

Westmont College
Political Science Department
2006-2007 Annual Report

Submitted May 11, 2007

Our department divides this annual report into three activity areas that represented our assessment work for 2006-2007. They are 1) academic year assessment activities, 2) archival issues and decisions, and 3) strategic planning in an era of transition.

Academic Year Assessment Activities

WASC

Our activities for the first half of 2006-2007 focused on the February WASC visit, its associated reports and, in particular, the poster session. Our poster focused on assessing student research and singled out as a case study one particular research project from PO 40: Empirical Research Methods.

GE Courses

Another departmental activity that characterized this last academic year was the revision of course syllabi in response to general education review mandates and a renewed commitment to assessment of learning outcomes.

Career Advising

As earlier reports note, the Political Science Department has emphasized the improvement of career advising. Our premise has been that a more deliberate career focus would help political science students better apply their majors to closely related public affairs and related careers. According to the department's June 15, 2006 report, "To the extent the department can improve its career advising mission, we would seek the following *student outcomes*: 1) career choices more closely connected to the major; and 2) greater satisfaction with the career advising function as expressed in future senior and alumni surveys."

In the spring semester, the department held a career advising workshop focusing on international affairs careers, a need documented in our senior surveys. After conducting the workshop and administering a participant survey, Professor Susan Penksa filed this report:

On March 22, 2007 the Department of Political Science, in cooperation with the Office of Career and Life Planning, held a career advising workshop focused on international affairs. Dr. Susan Penksa facilitated the session and discussed topics such as the different career options available domestically and internationally and

how students should prepare as undergraduates to be competitive in the international affairs job market. In addition, The Office of Life Planning prepared handout materials on the Foreign Service Officer Selection Process, the GRE and LSAT.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the session, we asked students to complete an evaluation. We received 15 responses. 2/15 respondents were graduating seniors; 3/15 were juniors; 5/15 were sophomores; 5/15 were first year students. Since 10/15 students in attendance were first year students or sophomores, it suggests that students have a strong desire to learn at an early stage what they can do to better prepare themselves for post-graduate life.

Student career interests included non-profit work, government service, the U.S Foreign Service, international business, consulting, political lobbying, and general development work. 6/15 expressed uncertainty about their future career plans.

There was unanimous consensus among the 15 students that the session was instructive and that it should be continued in the future. When asked which workshop activities and information were most helpful, students identified that it was helpful to learn about the resources available to them through the Office of Life Planning; to receive concrete information and strategies for informational interviewing and resume building, internship planning, and developing a portfolio (a new requirement that will be instituted in 07-08); to be encouraged to read additional sources about international affairs during the summer months; and lastly, to be given “a reality check” about the competitiveness of the job market and post-graduate education.

To improve future sessions, students suggested that we offer a longer period of time for questions and to include a handout with specific web resources.

In 2007-2008:

1. We will develop a handout (focused on web resources for careers in international affairs), in cooperation with the Office of Life Planning, to be distributed to students by faculty in the Political Science Department as well as by the Office of Life Planning.
2. We will hold a session on career planning focused on general career options for political science students.
3. We will develop a portfolio requirement for all students majoring in political science.

Archival Activities

One WASC mandate was that every department inventory, catalogue, and properly store all related assessment materials. This presented a minor challenge for the Political Science Department in that Professor Bruce McKeown had been our archivist and our survey researcher per senior and alumni surveys. He planned to retire in May 2007. In order to accommodate this transition, all feasible materials have been transferred to CDs

and are now in the possession of Professors Lawrence and Penksa. They will be loading onto all department computers in the fall of 2007 or sooner. Remaining hardcopy materials (survey coding sheets, questionnaires, senior interview materials) will be stored in the office of department chair (Professor Lawrence until January 2007 and Professor Penksa thereafter).

Strategic Planning in an Era of Transition

PO 40

During 2007-2008, Professor Lawrence announced his plans to retire in May 2008. The department also hired a tenure-track replacement for Dr. McKeown. This time of faculty transitions and replacements adds some complexity to the ongoing assessment process. For example, one course that has been central to our mission of improving student research capacities and better preparing majors for current graduate school environments has been PO 40 Empirical Political Research. That course was taught by Dr. McKeown and likely will not be reoffered on a permanent basis until Dr. Lawrence's eventual replacement is hired. While allowing majors to take a Statistics course partially fills this gap, it is no substitute for the department's own methods course. In the meantime, other research oriented courses across the department's subfields will need to meet at least some of the research expectations implicit in the PO 40 course. This is logical in that the PO 40 course was always intended to better prepare sophomore level students to do satisfactory research in other, primarily upper division, courses.

Portfolio Development

Historically, the department has relied on senior and alumni surveys to assess the near term and long term value of a political science education for our majors and graduates. Yet, self-reporting in such surveys has its own methodological problems and is an ineffective instrument for assessing actual student learning. As a consequence, after several years of general discussion, the department staff decided to proceed with a strategy for implementing student learning portfolios.

Initial discussions identified the kinds of issues the department will need to work on in the coming academic year relative to portfolios in political science. Below is a summary of those issues:

What would be the portfolio's primary purpose?

It would be to provide a record and review of cumulative student learning and accomplishment in a form useable for assessment purposes by the faculty and graduate school or employment purposes by the majors.

What should such a portfolio include?

- academic assignments such as exams (especially model essays), journals, research papers, oral presentations (videos?)
- internship supervisor evaluations
- student generated resumes
- content balance across the department's subfields
- "external" writing expectations such as student newspaper articles

What logistical issues does a portfolio requirement present?

- communicating portfolio requirements and expectations to current and future majors (checklists, etc.)
- enforcing compliance with a portfolio "requirement" and the role of academic advisors in the process
- application of the requirement to transfer students and "late" majors
- how best to store portfolios (electronic, etc.)
- timing of summative evaluation (second semester, senior year)
- workload manageability (all faculty review all portfolios or division of labor?)
- coordinating such a requirement with other assessment expectations (by College, WASC)

The anticipated portfolio requirement will need to be phased in and refined over the next several years due to the staffing transitions noted above. As a result, this method of assessing actual student learning may take somewhat longer to implement. The upside of this added time is that within two years, a reconstituted political science faculty will have an opportunity to take ownership of this new (new to us) approach to assessment. Only with such ownership will such a portfolio requirement be successful.