

Summary of Critical Trained PLO
Department of Political Science
2013-14

1. Assessment Method. The Political Science Department used two direct assessment methods during the 2013-14 academic year. First, we applied the AAC&U's "Inquiry and Value Rubric" to assess student research papers in Prof. Knecht's POL 111: American Foreign Policy course. Using this method, we observed how seventeen upper-division, political science majors put their knowledge of social science methods to use in crafting a 15-25 page paper.

Second, we used a pre/post-test design to test students' knowledge of social science methods. This process is as follows: 1) all students (usually first-years or sophomores) enrolled in POL 40: Empirical Political Research (the department's required methods course) take a pre-test the first day of class; 2) the POL 40 Final Exam asks questions similar to those asked in the pre-test; and, finally, 3) upper-division students in Prof. Penksa's POL 123 course (Spring 2013) and Prof. Knecht's POL 111 course (Spring 2014) took a similar, non-graded post-test. The nature of this design allows us to assess 1) how much students know about research methods prior to taking POL 40, 2) how much they learn in POL 40, and 3) how much information they retain as upper-division students.

2. Findings. Overall, our findings were mixed. The "Rubric" method of assessment uses a scale of 1 (Developing) to 4 (Capstone) to assess student work along six criteria. The average rubric scores were as follows: Topic Selection = 3; Existing Knowledge = 2.5; Design = 2.4; Analysis = 2.3; Conclusions = 2.5; and Limitations and Implications = 2.3. The POL 111 class was roughly divided between those students who wrote a qualitative paper and those who wrote a quantitative paper. Comparing rubric scores from these two groups yielded no statistically significant difference in paper quality. Although the mean scores reveal fairly average performance, there was a large variance: some papers exhibited graduate-level sophistication, while others were clearly needed additional work.

The pre/post-test design also yielded several interesting findings. First, the analysis shows that students learn a lot in POL 40. While incoming students averaged only 48 percent on the pre-test, they scored 83 percent on their final exam. Second, much of the knowledge gained in POL 40 seems to be lost by the time students enter their junior or senior years. For instance, our upper-division students averaged only 67 percent when they retook the post-test, a loss of 16 points since the time they left POL 40. Finally, disaggregating the data by question reveals that students at all levels still struggle with certain aspects of social science methodology, such as interpretation of quantitative statistics.

3. Effectiveness of our current assessment methods. We are satisfied with our current assessment methods and will continue both strategies.

4. Potential changes as the result of our assessment. The Political Science Department is taking several steps to close the loop. First, we have already discussed, and will continue to discuss, ways that we can increase student retention of social science research methods. This includes offering students more opportunities to conduct research and to read quantitative

research, and more consistent emphasis of methodology in our upper-division courses. Second, Drs. Penksa and Knecht have discussed ways to better connect what students are learning in POL 40 with what we are doing in our upper-division courses. We believe that considerable improvement will come from very simple changes, like using consistent terminology (e.g., using the phrase “qualitative methods” instead of “case study methods”). Third, the results suggest upper-division students need more guidance and review on research methods than we’ve been giving them. Fourth, we will continue to build and learn from our pre/post dataset. The results have been very interesting and have already lead Prof. Knecht to change the way he teaches POL 40, which will hopefully improve students’ understanding and retention.