

Westmont College
Department of Political Science
2008-2009 Annual Report

Assessment and Program Review During a Time of Transition

The Department of Political Science has undergone a major transition since the retirement of Dr. Bruce McKeown (Political Theory) in May 2007 and Dr. David Lawrence (American Politics) in May 2008. We are a three-person department in which 2/3 department members retired within a year's time. Additionally, we have worked with three different assessment coordinators, all of who had different recommendations for our department (e.g. portfolios were encouraged by one assessment coordinator but discouraged by the next department liaison). During his final year in the department, Dr. McKeown assumed the lead on department assessment efforts because the Provost, Dr. Shirley Mullen, asked him to do so as part of Dr. McKeown's responsibilities for a reduced teaching load during his last year of institutional service.

Dr. Lawrence and Dr. Susan Penksa conducted a search for a replacement for Dr. McKeown during 2006-2007 and hired Dr. Jesse Covington, who commenced his work at the college in September 2007. At that time, Dr. Susan Penksa, the only permanent and returning member of the department, took a one-semester leave to serve as a Fulbright Scholar to Bosnia and Herzegovina for Fall 2007. Accordingly, it was decided that the search for someone to teach American Politics and Research Methods would be postponed until 2008. In 2008, Drs. Penksa and Covington carried out a search for the third department position; the interview process was disrupted by the November 13, 2008 Tea Fire. Both Dr. Penksa and Dr. Covington were displaced from their homes and the search process was delayed until early 2009 at which time Dr. Tom Knecht was hired.

The Chronology of Transition

2006-2007 Department search for a person to teach Political Theory; Dr. Bruce McKeown received a teaching reduction for assessment work
May 2007 Dr. Bruce McKeown retires
Autumn 2007 Dr. Jesse Covington joins the department as the political theorist
Autumn 2007 Dr. Susan Penksa is on department leave as a Fulbright Scholar
May 2008 Dr. David Lawrence retires
2008-2009 The department conducts a search for a full-time position in American Politics and Research Methods and hires Dr. Tom Knecht
2009 Dr. Tom Knecht begins at Westmont College

In consultation with Acting Provost Dr. Warren Rogers, the DOPS has focused its primary efforts in the last two years on hiring with a related and secondary emphasis on program review and assessment. Due to the personnel changes in the department and the need for the department chair to mentor two new colleagues, we agreed to postpone any major initiatives until the hiring process was completed. Despite our focus on hiring, Drs. Penksa and Covington moved ahead with significant improvements in the area of program review and assessment.

Department Mission Statement

(See the PS mission statement on the Westmont College web page. The current statement will be revised to reflect the ethos and approach of the current department members.)

Program Review

In his first year of service (2007-2008), Dr. Covington reviewed the historical documents of the DOPS regarding assessment activities. Furthermore, Dr. Covington also adapted his course syllabi to comply with Westmont College General Education learning objectives and outcomes. Dr. Tom Knecht will do the same this year.

In 2008-2009, Dr. Penksa and Dr. Covington conducted an initial program review that resulted in changes to course prerequisites, the confirmed recognition of the need to hire a fourth department member to teach in the area of Comparative Politics, and an identification of the program review process necessary to initiate once all three members of the department were together.

Changes to Course Prerequisites

Students in political science are required to take four lower division courses, POL 10, 20, 30 and 40. These four courses provide an introduction to American Politics, International Politics, Political Theory and Research Methods. Many upper division courses have not had prerequisite requirements. Accordingly, students have not always taken lower division courses prior to upper division coursework. Dr. Penksa and Dr. Covington reviewed the PS program and added prerequisite requirements (primarily for POL 10, 30, and 40) to many upper divisions courses, thus enabling students to be better prepared for advanced coursework in PS. For example, in advance of the arrival of Dr. Knecht, we added POL 10 as a prerequisite for most upper division courses in American Politics (except for upper division courses appropriate to take without POL 10, such as POL 104, Constitutional Law).

POL 30: We have recently changed the requirements for upper-division theory courses from their historical requirement of junior-standing only, to making POL-030 (*Political Theory and Ideology*) the sole prerequisite for upper division theory

courses. There were obvious reasons for this move, given the logical progression of providing a broad grounding in theoretical sources and methods prior to more advanced work. Students have confirmed the merits of this approach. Under the old requirements, most students took POL-030 (the introduction to the theory curriculum) early in their political science coursework. However, several took the courses out of order as allowed under the old catalog standards. Of these, two have approached Dr. Covington independently to tell him how much taking POL-030 would have helped prepare for the upper division courses. Lastly, we have removed the writing intensive status from POL-30 and added it to POL 130 and 131.

POL 40: Drs. Penksa and Covington have agreed that students often are not well equipped to carry out advance research projects in upper division courses because some students postpone taking POL 40 to later in their careers. As such, we have begun to advise students to take POL-40 either in their first or second year of study. We have not formalized a requirement to take POL-40 prior to upper division coursework since some students may take POL-40 concurrently with upper-division coursework (this is especially true for students who declare PS as a major in their second year of study, are transfer students or double major). Moreover, since Dr. Knecht will teach POL 40, we have opted to wait for his arrival before making any significant changes beyond a “flexible approach” of strong encouragement for students to enroll in POL 40 early on in their PS program of study. Program review is ongoing in this area.

Related to our discussions about encouraging majors to take POL-040 (*Empirical Political Research*) early in their courses of study, Dr. Covington reviewed his records (mostly written responses to student research papers) for indicators of the quality of research, writing, and analysis by students in POL-130, *Classical Political Theory*. These results (included below) suggest significant needs in all three areas, particularly writing. (Please note that the scores on “research” involve both the acquisition of appropriate resources *and* conforming to required standards of presenting that research through literature reviews, focused research questions and hypotheses, and research designs.)

	POL 130 F'07	POL 130 F'08
Total Students	13	9
Good Research	7	3
Problematic Research	5	6
Good Writing	4	2
Problematic Writing	8	4
Good Analysis	4	2
Problematic Analysis	6	5

The above data does not offer much by way of detail. Dr. Covington’s written comments on students’ work suggest that improved literature reviews (increased synthesis, especially) and attention to appropriate research designs represent

nearly ubiquitous needs. This supports our decision to encourage students to take POL-040 early in their course of study.

Related to assessment more broadly, this data suggests that there is room for real growth in areas of student writing and analytical thinking. In comments to students related to their analyses, two broad themes emerge. First, when there are problems in this area, students are often over-dependent on their sources to establish their arguments, neglecting critical engagement with those sources. Second, when students do speak more clearly with their own voices, they are sometimes prone to assert rather than demonstrate. As regards writing, problem areas include organization, and general editing for grammar, syntax, diction, and overall clarity. Third, students often are not consistent in their use of citation methods. To improve consistency among student work, the DOPS has decided to adopt the American Political Science Association (APSA) standards for citation methods. All students enrolled in PS courses now will be required to use APSA standards.

Our expectation is that taking POL 40 earlier in a student career will improve the quality of student research, analytical thinking and written communication. We will assess this outcome over the next three years.

The Need for a 4th Member of the DOPS to teach Comparative Politics

In the Political Science Department Report of 2000, we identified the need for an additional full-time faculty member to teach Comparative Politics with a non-Western regional specialization (e.g. Asian, African, Middle East...). Since 2000, this need has become more apparent due to the ongoing commitment of Westmont College and the DOPS to globalize its curriculum and to increase course offerings that will improve student knowledge of diverse political, cultural, economic, religious, and historical processes.

Due to the absence of a full-time faculty member in the area of Comparative Politics, the PS Department lacks an introductory course in Comparative Politics, one of the four major fields in political science. The DOPS also is unable to offer upper division Comparative Politics courses in non-European regions. While Dr. Penksa recently has extended her research focus to include Afghanistan and Pakistan, her primary regional training in Comparative Politics is European in focus. The track in International Affairs is a popular specialization among PS majors; student education would be greatly enhanced by adding someone to teach non-Western Comparative political systems. Many Westmont College students are interested in pursuing global careers; they need training and exposure to diverse political systems if they are to be well trained to meet the exigencies of a diverse global community. This perceived need was confirmed in a career advising session for students specializing in International Affairs offered on March 22, 2007; students requested more course offerings in international and comparative politics.

To increase the persuasiveness of our case for a fourth department member in Comparative Politics, we will assemble the data on the number of students who have graduated with a specialization in International Affairs, Westmont College course enrollments in IR and CP classes, advisee totals over a ten year period, and comparative program data from similarly sized departments at other liberal arts colleges.

Student Learning Outcomes

The DOPS approaches the tasks of program review and assessment with the belief that such work will enhance effective teaching and learning. Our approach focuses on the development of student knowledge, skills and values. At present, the DOPS has directed its assessment efforts to focus on the learning outcomes of *research skills, written communication, oral communication and critical thinking and analysis*. Certainly, these are not the only objectives that we have for our graduates; these are simply the learning outcomes that we have targeted for this current phase of assessment.

In 2008-2009, the DOPS developed a rubric (Attachment A) for professor assessment of student work in research skills and written communication (in recognition that the rubric was a “living document” to be revised and augmented with the arrival of our third department colleague in 2009). We also agreed on the need to develop department rubrics for oral communication and peer review of oral and written communication. Dr. Penksa successfully has utilized rubrics for oral communication and peer review in both POL 112 and POL 126; the department is in agreement that peer review is an effective learning strategy and is committed to developing it as an explicit and common pedagogical technique. Given the expertise that Dr. Knecht has in service learning, the department will explore how to increase student participation in service learning, including ways to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs.

In addition to departmental assessment, Drs. Penksa and Covington participated in General Education Assessment activities. Dr. Covington intensively engaged with the Common Contexts: Philosophical Reflections on Truth and Value group, meeting seven times during the course of the first year and implementing an assessment rubric during Mayterm and Fall 2009. Dr. Covington also attended the “Thinking Historically” G.E. assessment group and the “Introduction to the Liberal Arts” G.E. assessment group. Dr. Penksa participated in the “Thinking Globally” assessment group, offered suggestions for the development of the common assessment rubric and utilized the rubric in POL 20.

Learning Outcomes: Data and Interpretation

In 2008-2009, the DOPS utilized the research and written communication rubric in POL 122 and POL 131 and administered the oral communication rubric in POL 126

and POL 122. The majority of our work during the year was focused on hiring, program review (see above) and the development of an initial assessment plan. Additionally, we also participated in the SAILS instructional quiz administered by the Westmont College library. All graduating seniors in Political Science participated in the online instructional quiz. We have not received any data yet.

In addition to the utilization of rubrics, the DOPS also relies on the following assessment techniques:

- ❖ Exit interviews for graduating seniors (6 students per year)
- ❖ Senior surveys (frequency to be determined)
- ❖ Alumni surveys (1 every five years)
- ❖ Library SAILS instructional quiz (Spring 2009 in cooperation with Claudia Scott but the DOPS was not provided with data to analyze)
- ❖ Student peer review
- ❖ Examination and analysis of pedagogical techniques, course syllabi, readings and assignments – within courses and across the department and longitudinally
- ❖ Evaluation of service learning and internship requirements

Next Steps and Time Table for Program Review and Assessment

Objectives for 2009-2010

- ✓ To revise the research and writing rubric to include an analytical skills learning outcome rubric
- ✓ To develop an oral communication rubric
- ✓ To create a peer review rubric for oral and written communication
- ✓ To establish an assessment implementation plan, including identification of the assessment techniques that will be used for each learning outcome and the production of a 3 year timeline for the 6 year report due in 2012
- ✓ To engage in department assessment of two/four of the prioritized learning outcomes

- ✓ To update faculty biographical information on the department web page, including c.v.'s
- ✓ To develop and submit the proposal for a fourth department member in the primary field of Comparative Politics
- ✓ To meet with the Director of Intercultural Programs regarding ways to improve our support of diverse students and increase diversity curriculum programming
- ✓ To meet with the new Director of the Library to discuss resource needs in PS
- ✓ To read and discuss the recently published book: *Assessment in Political Science (APSA 2009)*

Objectives for 2010-2011

- ✓ To review and revise Department Mission Statement
- ✓ To write a "Department Policies and Procedures" component to the web page including a common set of guidelines for students who request letters of reference, a department policy for citation (APSA) practices, etc.
- ✓ To continue comprehensive curriculum and program review
- ✓ To engage in ongoing departmental assessment of learning outcomes and to evaluate the success of department assessment techniques
- ✓ To conduct a career advising session for PS majors
- ✓ To gather missing data in preparation for the 2012 report