Annual Assessment Report

Department of Political Science

May 2019

Introduction

Several years ago the political science faculty adopted a list of nine specific learning outcomes under the three broad headings of knowledge, values, and skills. Each year we have assessed our students' mastery of one of these learning outcomes. For several years we adopted the pattern of assessing a single outcome for three years in a row in order to allow us to track progress. While this makes sense if the primary goal is to develop longitudinal evidence, assessing this way will require 27 years to cover all of our learning outcomes. (See the end of this document for the complete list of outcomes.) Given this very long horizon, we decided this year to assess a new learning outcome, and we will likely pick yet another one next year. This year's target was to see whether students are "able to communicate research findings and arguments in a clear, logical, and persuasive manner" based on a team reading of a collection of short papers.

The papers came from Greg Shaw's *American Health Policy* (PSCI 282) course, taught in the spring of 2019. The assignment asked students to identify a problem with the Affordable Care Act of 2010, to propose a solution to that problem, and to discuss likely points of political opposition to that solution and what might be done to overcome such opposition. We divided the 8 papers into two groups of 4. Each paper was read independently by two faculty members. These paired readings have generated many useful conversations over the years, as we reflect on the types of assignments we give, students' abilities, the grading rubrics we use, and so forth. In response to these insights, many of us in the department have modified assignments to be more clear and, hopefully, impactful. The paired readings for assessment purposes also allows us to check inter-scorer reliability. This May, Greg Shaw and William Munro worked as a pair, as did Jim Simeone and Tari Renner.

Findings

Overall, Jim and Tari assessed their 4 papers as being somewhat less solid than Greg and William found the other 4 selections. We used a three-point scale to score the papers, ranging from under-developed, to developing, to mastery. Jim and Tari's scores assumed an essentially normal distribution, with the modal score being in the (middle) developing column, and fewer in each of the mastery and the under-developed columns. William and Greg's scores were mostly in the developing column, with a minority of them in the mastery column. William and Greg assigned three of their 20 scores to the underdeveloped column. This cross-sample difference may be attributable to sampling error and / or to the fact that all of the papers came from Greg's class, which may introduce bias. Since the two collections are mutually exclusive, we cannot dissect this gap with any precision.

Judging from either set of scores, we have some work to do to help our students become more consistent across the specific skills involved in this learning outcome, though the students show significant potential. On the whole, the students did better at identifying problems than they did at proposing cogent solutions. Their weakest points came in discussing how they would propose overcoming likely opposition to their proposed solution, and in demonstrating an adequate amount of policy knowledge. Several of the students also struggled with contextualizing their proposed solution. They sometimes failed to situate how a given policy remedy would fit into the larger policy landscape. Given that the assignment involved a highly specific template with space limitations, it seems understandable that the students were often brief in their explanations. However, the point is well taken that they did not consistently make the most of the space they in fact had available to them.

Combining all four readers' scores, the distribution of scores was as follows (cell entries are the number of scores):

Goal	Under-developed	Developing	Mastery
Clear framing of the problem	0	7	5
Proposed solution logically presented	1	5	6
Proposal adequately informed	3	7	2
Proposed solution presented in a persuasive way	1	9	2
Address objections	2	10	0

The disagreements within the pairs of readers were slight. In no instance did two readers of the same paper disagree by more than one point on the 3-point scale.

General Conclusions and Suggestions for Future improvement

As part of our spring 2018 assessment efforts, we noted the need to integrate more assignments at the 200- and 300-levels that ask students to synthesize multiple and competing perspectives. Such skills were clearly called for in the current assignment. Students needed, for instance, to do a better job of understanding the policy problem from the perspective of likely political opponents. We also noted the need to give particular attention to underlying assumptions and implications. Had the students done better this spring, they might have better situated their proposed policy solutions in thorough understandings of the problems.

We recognize that no single assignment is sure to elicit all of the desired components of any of our learning outcome goals. While the group expressed approval of this particular assignment, it's possible that the space limitations embodied in the assignment lead students to write a little less than they otherwise might have.

Finally, reading these papers generated a useful conversation about how students succeed (or not) at writing abstracts. In our way of thinking, abstracts are an instance of concise writing, and that's something we want our students to be proficient at doing. Specifically, we want our students to be able to concisely frame the topic at hand while signaling that they understand how their specific work fits into a larger intellectual context. At least one member of the department who has not done much in the way of teaching how to write an abstract reported that he will work on this in the future.

Appendix

Our department's learning outcomes are the following:

Our expectation is that a graduate in Political Science from Illinois Wesleyan University will:

Knowledge

1. Know the theoretical traditions, debates, and methodological approaches used in the empirical study of political phenomena;
2. Be well versed in the major normative traditions of modern political thought;
3. Know the processes, institutions, and contexts that shape politics at local, national, transnational, and international levels;

Skills

4. Be able to analyze political phenomena critically, recognizing the implications of diverse perspectives, normative positions, and evidentiary claims;
5. Be able to conduct rigorous and original political research, using appropriate analytical frames and methodological instruments to test hypotheses;
6. Be able to communicate research findings and arguments in a clear, logical, and persuasive manner, whether in written or oral form;

Values

7. Be intellectually curious and appreciate the value of critical scholarly work;
8. Appreciate their place, and the place of others, in the broader global community;

9. Value civic engagement and appreciate the importance of active citizenship.