

## Political Science Department 2009-2010 Annual Assessment Update

### I. Mission Statement and Student Learning Outcomes

- a. **Mission Statement** – Our department mission statement is currently under revision, Fall 2010. This is our first task for the new semester. We identified this objective for 2010-2011 in last year’s report.

- b. **Student Learning Outcomes – Revised Fall 2009**

**Disciplinary Knowledge:** Students will demonstrate competence in the major content areas of political science, including American politics, international politics, comparative politics, and political theory, including integral Christian perspectives on each.

**Methodology: Research & Analysis:** Students will evidence competent skills in research methods and analytical thinking, including the ability to critically engage existing research and to conduct original research.

**Citizenship: Global & Service-Oriented:** Students will demonstrate awareness, sensitivity, and responsibility as members of diverse local, national, and international communities, understanding the pursuit of justice and peace as part of Christian service in politics.

**Communication: Oral & Written:** Students will communicate capably and appropriately in both written and oral formats.

- c. **Alignment Table – Updated Spring 2010**

### II. Follow Up on Action Items identified in previous reports

- a. The department works as a team on assessment and program review. As department chair, Dr. Penksa coordinates the work. (While Dr. Penksa was on sabbatical January-August 2010, Dr. Covington co-coordinated).
- b. Last year, the PS Department identified the following 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 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 Completed in 2009-2010:**

- ✓ To revise the research and writing rubric to include an analytical skills learning outcome rubric
- ✓ To develop an oral communication rubric
- ✓ 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 (we completed the first of the two objectives)
- ✓ To engage in department assessment of two prioritized learning outcomes
- ✓ To meet with the new Director of the Library to discuss resource needs in PS
- ✓ To update faculty biographical information on the department web page, including c.v.'s (bio information completed; CV's need to be uploaded)

- ✓ To continue program review (i.e. initiate course rotation changes for American Politics and Political Theory; require POL 40 as a prerequisite for most upper division courses; require POL 10, 20 and/or POL 30 as a prerequisite for upper division courses in the subfield specialization)

**Objectives Initiated in 2009-2010 and Carried Over Into 2010-2011:**

- ✓ To create a peer review rubric for oral and written communication
- ✓ To produce a 3 year timeline for the 6 year report due in 2012
- ✓ Upload faculty CV's to the web page

**Remaining Objectives from 2009-2010 yet to be completed:**

- ✓ 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 read and discuss the recently published book: *Assessment in Political Science (APSA 2009)*

**Objectives Identified in 2009-2010 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 data in preparation for the 2012 report

### III. 2009-2010 Focus

#### *Learning Outcome: Methodology: Research and Analysis (rubric)*

- A. Summary of assessment methods and collected data (see attached summary and analysis by Drs. Knecht and Covington)
- B. Data Interpretation

#### **POL 20: International Politics Spring 2010 (Dr. Knecht)**

The central research project for POL 20: *International Politics* was a position paper that integrated international relations theory with a contemporary case study (see attached paper guidelines). Most students worked in pairs, although a few wrote single-authored papers. The aggregate grading rubric shows figures that are somewhat expected in a lower-division, general education course (see Table 1). Although all students selected a good research topic, a significant percentage fell short of expectations when it came to writing an effective literature review (39 percent), providing sufficient data and/or evidence to answer the research question (27 percent), and offering an effective analysis of the situation (33 percent). In sum, there is room for improvement in our students' research skills.

A more troubling and persistent problem concerns students' written work. Here we see considerably more variation in student performance, with almost as many students exceeding expectations on writing structure (27 percent) as falling short of expectations (33 percent). These data are consistent with my experience of student writing at Westmont and elsewhere: there is a wide chasm between the good writers and the poor writers. I believe student writing generally fall short of our expectations for three main reasons, 1) students are writing the paper at the last moment, 2) students fail to revise and edit, and/or 3) students do not know what a good paper looks like. I repeatedly stressed the first two points in class and, largely, the onus is on the student when it comes to the amount of work they put into their papers. However, I will try to do a better job going through the fundamentals of writing and making clear my expectations of a term paper both in my substantive classes and in *POL 40: Empirical Political Research* (see 2010-2011 Plan).

Although the aggregate performance for the POL 20 term paper was somewhat disappointing, it is important to remember that the course is a GE populated with many non-majors and first-year students. Most of these students have yet to enroll in our research methods course, which teaches many of the research and writing fundamentals that I found lacking. It is also important to note that I was quite pleased with my students' performance in all other areas of the course, including multiple-choice exams, daily quizzes, and especially our class discussion. Nevertheless, the data presented here suggests that I must do a better job teaching research and writing to my students.

**Summarize the assessment methods that have been used and what data have been collected (Dr. Covington)**

- i. I aggregated rubric scores in POL-30 (Fall), POL-131 (Spring), and POL-140 (Spring)
- ii. Dataset Totals:
  1. POL-30: 31/34 Students
  2. POL-131: 8/9 Students
  3. POL-140: 15/16 Students
- iii. Prompts: See attachment
- iv. Rubrics: See appendix

*Methodology Objective (Research and Analysis):* The data for POL 140 (see Table I) show mixed results in this category. The strongest areas of student research include articulating a research question (14/15 meeting or exceeding expectations—93.3%) and using appropriate bibliographic and citation methods (11/15—73.3%). Of concern are data that suggest students struggled to complete basic components of a research paper. Areas in which nearly half or more of the students fell short of expectations include: the literature review, the research design, and analysis. In part, this may reflect the absence of a research methods course for several years due to faculty retirement and replacement.

The data for POL 131 (see Table II) reveal slightly more encouraging data in several research and analysis categories. As with POL 140, all but one student met expectations for articulating a research question. However in POL 131, students performed very well on their literature reviews (8/8—100%) meeting or exceeding expectations. Moreover, students performed well with their analyses, with 6/8 (75%) meeting expectations. One possible reason for the difference between the two courses pertains to the readings assigned in each: in POL 131, students are asked to read journal articles that largely conform to the same research methods that students are asked to use, whereas the literature assigned for POL 140 is quite different. As in POL 140, research designs in POL 131 were weak, with only 3/8 meeting expectations (37.5%).

The data collected for POL 30 (see Table III) indicate positive results as regards students' analytical skills. 28 of 32 students scored in the top two categories with regard to making connections between ideas (item 7 on the rubric), as did 20 of 31 students with analysis (item 8). Indeed only one student scored below expectations in analysis. However, that 10 students scored in the "competent" category suggests that there is room for improvement here. Comparing student performance between the first writing assignment of the semester and the fourth (see Table IV), there are signs of incremental improvement: students improved an average of .16 (on the 5-point scale) in the "connections" category (item 7) and .12 in the "analysis" category (item 8).

***Learning Outcome: Communication: Oral and Written (rubric)***

- A. Summary of assessment methods and collected data (see attached summary and analysis by Drs. Knecht and Covington)**
- B. Data interpretation**

**POL 109: POLITICAL PARTIES AND INTEREST GROUPS (SPRING 2010) Dr. Knecht**

POL 109: Political Parties and Interest Groups is an upper-division course that I taught much like a graduate seminar. The central requirement for POL 109 was original research on a topic related to political parties or interest groups, culminating in a 15-20 page paper (see research guide). Although students had various deadlines to meet (e.g., turning in a research question and research guide, writing an annotated bibliography, peer reviews, etc...), they were largely responsible for their own research. This “seminar” philosophy was consistent with my expectations of upper-division students: they should not need professors to micromanage their time. It is also consistent with how I have taught the course in the past, both at the University of Denver and UC Santa Barbara. Unfortunately, the aggregate results from the grading rubrics suggest dramatic change is needed (Table II).

POL 109 is, without a doubt, the most disappointing course I have taught. The aggregate results described in Table II show that students struggled in most areas of research and writing. These struggles are particularly evident in the large percentage of students who fail to meet expectations in articulating hypotheses and designing an effective research strategy (50 percent), analyzing data (57 percent), and writing a literature review (42 percent). Students fared no better in their writing, with 50 percent of the class falling below expectations.

There are numerous reasons why POL 109 failed to live up to expectations, but here I will concentrate on one: students started their research project way too late in the term. Despite my repeated admonishments to start the project early and work steadily throughout the term, students tended to procrastinate until it was too late. And, because of the way I structured the class, it was easy for the students to put off their research and/or go off on unproductive tangents. Students also remarked that they felt I left them to sink-or-swim in this project and that I failed to provide the help they needed. The problem of procrastination can be addressed by forcing students submit multiple sections of their paper throughout the term. Additionally, I am committed to doing a better job of providing students with more feedback and assistance throughout the term. Although I am conflicted about this new strategy—I still think students need to learn how to work on self-imposed deadlines—I feel that the result will be better student research, better papers, and ultimately, a better course.

## **POL 140 and POL 30 Dr. Covington**

*Communication Objective (Oral)* (see Table V): Broadly speaking, most POL-140 students met or exceeded oral communication expectations on their major presentation assignment. Students demonstrated the greatest competence in the *delivery* of their presentations (item 2 on the rubric), with 14 of 16 students meeting or exceeding assignment expectations (87.5%). Students performed relatively well with regard to the purpose, focus, organization and clarity, etc. (item 1 on the rubric), with 11 out of 16 meeting or exceeding expectations (68.8%). Likewise, 10 of the 16 students also met or exceeded expectations (62.5%) as regards supports for their presentations (item 3 on the rubric). That 5 students fell short in purpose, focus, organization, clarity, etc. is of some concern, as is the fact that 6 fell short of expectations in supporting their presentations. Knowing that these are areas with room for growth, they can be emphasized in the future.

*Communication Objective (Written)*: Indications in this area for POL-140 (see Table I) are broadly positive. In purpose, focus, and organization, 11/15 students (73.3%) met or exceeded expectations. In sentence form, diction, grammar, spelling, etc. the results were even stronger, with 13/15 students (86.7%) meeting or exceeding expectations.

The data for POL 30 (see Table III) suggest the development of solid writing skills as no more than three students failed to meet expectations in any of the four writing categories (items 1-4 on the rubric). However, there is room for improvement given the relatively high numbers scoring in the “competent” range on these items (8 for rubric item 1 and 10 for rubric item 2). Comparing student performance between the first and fourth writing assignments of the semester reveals little change—an average of only -.05 change on the 5-point scale for the writing categories (aggregated). It is somewhat surprising that positive change is not indicated, but this may be due to some intervening variable. I will plan to compare the first and third assignments next year.

### **C. Departmental Response**

First, the PS department discussed the above data results and concurred that we need to continue to track the change in student learning based on the program review changes that we instituted last year, namely requiring students to take *POL 40: Empirical Political Research*, prior to taking upper division courses. We believe (based on data results) that students will perform better in upper division courses if they already have taken POL 40. We will continue to link assessment efforts to program review and monitor the effects of the program changes that we instituted last year.

Second, we have worked with Savannah (the PS Dept library liaison) to redesign the PS department library web page. We also have invited her to provide research instruction to all of our classes and believe this will facilitate student learning.

Third, the 3 PS department members will change portions of their course assignments to better communicate learning objectives to students.

We do not have any new or revised goals.

Given the centrality of POL 40 to the learning goals of methodology and communication, Dr. Knecht has provided the following plan to improve the effectiveness of POL 40:

### **2010-2011 PLAN (POL 40, Dr. Knecht)**

Dr. Knecht will implement a number of changes in his courses to help our students meet research and writing expectations. Most of these changes will involve revisions to *POL 40: Empirical Political Research*, but some will also occur in his other courses. These changes include:

- Teaching POL 40 as a two-hour course instead of a one-hour course, which allows more time for student exercises, discussion, and reflection.
- Devoting four, two-hour class sessions to writing a research paper in POL 40. Devoting more class time to paper writing in my substantive courses.
- Developing a paper-writing guide that takes students through various sections of a research paper drawing on examples from peer reviewed journals and books.
- Increasing the opportunities for feedback on student writing by 1) having students submit more drafts of their papers, 2) personally reviewing those drafts, 3) offering more comments on student papers and aiming for a quicker turnaround time.
- Increased contact with political science librarian Savannah Kelly, including having her teach one, two-hour session on library research.
- Developed LibGuide instructional resource with Savannah.
- More effective tracking and assessing POL 40 students. As a department, we envision POL 40 providing the skill-set students need as they navigate upper-division courses. In order to better track whether POL 40 is serving this purpose, we will make several new assessments. First, I have developed a pre-/post-test of empirical political research terms. By assessing students on the first and last days of class, we gain a better understanding of how much they actually got out of the course. Second, we will track students that have taken POL 40 as they progress through the major. If POL 40 is serving its purpose, we should see evidence that students who have taken the course are outperforming their peers who have not yet taken the class.



There are also several additions and changes planned for 2010-2011 beyond student research and writing. These changes include a greater emphasis on service learning and experiential learning.

- Offer service-learning courses. *POL 110: American Public Opinion* will be taught as a service-learning course, where students will design, conduct, and interpret a survey for a community partner. The service learning assignment serves two purposes. First, it grounds abstract theories of survey research methodology in concrete application. Second, service learning allows Westmont students to apply their learning in the service of others. In the past, students have conducted opinion polls for groups that advocate for the homeless; groups that provide meals for the indigent; and an organization that does hospice work with terminal AIDS patients. In short, the service learning assignment enhances student learning and offers a way for Westmont to give back to the broader community.
- Dr. Knecht is serving on the experiential learning task force at Westmont.
- Finding new teaching techniques to address different learning styles. For example, in *POL 108: US Congress* will use a simulation of Congress (SIMCONG) to provide concrete applications to more abstract congressional theories. The simulation requires students choose a real-life member of Congress and then seek the goals related to that position. In SIMCONG, for example, students will write their own bills, meet in committees and floor sessions, and communicate with their constituency. By playing politics, students will better understand parliamentary procedure, budgetary politics, and the legislative process.

#### **Dr. Covington**

- i. I plan to assess the first and third assignments in POL-30 next time (rather than the first and fourth); determine if results this year are spurious.
- ii. I plan to continue emphasizing research and writing skills in each relevant class, while also anticipating the impact of POL-40 as more students take this prior to upper-division courses.
- iii. Improve communication regarding expectations of oral communication assignment in POL-140.

#### **IV. Next Steps**

*Our weekly Tuesday department meetings focus on assessment and program review. We collectively work on tasks together and delegate appropriate tasks to Ruby Jeanne, department secretary, as needed.*

### **Remaining Objectives from 2009-2010 yet to be completed:**

- ✓ To develop and submit the proposal for a fourth department member in the primary field of Comparative Politics (postponed)
- ✓ To meet with the Director of Intercultural Programs regarding ways to improve our support of diverse students and increase diversity curriculum programming (timing to be determined)
- ✓ To read and discuss the recently published book: *Assessment in Political Science (APSA 2009)* (timing to be determined)

### **Objectives Identified for 2010-2011:**

- ✓ To review and revise Department Mission Statement (September and October)
- ✓ 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. (November)
- ✓ To continue comprehensive curriculum and program review (ongoing)
- ✓ To engage in departmental assessment of the **CITIZENSHIP** learning outcome (Spring 2011: POL 110 and POL 190, both taught by Dr. Knecht)
- ✓ To conduct a career advising session for PS majors (date to be determined)
- ✓ To gather data in preparation for the 2012 report and produce a 2 year timeline (ongoing)
- ✓ To create a peer review rubric for oral and written communication (January-February)
- ✓ Upload faculty CV’s to the web page (October)
- ✓ To meet as a department with the new Dean of Assessment (Fall 2010)

## **V. Appendices**

- A. Alignment Chart**
- B. Dr. Covington's Instrument and Data Analysis**
- C. Dr. Knecht's Instrument and Data Analysis**
- D. PS Department Research, Analysis and Communication Rubric**
- E. Updated Multi-Year Plan**