

Department of Political Science

2014-2015 Assessment

Contents:

- Section 1 Action items from 2013-2014
- Section 2 Assessment activities for 2014-2015
- Section 3 Summary of Assessment Results
- Section 4 Reflections on Assessment Results
- Section 5 Actions items from 2014-2015

Section 1: Action items from 2013-2014

The Department of Political Science action items from 2013-2014 centered on the improvement of student scholarship. Specifically:

1. Raising expectations on quality of scholarship and imposing stricter penalties for student plagiarism/cheating.
2. Closer monitoring of student scheduling of the research methods/senior seminar sequence.
3. Increase the number of required and elective courses offered each semester in department to relieve scheduling conflicts that arise from transfer students, change of majors, and students who spend a semester off campus.
4. Possibly reduce the frequency of POSC 116 from two sections per semester to one.

Some actions were taken during the past academic year on items 1-2, but none on 3-4. Item one was addressed in a two-fold manner. First, the arrival of a new faculty member (Dr. Courtemanche) this year with high scholarship expectations automatically communicated to students a greater focus on this area. Second, there were at least two instances of probable student cheating that were brought to the attention of the office of Academic Affairs. Even though penalties were later dismissed or reduced, a clear message was sent to students that academic dishonesty will not be tolerated in the department.

In regard to item 2, rather than alternate the teaching of the research methods and senior seminar courses between department members as has been the practice in the past, Dr. Wells is scheduled to repeat teaching the senior seminar and Dr. Courtemanche will continue to teach the research methods component of the sequence. This scheduling change should provide more consistency and continuity for students in what and how these courses are taught. Dr. Wells and Dr. Courtemanche are also closely monitoring the scheduling of our advisees to ensure they enroll in these courses at the appropriate time.

In regard to items 3 and 4, no actions were taken. With the department being down one full time faculty slot it simply was not feasible to offer the range and number of courses we would have found optimal during 2014-2015. This is a significant obstacle for us. As for item 4, POSC 116 is not only a required course for majors, but also a popular course for fulfilling general education requirements. Both sections of this course are full or close to full each semester. Thus reducing the number of sections of this course seems ill-advised and counter-productive. Furthermore if a third full-time faculty for the department can be hired, then the rationale for item 4 is no longer present.

In summary, the most important impediment for addressing our action items from last year is inadequate full-time staffing.

Section 2: Assessment Activities for 2014-2015

The Department of Political Science performed an assessment on student learning outcomes during the spring 2015 semester. We followed the same process for assessment as was utilized during the spring 2014 semester. The department's curriculum is designed to assess its majors through coursework that addresses learning outcomes in various ways. Our majors participate in a Senior Seminar that is a culminating experience which brings together the learning outcomes and the course work taken throughout their tenure. Our spring 2015 assessment utilized the research papers from the fall 2014 Senior Seminar to assess departmental student learning outcomes.

There were six students enrolled in the Senior Seminar. Dr. Wells conducted an assessment of how well each paper met the departmental learning outcomes.

Professors Wells scored each paper and provided a brief narrative for each learning outcome on every paper. These scores and comments were combined for the purpose of this report. Please note that Dr. Wells was the instructor for the fall 2014 Senior Seminar and although he previously graded the papers, the assessment rubric utilized here was substantially different than the grading matrix used to determine the letter grade for the paper.

Department of Political Science Learning Outcomes/Departmental Goals

1. Be able to use two or more principle frameworks to analyze political power
2. Be able to use two or more principle frameworks to describe and analyze political processes and institutions
3. Be able to critically use important elements commonly found in normative political thought
4. Be able to use the principle elements of empirical research in political science at both the macro and micro levels of analysis

Scoring Rubric

Scale from 1-4

1-does not meet departmental learning outcome

2-minimally meets departmental learning outcome

3-satisfactorily meets departmental learning outcome

4-expertly meets departmental learning outcome

Departmental Learning Outcome	Score	Comments
Be able to use two or more principle frameworks to analyze political power		
Be able to use two or more principle frameworks to describe and analyze political processes and institutions		
Be able to critically use important elements commonly found in normative political thought		
Be able to use the principle elements of empirical research in political science at both the macro and micro levels of analysis		

Note that the this assessment sheet is in portrait format for the purposes of fitting it into this document

Section 3: Summary of Assessment Results

Compared to last year's assessment, average scores for the papers and the individual learning outcomes were higher. However, it should be stressed that the sample size for both years is small (6) and consequently it would be inappropriate to infer any general trends from the results. The results could simply be the consequence of random variability of small classes from year to year. In the discussion that follows, last year's scores will be noted in parenthesis for comparative purposes.

An average score was calculated to be 2.67 (2.2), which is slightly under the "satisfactory meets departmental learning outcome" designation. Individually, all of the papers were assessed to score within a range of 1.5-4.0 (1.8-2.6). This wide range is reflective of the range of quality of our students. Some are very well prepared to do rigorous work while others much less so. So while this result is somewhat disappointing, it is encouraging that only one paper scored under the "minimally meets" standard. As for each individual learning outcome the average scores ranged between 2-3 (2-2.6). It should be pointed out that some of the papers received as high as 4 while others received as low as 1 on single learning outcomes.

These results are not that surprising. Thiel's student body reflects a high degree of variability on preparedness for college, motivation to succeed, and intellectual ability. The caliber of student papers in our senior seminar has been and continues to be reflective of the diversity of the students who choose to enroll at Thiel. As with last year's assessment, too few students understand proper citation and the importance of scholarly articles. Similarly, many students are unable to distinguish between articulating an opinion versus an argument based on empirical evidence. Consistent with last year's results, students did score higher on the learning outcome dealing with "normative thought" yet scored lowest on learning outcomes involving frameworks of power and empiricism. This is a finding that may be connected to the reliance on adjunct instruction. While we have the highest regard for the adjuncts who teach in our department, it is most likely that faculty with Ph.D.'s are more comfortable with theory development and data analysis than the typical non-Ph.D. instructor. Thus, adjunct taught courses are more likely to focus on normative and descriptive approaches to the material rather than theoretical or empirical ones.

A review of the comments or narratives was also performed. This analysis will be presented by learning outcome and as a summary of the comments with specific comments used when needed. As noted above, last year's scores will be placed in parenthesis.

1. Be able to use two or more principle frameworks to analyze political power

The average score for this learning outcome is 2.33 (2); with scores ranging from of 1-4 (1-3).

Most of the papers did not identify frameworks for analyzing political power, however it should be noted that a few papers did indirectly address power relationships. One paper did directly discuss conflicts over political power in a theoretical fashion. This learning outcome had the lowest average score of the four learning outcomes assessed.

2. Be able to use two or more principle frameworks to describe and analyze political processes and institutions

The average score for this learning outcome is 2.83 (2.25) with scores ranging from 2-4 (2-3).

Most papers did mention and identify the issues surrounding institutions and the political process as they related to the research topic. However, the analysis did not go in depth, discussion was often limited and sometimes inaccurate. A few of the papers were more elaborate in this section and did receive scores of 3 or satisfactorily met the departmental learning outcome and one paper received a score of 4.

3. Be able to critically use important elements commonly found in normative political thought

The average score for this learning outcome is 3.0 (2.6) with scores ranging from 2-4 (2-4).

This learning outcome received the highest average score of the four learning outcomes assessed. Thus all of the papers did incorporate some element of normative political thought. As the range of scores indicates most of the papers satisfactory met this departmental outcome while only one minimally met this departmental outcome and one met this outcome expertly. It should be noted that no papers received a score of 1 indicating that every paper did in fact meet this outcome at some level.

4. Be able to use the principle elements of empirical research in political science at both the macro and micro levels of analysis

The average score for this learning outcome is 2.5 (2) with scores ranging from 1-4 (1-3).

Only half of the papers met this learning outcome satisfactorily or expertly. Three papers were minimal or unsatisfactory. Most of the students struggled with using, presenting and analyzing data. The lack of scholarly articles and improper citation were commonplace. Research design problems/confusion and execution of the design were also problematic. All of these issues are thoroughly addressed in the research methods course and again in the senior seminar. Part of the problem is student time management issues. The senior seminar is one of the few courses that requires a substantial research paper. Despite efforts to assist students to begin their projects early in this course, too many of them procrastinate and feel overwhelmed at the end of the semester. Consequently, the result is often sloppy and poorly executed research projects. Second, many of our students have a fear/aversion to engaging in quantitative research.

Section 4: Reflections on Assessment Results

The department is still in the process of review and reflection of these results. But as noted earlier, more consistency in the faculty assigned to teach the research methods/senior seminar sequence is one reflection that may prove beneficial. Second, the department is in transition with two faculty departures from last year and one new faculty addition this year. It is too soon as well as difficult to judge the impact, if any, of the personnel changes in the department on learning outcome assessment. Dr. Wells and Dr. Courtemanche have had discussions on a possible curricular change to require statistics for department majors, but instead Dr. Courtemanche has/is utilizing a statistical package in the research methods course that should improve student skills in using/analyzing empirical data. We will continue to strongly recommend that our majors take a statistics course.

It is also important to reiterate that it is to be expected that the diversity of our study body will be reflected in divergent and variable learning outcome assessments. We can and should always strive to help our students achieve their full potential in the classroom, but the reality is that many of our marginal students simply have too much ground to make up to be able to perform at the expert or even the satisfactory level.

Section 5: Action Items from 2014-2015 Assessment

In the coming year the most important action item is getting the department back to full time staffing levels. This action item is beyond the control of the department and is contingent on

the financial resources of the College. There is one current and one future faculty vacancy confronting the department. At the time of this writing a decision on the current faculty opening is pending. Resolving the current faculty vacancy item is important for at least three reasons. First, we need coverage for required public law courses that are currently covered by adjuncts. Second, filling this position will provide necessary advising/mentoring expertise for the legal studies minor that is difficult to achieve with current faculty. Third, filling this position will enable the department to expand the breath of our offerings particularly in the area of public policy/public administration. Filling this vacancy is also consistent with our goal of highlighting the legal studies program for the recruitment and retention of new students.

The retirement of Dr. Wells after the fall 2015 semester poses an additional staffing challenge for the department. Dr. Wells teaches international relations and comparative politics which comprise two of the five substantive subfields in the political science department. Replacing Dr. Wells with a full-time Ph. D. faculty member trained in IR/CP is a high priority action item for the department.

If the College is unable to provide the resources to staff the public law position, it is highly probable that the department will need to revise its current curriculum to remove some of the public law offerings and perhaps consider terminating the legal studies minor. If the IR/CP slot is not replaced in a timely fashion, coverage for 40 percent of the department's curriculum and delivery of the international studies minor will not be feasible.

The department also seeks to continue to market the Washington Semester program both internally and externally. To this end, the director of internships at the LCWS was invited to Thiel's campus during the fall 2014 semester to speak to students about the program. An action item for next year involves Dr. Courtemanche becoming the campus director of the program. Dr. Courtemanche is working on developing strategies to provide more effective outreach/communication to Thiel faculty concerning student opportunities provided by the program. There is no question that students who participate in this program come back to Thiel's campus more energized and focused on coursework and have expanded horizons on the possibilities for their post-Thiel plans.

Finally, we will continue to implement two action items from last year. Namely, we will continue to demand/expect more rigorous scholarship from our students and impose appropriate penalties when there are violations of the student honor code. Second, we will strive to monitor student scheduling to minimize scheduling conflicts and/or students taking required courses out of sequence.