

**Annual Assessment Report
Department of Political Science
May 2026**

Introduction

In 2022, the political science faculty settled on a list of six specific learning outcomes. The earlier list, consisting of nine, had been organized under three broad headings: knowledge, values, and skills. In the process of condensing, we basically jettisoned the three “values” outcomes because they were difficult to assess directly. In their place, we added a skills-based outcome focusing on the tools needed to carry out the values we endorsed—i.e., to become effective “advocates for change.” This outcome operates as a proxy for the abandoned value-based outcomes of appreciation for civic engagement and recognition of privilege. In 2026, we assessed the new “advocacy” outcome. Given that the department has sponsored an “advocacy minor” for years, the choice of this assessment goal made good sense. We further agreed that one of the key normative values we seek to instill—e.g., the importance of engagement for making change—was contained in the learning outcomes.

Process

The advocacy outcome is now the department’s third learning outcome (see Appendix 1 for the full list), specifically, that political science graduates at IWU should “be well-versed in the common strategies employed by advocates for change and their opponents concerning the great challenges facing humanity.”

We decided to break down into three separate skills or specific learning outcomes: (1) identifying common advocacy strategies; (2) analyzing how these strategies vary in their effectiveness; and (3) assessing these strategies in terms of their capacities to address a pressing challenge facing humanity.

Instrument

We devised a rubric (see Appendix 2) to assess how our students did in achieving these skills. The rubric is designed to score written essays, and the assignment in this case was a paper for PSCI/SOC 202 Engagement & the City taught in the Spring 2026 by Professor Simeone. Students were asked to assess the competing strengths and weaknesses of the power-based and assets-building models of community organizing in the context of a 2016-2017 controversial police substation proposal made by the Bloomington City Council. This pitted several long-standing capacity-building groups against the nascent Black Lives Matter group in town.

Ten essays were randomly selected—every other paper—from the class of 22, and three members of the department (Munro, Shaw, and Simeone). Seven of the ten selected were written by Political Science majors; the other three were undecided as to major, International and Global Studies, and Psychology. Three were first-years, three were sophomores, and four were juniors.

Findings

After the three professors scored each of the ten essays using the rubric, we came together to discuss our impressions. Two global comments were the following:

(1) while the students did a good job labeling and identifying the different approaches to community organizing (e.g., the power-based approach and the capacity-building approach), but they were not great at applying the logic of the models to the facts of the case;
(2) the students tended to use the claim, objection, rejoinder approach in a wooden way, supplying stock objections. It just so happened that the essays selected almost all sided with the power-based approach, which added to the sense that there was not much of a debate present. Professor Simeone reported that in the full student array and in the live class debate on the topic, the positions were more mixed, and the overall stakes of the issue more pressingly felt.

The first global comment raised the old issue of our students' ability (or relative inability) to apply in detail and nuance the theories we offer in class. It could be said that applying theories to facts is what social scientists do—so this has been a skill that we have monitored frequently over the years. In this case, it seemed that many students were better at articulating the theories as abstractions than showing how they were illustrated in the details of the Bloomington substation/police review board case study. This ability to do two things at once in writing is a higher order skill, so we have learned to be humble in expecting immediate results. We concluded that in the case of this outcome, it is never learned until practiced over and over again.

The second global comment raised the issue of just how much our students were willing to explore and consider in writing the position and strategies entailed in the “losing” side of the debate—whichever side they did not favor. It seemed that the larger significance of west Bloomington community development was lost for many students in the game of picking a winner in the debate and making it stick rhetorically.

Despite these deficiencies in performance, we agreed that overall advocacy of some kind was recognized as a worthy value by our students. Recognition that effective commitment to the value required critical thinking was something that perhaps was just dawning on them. On the one hand, the assignment presented with a challenging case study, which took place in the community surrounding IWU and for which there was no easy resolution, though having many weighty consequences for the people of the nearby, resource-challenged West side neighborhood of Bloomington. On the other hand, our students had not performed as well as expected and it was clear the whole assignment needed to be tweaked, as is so often the case in achieving excellence in teaching.

Closing the loop: how can we teach better?

We see room for improvement in the following ways:

The prompt could have been more pointed in making clear the need to apply the theories and explore their logics in context as opposed to simply championing say the power-based model because it was “empowering” or the capacity-building model because it promised more “long term” gains.

The assignment might have asked for a longer, more detailed analysis. The paper was to be 5 pages. Perhaps to get the depth we want from the students. 10 pages would have been more appropriate. If practice makes perfect, they need more time and space to practice.

Appendix 1
The department's six student learning outcomes
(adopted at our department retreat on July 15, 2022)

A graduate in Political Science from Illinois Wesleyan University will:

1. Know the theoretical traditions, debates, and methodological approaches used in the empirical study of political phenomena;
2. Know the ideas, institutions, and processes that shape politics at local, national, transnational, and international levels;
3. Be well versed in the common strategies employed by advocates for change and their opponents concerning the great challenges facing humanity;
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.

Appendix 2
2026 Advocacy Assessment Rubric

1. How well did the paper writer identify and define the strategies under discussion?

Proficient	developing	emerging
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2. How well did the paper writer analyze the effectiveness of the strategies in the setting?

Proficient	developing	emerging
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3. How well did the paper writer demonstrate understanding of the significance of the pressing challenge?

Proficient	developing	emerging
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