Political Science Departmental Learning Goals

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.

Political Science Departmental Learning Objectives:

1) Demonstrate knowledge of major theorists and theories, methods and concepts in Political Science and several of its major subfields;
2) Identify, analyze, critically evaluate, and synthesize major arguments in Political Science and in major subfields of the discipline;
3) Communicate knowledge effectively by making strong, evidence-backed arguments and interpretations, both in writing and in oral debate and discussion.

Learning Strategies

The strategy for achieving goals and objectives resides in the departmental curriculum, in individualized Directed Reading offerings, and in summer research opportunities sponsored by the department.

Learning Assessments

To graduate from Swarthmore as a Political Science major, non-honors students must fulfill the Senior Comprehensive Requirement in the Political Science Department. The most common means of satisfying that requirement is the Senior Comprehensive Exam (POLS 092), which represents a .5 credit written and oral project. With the help of a primary and secondary faculty adviser, students write a paper that links work they have completed in two different subfields of Political Science. They then present their papers at a departmental conference and field questions from their peers.

The Political Science Department will employ a rubric to assess achievement of several Departmental Learning Objectives in the Senior Comprehensive Exam. It will assess the students’ demonstrated knowledge of major theorists and theories from more than one subfield of Political Science (Learning Objective #1); students’ ability to analyze, critically evaluate, and make connections between the relevant arguments in more than one disciplinary subfield.
(Learning Objective #2); their ability to communicate their knowledge and insights effectively in written argument (Learning Objective #3); and their ability to communicate their knowledge and insights effectively in oral argument and discussion (Learning Objective #3). Students will be assessed on a scale of 1-4 in each of the relevant areas so that the Department can identify areas of strength and weakness in our program. Because the Senior Comprehensive Exam is a culminating exercise, designed for students to demonstrate their overall disciplinary learning, we hope that our results help us to evaluate not only POLS 092’s effectiveness but the effectiveness of our departmental curriculum and teaching methods.

Along with our assessment of the Senior Comprehensive Exam, the Political Science Department will be conducting focus group interviews with the department’s graduating seniors as well as alumni. We are in the process of devising questions for that endeavor, and we will discuss and analyze the findings at our spring 2013 meetings and Department Retreat. We will include several questions for non-honors students and alumni about the Senior Comprehensive Exam, and we will utilize the findings along with our Senior Comprehensive assessment results to help us better understand and improve our teaching content and methods.

Political Science faculty have long debated whether our curriculum and teaching methods suitably help students to make connections between courses and between subject matter from different subfields. Those connections are usually left to individual faculty members’ discretion. We hope that the assessment exercise will help us to evaluate how well students are learning the lessons that we aspire to teach.