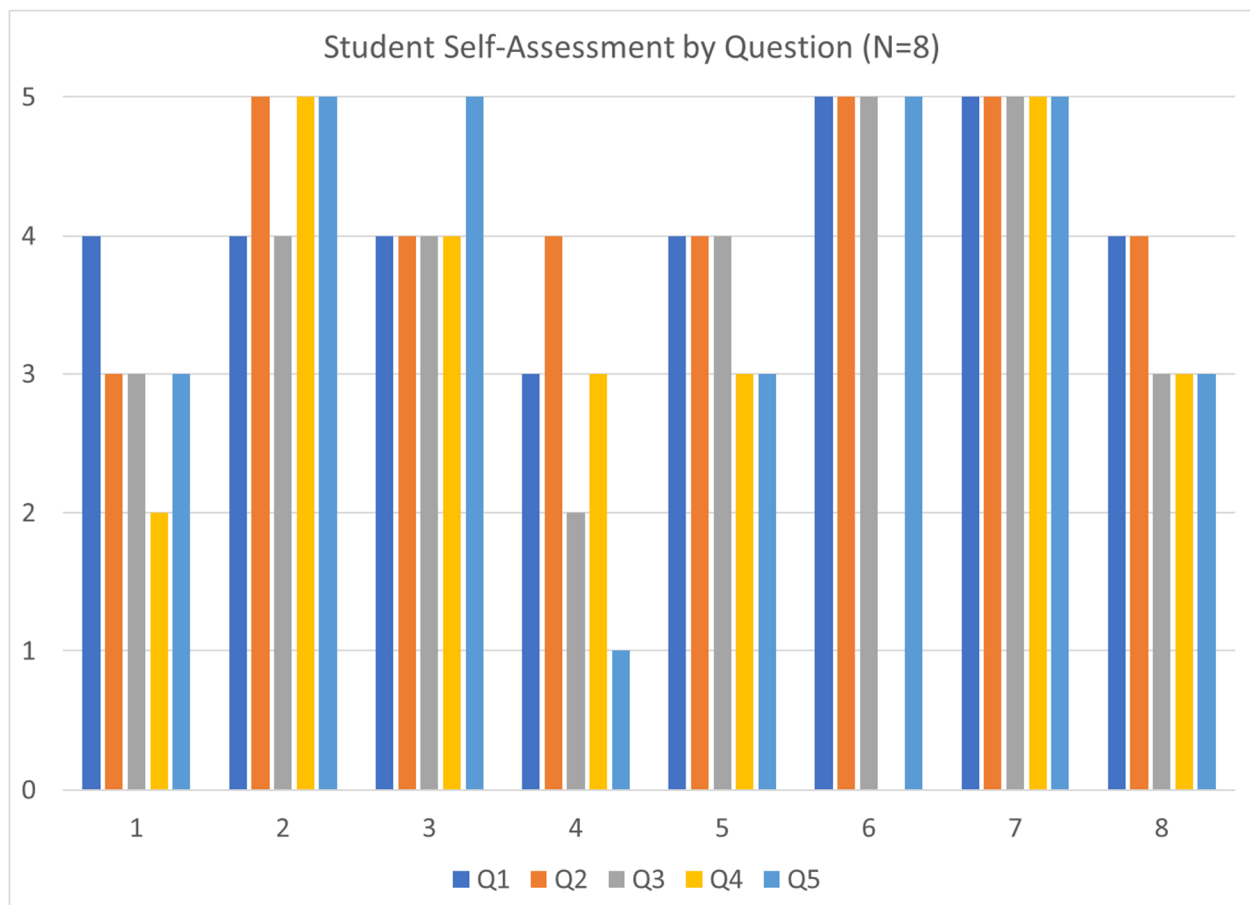
This is the first year we have applied this measure, so no comparison is available. However, only two students were scored at a 2 (and none at 1). The rest are split between 3 and 4 (89% of the students). After POLI 203, most students can apply one or more concepts or traditions to a research question. This course is doing what is intended.

POLI 203 Indirect Assessment

Extra questions were added to the student feedback form at the end of the semester. Students used a five-point Likert scale (1= strong disagree, 5=strongly agree) to self-assess this goal according to five questions:

- Q1: This class helped me identify major concepts and theoretical traditions in political science.
- Q2: This class helped me explain major concepts and theoretical traditions in political science.
- Q3: This class helped me critique major concepts and theoretical traditions in political science.
- Q4: This class helped me recognize and categorize different methodological traditions in political science.
- Q5: This class helped me recognize and categorize research from American politics, political theory, comparative politics, and international relations.

We would like to see as many 4s and 5s in the results:



Indeed, across all responses, a full twenty-six of them (67%) are “agree” or “strongly agree,” indicating high attainment of this goal (as self-assessed). Additionally, only three of them (8%) are in the disagree or strongly disagree categories. However, we are not reaching all students equally.

It is important to note that only eight students completed the student feedback form for the course.

Senior Survey

Two questions on the senior survey address our second learning goal: questions 2 (quantitative and qualitative data) and 14 (qualitative data only).

Q2: Assess on a scale of 1-5 (1 = almost nothing; 5 = immensely) the degree to which Politics/IR courses have contributed to your development in knowledge of the discipline:

2020-21	2019-20	2018-19
4.30	5	4.61

Clearly the average rating for the past year is lower than the two previous years. Still, it ranges between 4 and 5 on the Likert scale.

Two open-ended responses are relevant to Learning Goal 2:

To address the 4 in knowledge, I want to stress that this is more related to substantive knowledge like dates etc. While I certainly have developed detailed substantive knowledge of particular subjects, I want to stress that I found the more "how to think" and "procedural" studies immensely valuable, and I do not view it as a shortcoming that this was my experience.

I really felt there wasn't much of a proper introduction to the research side of political science before Empirical Research Methods, so we had to learn that entire sector of the discipline in the midst of writing our first research paper. This made it difficult to effectively learn and retain the lesson material and produce a quality paper.

Q14: How well does the department (through coursework and other experiences) expose you to the interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary nature of understanding political, economic, and social phenomena?

This is an open-ended, quantitative question:

I think some of the classes I had focused more on this than others, and I think that it would be really cool and beneficial for the department to offer some kind of extracurricular activities targeted toward interdisciplinary experiences with politics, although I'm not sure what specifically would fulfill this.

Very well. I can't think of a course in which there were not explicit conversations about exactly this.

Exceptionally well. Maybe it was just the courses I took, but if you were looking to expand the interdisciplinary study of politics and social phenomena, expanding to include more psychology might be the highest leverage place to start (comparatively, I think that the department does a better job with incorporating economics, sociology, and history than psychology)

Well

The department is doing well in this field.

Some of my best experiences in the department came from the most non-traditional courses. For example, Dr. Barth's courses on Southern Politics and at the Wrightsville unit and Dr. Shanks' public policy course were most effective at weaving this interdisciplinary experience.

politics coursework, by its very nature, tied closely with my history classes (especially poverty and welfare, etc). it felt less tied to other disciplines like economics, etc, but that's just me.

I think we do pretty well. I've taken microeconomics so I can at least appreciate some of economic factors behind a policy or political movement. I think courses in American politics also do a great job of detailing social movements and social theory

I'm not really certain how to answer this question, as my experience rarely covered interdisciplinary courses or experiences.

I think the department overall exposes this fairly well. Everything did a thorough job of connecting and discussing the political, economic, and social aspects.

Distinction Interviews

Unfortunately, the Department has moved away from consistently asking that same questions across all distinction interviews, especially questions specifically targeting each learning goal. At our summer retreat in early August, we will discuss whether or not it makes sense to still use the interview process as a tool for assessing specific learning goals. If we move forward, we will include a question on the appropriate learning goal (according to our assessment cycle) each year.

Discussion and Recommendations

While the evidence for Goal 2 attainment is mostly positive, there exists room for improvement. Most concerning is the three-year decrease in the quantitative student self-assessment on this dimension through the senior survey since it is a more "capstone" evaluation. However, the qualitative data from the survey is positive. It is easy to point to pandemic as culprit, given that the Class of 2021 was greatly affected during two important years (typically when POLI 303 *Analyzing Politics* and POLI 497 *Senior Research Seminar* occur). Even though Goal 2 is not part of the assessment plan for 2021-22, we should still check this data point next summer to see if 2020-21 is an anomaly or trend.

Specific Recommendations:

- POLI 100: To move more students to capstone or nuanced understanding of major concepts and theoretical foundations, as measured both directly and indirectly, include specific, targeted lectures and assignments. Basic expectations should be agreed upon by all departmental members, so they are consistent across all sections of the course.
- POLI 203: As this is the first year using these specific assessment measures, the Department should discuss if they are appropriate, if changes need to be made, etc. One approach may be to employ pre- and post-tests like POLI 100. Further, a scaffold approach should be taken to reinforce the concepts first introduced in POLI 100. In this case, more advanced concepts can be covered and reinforced through lectures and assignments.
- Distinction Interviews: The interview has not been an effective assessment instrument over the past few years. We need to discuss if and how best to utilize the interview. One approach can be to make sure each faculty team conducting the interview asks the same questions related to the

learning goal being assessed that year (according to the assessment plan). We need to be more systematic.

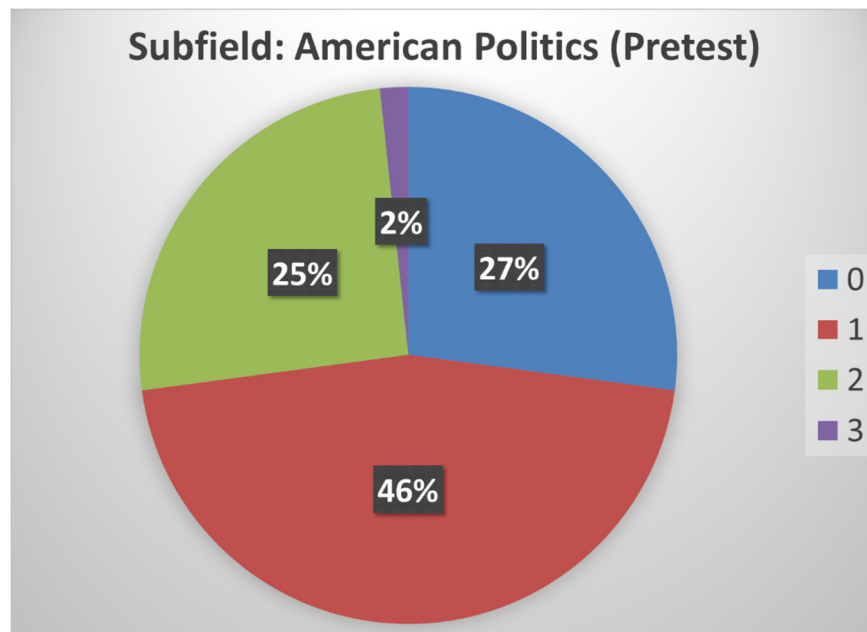
Analysis: Goal 3

“Recognize and classify the content of the five subfields in political science: methodology, American politics, political theory, international relations, and comparative politics.”

POLI 100 Direct Assessment

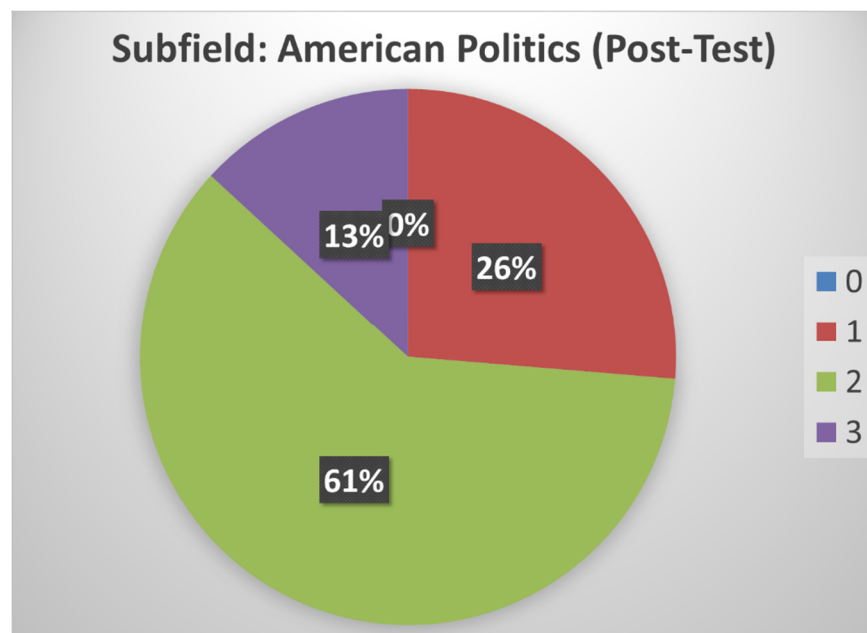
The POLI 100 pretest and pos-test ask students to demonstrate understanding of four political science subfields as they relate to the specific topic of the course. Student responses are marked on a scale from 0 (no or incorrect response) to 3 (nuanced and deep understanding).

For the American Politics subfield:



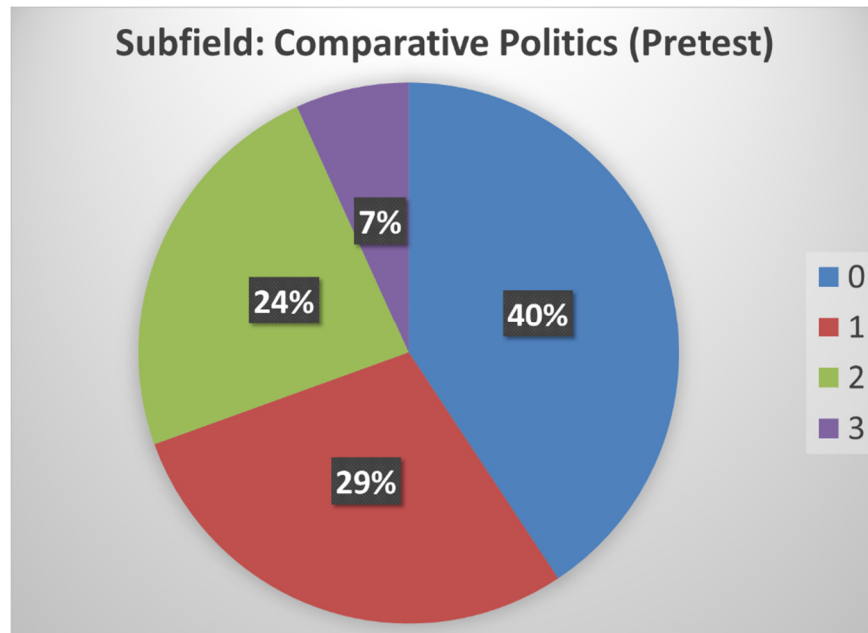
Over a quarter of students score a zero, and only 2% are capstone. Almost half score a 1.

Post-test data:

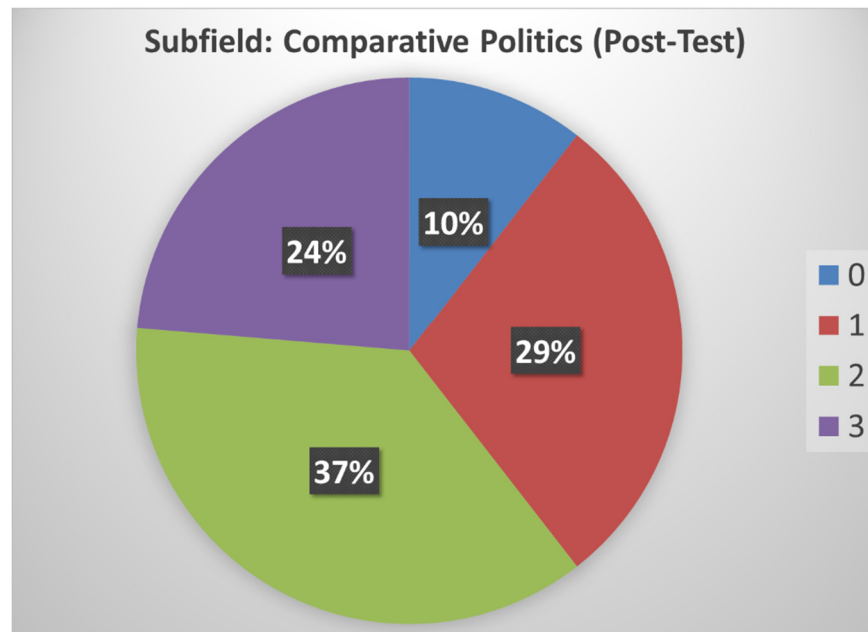


Almost three-fourths score a 2 or better. No students score a 0. This is significant upward movement.

For the Comparative Politics subfield:

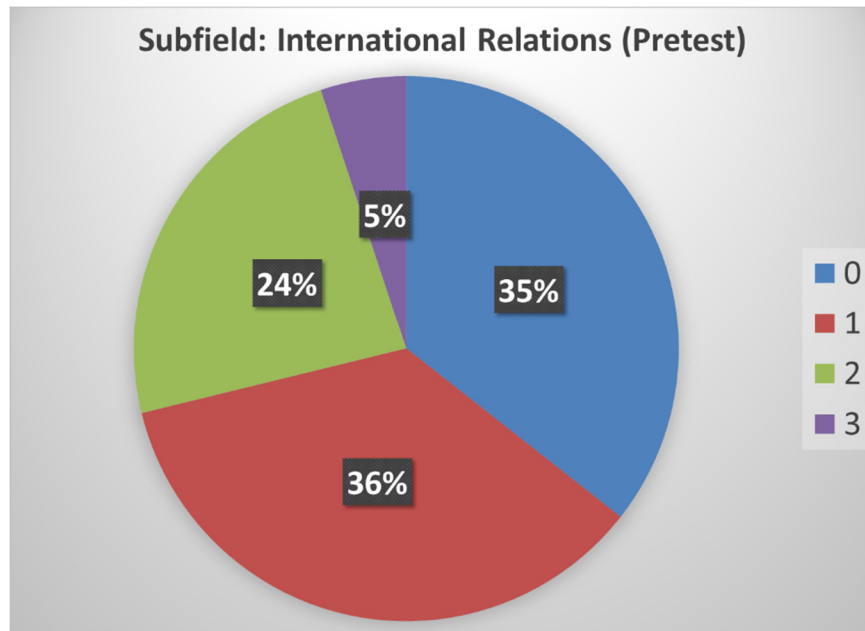


Students start off with a lower understanding of this subfield than with American politics, as half score only a 0 or 1.

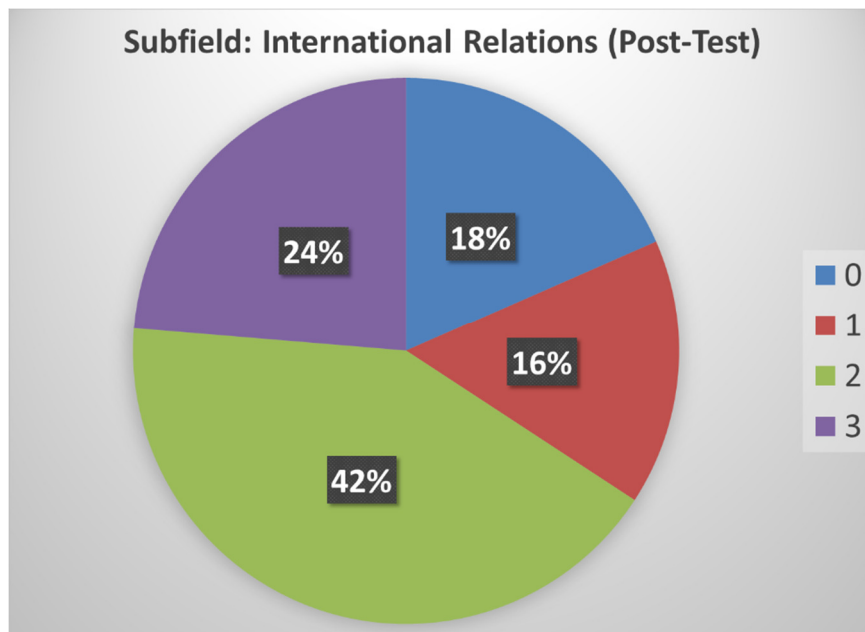


However, at the completion of the courses, the number of students scoring 2 or 3 increases from 31% to 61%, a significant increase. Still, 10% remain at the 0 level, and almost 40% are at 1 or less.

Students start with a lesser understanding of the International Relations subfield than with the two previous:

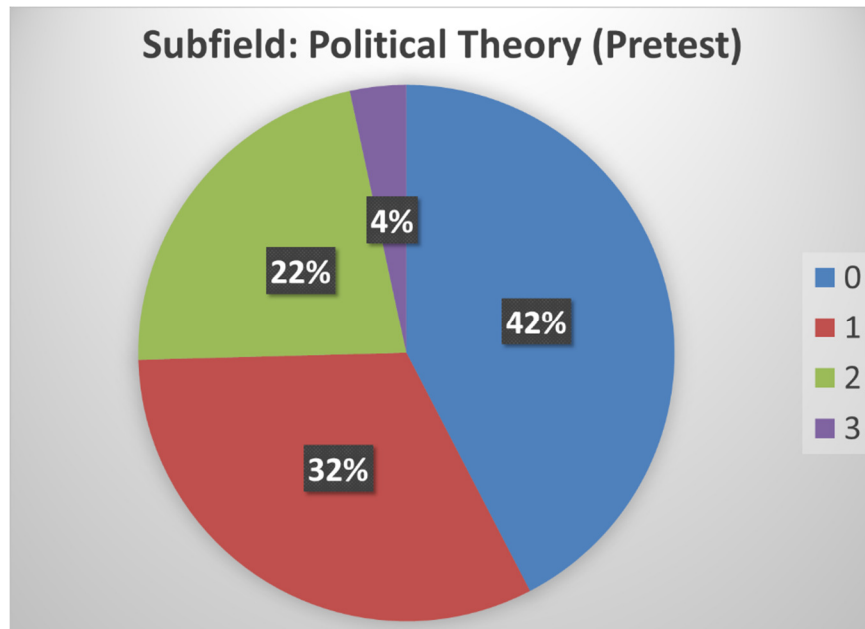


Only 29% score above a 1. For the post-test:

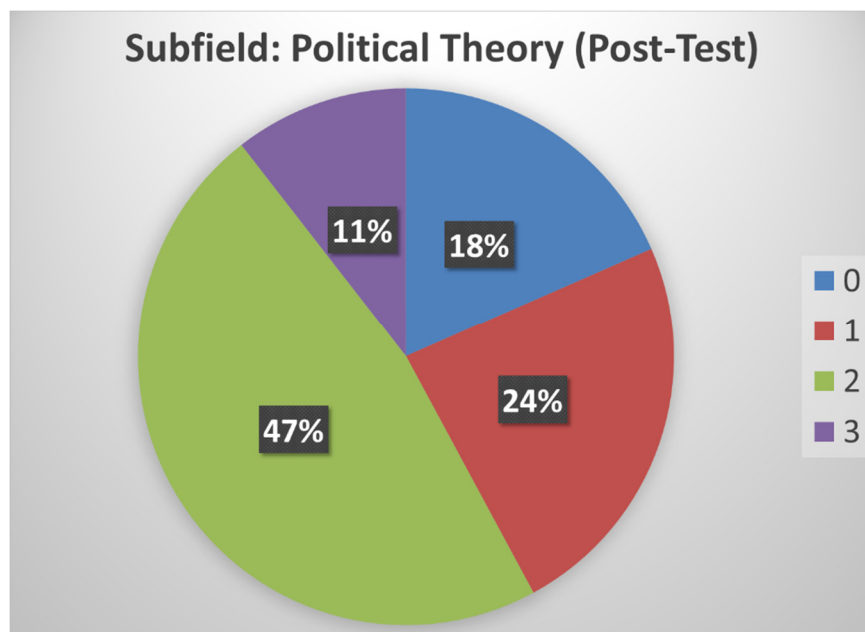


Those scoring a 2 or better increases to 66%. A full 18% still cannot answer this question.

For the final subfield, Political Theory:

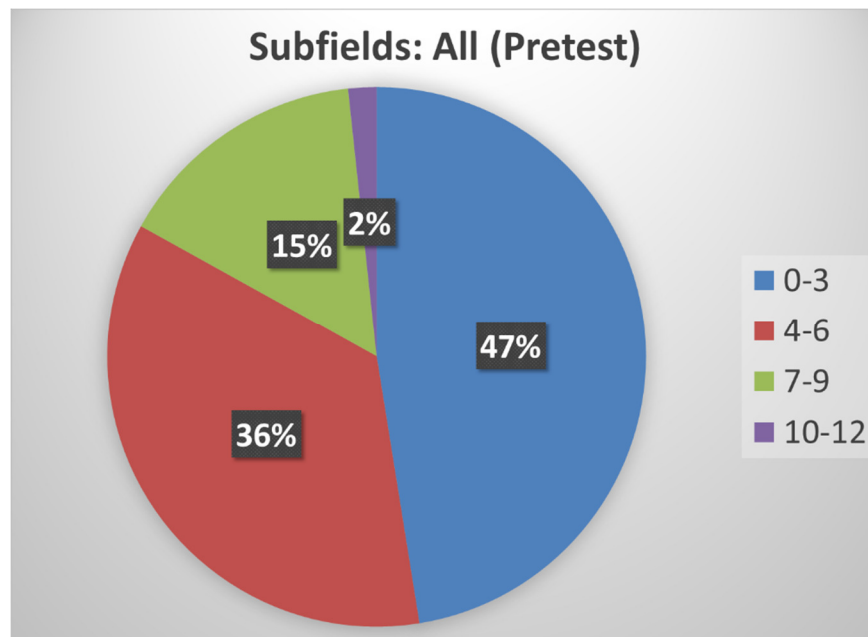


Understandably, students having the hardest time with this subfield; at the beginning of the semester, only a quarter of the students score a 2 or 3.

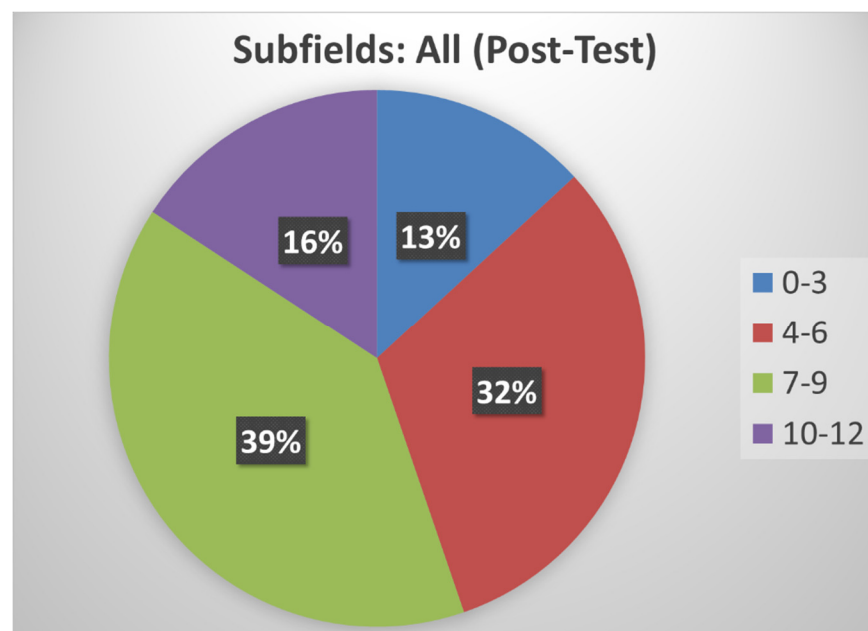


At the end of the semester, the percent scoring a 2 or 3 increases to 58%, more than twice the students. Still, nearly half remain at a 1 or 0.

When scores are summed across the subfields for each individual student, it is possible to present an aggregate score (0 to 12). For the pretest:



Only 2% of students start as “capstone” across the subfields, and almost half demonstrated the lowest tier of understanding.



The post-test demonstrates positive movement. Now 16% are capstone, and only 13% lack understanding. Over half have capstone or advanced understanding.

POLI 100 Indirect Assessment

The POLI 100 student feedback form asks students to assess, “A key goal of POLI 100 is to explicate the different subfields of Political Science. This course clearly differentiated the subfields of the discipline in the study of the specific theme of this POLI 100 course.”

For the 2020-21 academic year, we have data on this question for three of the four offered POLI 100 courses. For the students in those three courses, the result is a 4.21 on the standard 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). This compares to a 4.30 average over the 13 previous offerings of POLI 100. The decrease is only minor compared to the previous years. Again, this might be at least partially explained by the pandemic (two of the three examined 2020-21 courses occurred fall semester, while we were remote).

Senior Survey

One question on the senior survey addresses Learning Goal 3:

Q13: Thinking about the different subfields in politics (American politics; political theory; comparative politics, and international relations), does the curriculum adequately address each one? Are there holes or gaps in the curriculum? If so, what are they, and how could they be addressed?

And the open-ended, qualitative responses:

I think there could be one more comparative/IR credit requirement just because I don't think I learned as much as I could have about other countries' politics from the two alone, although that might just be because I took more american politics classes. I think that, with the elimination of the IR major, another IR requirement for poli majors could be added, or structure it like the English major with different emphases.

I can't speak well to this, since I was attracted to IR and theory courses, although the brief experiences I have had with comparative politics, and even more briefly, American politics, have been satisfactory. Honestly, I don't think I have taken a comparative course. I have had two IR courses, both with Whelan. It might be useful to separate comparative and IR as major requirements, but that would only increase Dr. Kolev's teaching load. Something to consider. As far as theory goes, it might be nice to have more options. Off the top of my head I can only think of three that satisfy the major (Western, American, and 203). However, if the department is only going to require one theory course, then having the option between Western and American seems like a good enough set of options. Maybe Maslin could teach a Feminist Political Theory class if she doesn't already have one. I'd sign up for that.

I think they were all addressed

I don't think there are any holes in the curriculum.

I believe there is a good variety of comparative politics and IR courses. I would've appreciated higher-level courses in American Politics and political theory. American politics is my forte, but, if I wanted to take courses on a pass my sophomore year, there never were any beyond 200 level difficulty.

i never took courses on comparative politics, but i felt that the other subfields were well addressed in course listings.

I think we do very well in political theory and American politics. It might also be my impression that courses in comparative politics and international relations is lacking because I'm not extremely interested in those courses. I would love to see a course focusing on a specific region such as Latin

America or East Asia. These regions are becoming increasingly important in international relations. The environment, i.e. the Earth, could also be a very interesting course. How do states determine sovereignty over a piece of land? How are nations combating climate change? Does accepting climate change fall along party lines? (yesssss it does) What peoples will be most affected by climate change, and what does that mean for surrounding countries?

I think the current curriculum does exactly that, but as to what holes or gaps there might be, I'm not sure I have enough information to say what exactly.

I think each of these are adequately addressed. I do feel that I was able to engage with each one on at least an intermediate level. I enjoyed this aspect, but there are moments where it felt that I was not able to fully engage with certain courses as it my first introduction to that realm of politics.

Discussion and Recommendations

The pre/post test for POLI 100 demonstrates significant growth in understanding and knowledge of the political science subfields. It is a bit concerning that 13% of all students are left with only minimal attainment on this goal. The pandemic does have an effect here; students who took POLI 100 in Fall 2020 demonstrate some of the least growth across the history of the course (they were both new topics as well). It will be important to keep an eye on this goal next year, even though it is not again on the assessment cycle until 2023-24.

The qualitative data from the senior survey is positive. Most students do not identify holes in the curriculum vis-à-vis the subfields. Some students advocate for a comparative requirement and more comparative courses. We pragmatically simplified the major a couple of years ago; it now requires one credit in either comparative or international relations. Still students can elect to take additional courses in subfields of their choice, as we are able to offer them. Comparative politics is limited now by Kiril Kolev's administrative responsibilities. We will look for creative solutions, such as applying for a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence with expertise in comparative politics.

Specific recommendations:

- In POLI 100 courses, continue to be explicit about the different subfields as they are being taught and discussed. Create at least one assignment for each subfield to reinforce the awareness and content of that subfield.
- As a department, create a list of "expectations" of student attainment (basic knowledge of each subfield) in POLI 100.
- Where practical, in other courses, include lessons, discussions, and assignments from the perspective of each applicable subfield. For example, the elective "Environmental Policy" is focused mostly on American politics and policy, and could easily include units on comparative, international, and theory.

Conclusion

The Politics Department is holding a retreat August 5-6, 2021. We will start with a review of the departmental learning goals to determine if it is time to revise any of them. Clearly if we change any

goals, we will need to update our assessment plan (the assessment cycle, the tools we use, VSL and curriculum mapping).

We will also continue our 2020-21 assessment discussion by reviewing this report, especially the recommendations going forward. One specific agenda item will be POLI 100, including the course-specific learning goals and common expectations across the course sections. This should improve learning outcomes and attainment of Goals 2 and 3.

Another specific agenda item is the scaffolding or articulation among courses, specifically the research sequence (MATH 215, POLI 202, POLI 203, POLI 303, and POLI 497). We know this sequence is not meeting our departmental expectations at this point. This is important to enhance our second learning goal (but also Goal 1: "Demonstrate critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills with primary reference to political science and the social sciences more generally," which will be assessed the coming year). We want to identify a list of content and processes covered in each class, so that the instructor in the next class in the sequence is confident all students have the same foundational knowledge.