Final Report for Teagle Project

Division: Social Science
Department: Political Science

Abstract:
The Department of Political Science employed a rubric to assess how well our course majors (non-honors students) were fulfilling core departmental learning goals by the time they graduated. We assessed performance on the annual senior comprehensive exercise, and the repeated nature of the comprehensive exercise allows us to gather data over multiple years. The serial data sets should allow us to interpret the assessment data; change our curriculum, our pedagogy, or our senior comprehensive exercise; assess the results yet again; and thus close the assessment loop.

Introduction:
The department of Political Science holds an annual spring retreat to discuss past problems, future business, and anticipated needs. During one annual retreat we mapped our conception of political science’s “state of the field” ten years down the road, for the purpose of planning long-term departmental hires. During another retreat we discussed the results of a large-scale survey that we had conducted among our graduating seniors and recent alumni. During a third retreat we generated a list of eight broad objectives that we hope graduating political science majors will be able to meet, with full achievement of all objectives being (in the words of Alexander Hamilton) “a thing more ardently to be wished than seriously to be expected.” Our annual retreats wrap up the academic year with perspective and hope, but not always with clear action plans to address our “big picture” goals. Our Teagle assessment project helped us to translate goals and objectives into concrete steps.

Departmental Learning Goal:
We took what might be considered an unusual, inductive approach to developing
departmental goals and objectives. First, we developed reasonably specific objectives (listed below); afterward, we could glimpse a broad goal that subsumed the objectives. We found it more natural to ascend from specific to general propositions, and the process helped us to glimpse a broad, disciplinary goal in a way that we had never articulated before. We eventually expressed our learning goal as follows:

“Students majoring in Political Science will be able to understand, synthesize, and communicate knowledge of major concepts and methods in Political Science and several of its major subfields.”

Departmental Learning Objectives:
Several years ago the Department of Political Science faculty developed a list of what we then called “departmental goals,” but that (on reflection) would be better described as learning objectives. They specify activities through which we hope students will demonstrate or express various, discipline-specific competencies. We realize that no single student is likely to fulfill all of the goals completely; neither are most faculty members. But the set of objectives expresses the ideal toward which we strive as political scientists and educators.

Students majoring in Political Science should be able to do the following:
1) demonstrate knowledge of fundamental political processes, institutions, actors, and relationships, and the theoretical concepts and ideas that move them;
2) demonstrate a familiarity with major theorists and theories, methods and concepts in Political Science and several of its major subfields;
3) demonstrate proficiency in thinking systematically and historically about political actors and interactions in national, regional, global and international contexts;
4) demonstrate proficiency in thinking critically and creatively about the ethical dimensions of politics;
5) synthesize, analyze, and critically evaluate major arguments in the discipline as a whole and in major subfields of the discipline;
6) write effectively in making strong, evidence-backed arguments, engage in intellectually grounded oral debate and discussion, and form and express cogently formulated arguments and interpretations;

7) assess original and secondary sources of argument and evidence and apply scholarship to new areas of research;

8) develop abilities to engage with the broader world, applying disciplinary knowledge to understand and possibly shape political processes, institutions, and discourse.

From these eight learning objectives, our department members chose three—numbers 2, 5, and 6 (which we re-numbered as 1, 2, and 3)—that could be assessed together in a single exercise (our senior comprehensive exercise). Those three would form the basis for our rubric:

1) demonstrate a familiarity with major theorists and theories, methods and concepts in Political Science and several of its major subfields;

2) synthesize, analyze, and critically evaluate major arguments in the discipline as a whole and in major subfields of the discipline;

3) write effectively in making strong, evidence-backed arguments, engage in intellectually grounded oral debate and discussion, and form and express cogently formulated arguments and interpretations.

From these three learning objectives we discerned the unifying goal described above, repeated here for the sake of narrative flow: “Students majoring in Political Science will be able to understand, synthesize, and communicate knowledge of major concepts and methods in Political Science and several of its major subfields.”

**Strategies for achieving goal/objectives:**

To summarize: The Department of Political Science’s strategy for achieving our goals and objectives resides in our departmental curriculum (which includes our honors program and our senior comprehensive exercise), in individualized Directed Reading offerings, and in summer research opportunities sponsored by the department.
To elaborate: The Department of Political Science has long required undergraduate majors and minors to take introductory and mid-level courses that will expose them to major theorists and theories in more than one subfield (political theory, American politics, international relations, and comparative politics). We designate several of our introductory and mid-level courses as Writing (W) courses; these entail a considerable amount of writing and re-writing essays (with students receiving re-write tutoring at Swarthmore’s undergraduate Writing Center). Our faculty members share a commitment to teaching critical engagement. That means helping students to understand the most important political science theories and arguments; to view the theories critically; to compare them with the historical record and other empirical evidence; and to put them in conversation with each other. For several years we have consciously reviewed each other’s syllabi in order to find points of overlap or tension, to help students view their courses as part of a cohesive enterprise, and to help us tweak our syllabi to put them more closely in conversation.

Our honors program remains one of our best means of helping students to achieve our departmental objectives and goals. Honors majors take three seminars in their chosen fields. Honors seminars tend to meet for at least four hours per week and sometimes longer, entail heavy reading and writing loads, and are generally run on the model of first-year graduate school seminars. During their senior spring semester, honors students prepare for three exams—each requiring a three-hour written exam and an hour-long oral exam—administered by expert scholars drawn from other institutions. The senior spring culmination provides an immersive process by which students glimpse connections between courses and subfields that they might not have seen before, and requires them to demonstrate mastery (or at least competence) in a range of literatures.

However, as we discovered from a survey that we administered to graduating seniors and recent alumni, our “course major” (non-honors) students have felt much less satisfied with their departmental experience than our honors students. In response, we re-designed our senior comprehensive exercise, POLS 092—the capstone experience for course majors—in order to
make it more meaningful and useful to students and faculty alike. Instead of allowing course majors to pick a subject on which to write a ten-page essay, and then to “defend” it before two faculty advisers, we devised a year-long (half-credit) course that would culminate in a formal essay (connecting the ideas or readings from one sub-field with the ideas or readings from another) and an oral presentation delivered before all of the Political Science faculty and course majors. Students would be asked to make connections between syllabi drawn from two different political science subfields, which we hoped would replicate (on a smaller scale) the connective, synthesizing experience that honors students undergo in their senior spring. The final presentations would be modeled after academic conferences, with students grouped into panels and presenters taking questions from the floor. We hoped that the conference atmosphere would create a mutually supportive environment and an esprit de corps among the course major students.

Assessment Activities:
The re-designed senior comprehensive exercise (POLS 092) presented an excellent opportunity to assess the departmental objectives that our curriculum and pedagogical approach should achieve. Roughly half of our students take the “course major” rather than the honors route, and all course major students undertake the senior comprehensive exercise as the culminating event of their Political Science studies. Thus, by assessing the extent to which the graduating seniors have achieved our three department learning objectives, we hope to gain insight into our own practices and efficacy—not only with regard to POLS 092’s effectiveness but of our departmental curriculum and teaching methods. Because we administer the senior comprehensive exercise each year, we should be able to gather data for multiple years. Over that time span we could interpret the data; change our curriculum, our pedagogical approaches, and/or the senior comprehensive exam in response to our findings; repeat the assessment; and close the assessment loop.

In the spring of 2013 we converted our three assessment objectives into an evaluative rubric. Each faculty member would evaluate students according to whether their work had achieved the objectives to the “Highest” degree (a score of 4), to a “High” degree (a score of 3), to an
“Acceptable” degree (a score of 2), or to an “Unacceptable” degree (a score of 1). Because the senior comprehensive exercise entails both a written and an oral component, we separated our third objective into two discrete categories and thus prepared to assess four learning objectives via the senior comprehensive exercise:

1) demonstrate a familiarity with major theorists and theories, methods and concepts in Political Science and several of its major subfields;
2) synthesize, analyze, and critically evaluate major arguments in the discipline as a whole and in major subfields of the discipline;
3) write effectively in making strong, evidence-backed arguments, and form and express cogently formulated arguments and interpretations;
4) engage in intellectually grounded oral debate and discussion.

The senior comprehensive exercise generally accommodates twenty to twenty-eight course major seniors each year. Each senior works with a primary and secondary faculty adviser in writing a critical, synthetic essay. The faculty coordinator divides students into panels of five or six presenters, grouped by subject matter. Students present their findings for approximately eight minutes each. The entire political science faculty, and all senior comprehensive participants, comprise the audience and ask questions after each panel, moderated by one of the panel participants. Faculty members each score the students using our rubric, although only the two faculty advisers for each student—the two who have advised and read the student’s written essay—assess the student on objective #3 (“write effectively…”).

**Findings**

We conducted the assessment exercise in the spring of 2013 and again in the spring of 2014; we anticipate continuing it into the near future. The students’ overall, average scores are listed below (Figure 1), broken out by professor (anonymized but held constant over time) and by year:
The students’ average scores in each category (learning objective) are listed below (Figure 2), broken out by year but not by professor:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Familiarity with major theorists &amp; theories</strong></td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>3.11</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Synthesize, analyze, critically evaluate major arguments in discipline</strong></td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.05</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Engage in intellectually grounded oral presentation</strong></td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>3.00</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Write effectively</strong></td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3.19</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>OVERALL</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.14</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.09</strong></td>
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The results were not only interesting in themselves, but gave us occasion for detailed conversation at our 2013 and 2014 departmental retreats. We noted that the students’ overall average scores were reasonably close in 2013 and 2014, although slightly lower in 2014. Students clearly, on average, were fulfilling our departmental learning objectives at least reasonably well by the time they graduated (although we hope to find means of prompting improvement).
We were not surprised to find learning objective #4 (“write effectively”) to have produced the highest average score in each year, since only the two faculty advisers (who had guided and read the essays in advance) assessed each student in that category. Students may have been better able to convey meaning and insights in their written work than in their eight minute presentations. We also were not surprised to find learning objective #3 (“oral presentation) to have produced the lowest average score in each year, if only by a small margin. Public speaking is not always one of our students’ strengths, and should be improved.

We were interested to see clear evidence of scoring variation between faculty members. We were also interested to note that while our overall student scores were above 3 (which should have denoted a “High” level of achievement with regard to our learning objectives), the department as a whole felt dissatisfied with the students’ overall performances. The discrepancy between our formal assessments of student achievement and our informal impressions of quality occasioned a longer conversation at our 2014 spring retreat.

Using the Results

Although we did not set out to assess our own grading standards, the variation in Figure 1 led us into a fruitful discussion of grading and expectations—not only for POLS 092 but for all Political Science coursework—and whether we should take steps to calibrate them among department members. We proposed a future exercise in which faculty members would exchange essays written by graduated students (with names redacted) so that we could each grade the papers, compare our results, discuss any discrepancies, and decide whether we should take steps to bring our standards more closely in accord. In other words, as a result of the Teagle assessment exercise we devised a miniature assessment loop for departmental grading standards. We hope to conduct that exercise over the next two years.
Our general sense of dissatisfaction over presentations that supposedly evinced “high” achievement levels made us wonder, first, whether as a department we are encountering inflation—assessment as well as grade inflation—and whether we should take steps to resist it. Our reaction also prompted us, second, to re-consider POLS 09’s ungraded status (students receive a mark of credit/ no credit, which is essentially pass/fail). We resolved to begin assigning letter grades for future senior comprehensive exercises, to be assigned by each student’s primary and secondary adviser on the strength of the student’s formal essay and also the oral presentation.

Our Teagle-sponsored discussion with faculty colleagues at Bryn Mawr and Haverford pointed us toward several innovations that we may implement soon. First, while we have invited other Political Science majors, especially senior honors majors, to attend the senior comprehensive exercise, we have not made that attendance mandatory nor included juniors. Requiring attendance by course major juniors—and possibly asking them to assess their peers’ performance as well—might prepare those students for their own senior comprehensive experience by making them aware of the faculty’s expectations, getting them thinking about potential topics of their own, and (by involving them in assessment) prompting them to work on their own presentation skills.

On a related note, some of our Tri-Co Teagle colleagues suggested videotaping the POLS 092 presentations and inviting students to review the results with their advisers, for the purpose of receiving helpful feedback. If we want to improve their performance during the POLS 092 exercise as opposed to after it, we might videotape a practice session and have the students review it with advisers prior to the actual POLS 092 exercise. Political Science faculty members also will consider asking students to utilize Swarthmore’s “Speaking Associates” program, which matches them with trained student mentors for public speaking practice. Some of us may utilize the “Speaking Associates” program in our other courses, which would help us to improve oral presentation in our curriculum prior to students’ culminating exercises.
We will conduct the POLS 092 assessment exercise again in 2015. We will be eager to see whether the changes that we make in response to prior assessment exercises improve the results for our learning objectives and goals.
### Appendix A – Political Science Rubric

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty name: __________________________</th>
<th>Student name: __________________________</th>
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<tr>
<td>Primary adviser? Y N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary adviser? Y N</td>
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- Questions 1-3 below address the ORAL PRESENTATION. Question 4 addresses the WRITTEN WORK.
- Question 3 addresses the quality of the oral presentation (demeanor, poise, clarity) and responses to questions.
- Only primary and secondary advisers, who have been able to evaluate the students' written work, should address all 4 questions.
- Faculty who have not advised a particular student should address questions 1-3, which evaluate his/her oral presentation.
- Please mark each question with an "X" in only ONE box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Highest (4)</th>
<th>High (3)</th>
<th>Emerging (2)</th>
<th>Unacceptable (1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Demonstrate a familiarity with major theorists and theories, methods and concepts in Political Science and several of its major subfields;</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Engage in intellectually grounded oral presentation, discussion, and debate</td>
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