

Assessment Report AY 2012-2013

Political Science Department

January 20, 2014

During the past Academic Year, the Department has undertaken the assessment of the Department's progress in achieving two selective Learning Outcomes focused on active learning and public service, and career preparation. These constitute Departmental Learning Outcomes Numbers 9 and 10 for Political Science or POLS (formally POLS-BA-01) majors:

- **(9) Active Learning/Public Service:** Students will be actively engaged in the learning process both in the classroom and in extracurricular activities so as to stimulate their curiosity, interest them in public life, foster openness, and increase their self-confidence.
- **(10) Career Preparation:** Students will have developed realistic ideas for applying their knowledge and skills in meaningful employment and/or further educational opportunities after graduation, in part through internships, independent research, and special programming.

The Department last assessed "Career Preparation" outcomes in AY 2005-06, utilizing a departmentally generated survey of former students (N=1100) with a very low response rate (N of 67). Open comments did tend to emphasize the very broad range of career paths chosen by alumni and general satisfaction in this area. In 2005-06, as again for 2013-14, the Department examined data produced by the Office of Career Services, but found the N for Political Science majors too small to be of any value. The Department has not previously assessed "Active Learning" outcomes.

Methodological Approach

To assess the above two learning outcomes this year, the Department examined the annual HSS Survey of Students conducted by Jason Dahling. Professor Dahling provided additional political Science information at our request. For reasons discussed below, a Departmental committee also designed and distributed a custom Qualtrics survey to all POLS seniors registered in the capstone seminars for the year. Dr. Bowen designed and emailed the survey link using class rosters; instructors followed-up with a reminders to their students to respond. Approximately half did so. Beyond this the Department drew various data from other sources that are identified in the following discussion. Various activities and events referred to all have their

own paper trail. (Note this report refers to POLS majors, but post-transformation the courses are labeled POL.)

Active Learning/Public Service Outcomes

This learning outcome addresses efforts to stimulate and engage POLS students both in the classroom and through extracurricular activities. Beyond the classroom itself the Department engages in various activities including the Politics Forum run by Dr. Miriam Lowi, the Celebration of Student Achievement coordinated first by Dr. Sarah Chartock and now by Dr. Dan Bowen, Model UN's with Dr. Brian Potter, and Moot Court with Dr. Daryl Fair that are intellectually stimulating, although no attempt is made here to evaluate these separately.

While overall an outcome such as "active learning" is difficult to measure directly, it was explored in several questions on the 2012-13 Departmental Assessment Survey of Seniors. In terms of responses regarding several aspects of their POL coursework in Question #6, 23 of the 27 seniors (85%) said their political science courses were intellectually stimulating "most of the time" or "nearly always." (Thirteen said most of the time and 10 said nearly always.) Again, about three out of four (20 of the 27) found their political science courses "helpful for interpreting current events and political processes" most of the time or nearly always. Responses to Question #6 also indicated that seniors found—almost universally—their courses leave them prepared to participate in politics and civic affairs. Finally, as a measure of sustained interest in the major, responses to Question #13 about "plans after graduation" indicated found that only 3 of 27 majors indicated that they planned to work in a field unrelated to their political science degree. Ten of the 27 indicated law school plans—a bit higher than our expectation, but overall the seniors clearly sustained an interest in the discipline.

In terms of extracurricular activities, it should be noted that political science faculty serve as advisors to over a half dozen various clubs and honor societies. Some activities involve considerable contact with students as with Dr. Potter's work with three Model UN programs—a service to both POLS and International Studies students. Dr. Fair takes students to both regional and the national Moot Court competition. The faculty leads by example and with a giving spirit. Responses to Question #14 which invited students to list their activities indicate that 22 out of 27 senior majors (over 80%) reported involvement in extracurricular (other than work) both on and off campus. Most frequently mentioned were political clubs and organizations, student government, the campus leadership development program, other clubs and honor societies, residential life, Greek life (both social and service organizations), and sports. Off campus activities included the Ewing School Board, local politics, and musical organizations. The degree of involvement, the range of activities, and their public service component proves impressive and gives testimony to our majors being motivated and prepared to be involved in politics, law and decision-making.

Career Preparation Outcomes

The Department assists students in career preparation in a variety of ways, through its traditional courses, internships, career- related advising with the adviser of record, and career-related programming. Generally speaking, the Department also publicizes and cooperates in the Office of Career Service's activities when it becomes aware of them, but interaction between our two units is very limited. We send students there for resume writing workshop, learning interviewing skills, and the like.

Classroom:

Responses to Question #6 of the 2012-13 Departmental Assessment Survey show that 16 of the 27 seniors responding (60%) found that their classes contributed to their personal or professional development "most of the time" or "nearly always". One might hope for a higher score here, yet clearly in terms of professional development different courses certainly prepare students for differing careers to differing degrees. For example, POL 300/Politics and Public Management explores jobs in the public service (civil service and political appointments especially in the executive branch) and graduate schools with MPA and MPP programs. Law related courses, including the newly created Moot Court course, focus more on the substance of the law and on specific skills, like making oral arguments or writing legal briefs, which prepare students for the legal profession. A long history of discussions with law school attendees has repeatedly emphasized the importance of being able to write briefs before entering law school.

The Department typically hires American Politics adjunct instructors who are working in the public sector, in part to further positive career- related outcome. Recently Dr. Stu Koch taught a seminar with Bradley Brewster, a Trustee of the College and contract lobbyist. Mr. Brewster arranged for a range of guest speakers, practitioners from the legislature and the world of lobbying and public affairs. This past fall semester, William Healey, a lobbyist with experience teaching at NYU, offered a topics course on advocacy and public affairs, a course more "applied" than most (and Richard Keevey the former Director of the NJ Office of Management and Budget will be teaching a course on public budgeting in the spring) . Generally speaking, however, Political Science faculty members seeks to impart knowledge related to the field and to develop and encourage critical thinking; as a whole we are not especially "applied" or "vocational" in our teaching. The Department has developed but not yet offered an experiential learning (CEL-2) course—largely because of demands elsewhere. It does not have a non-credit career development course like some departments, referring students to the HSS 201/Career Planning course. Evidence shows few POLS majors attend it; many would not otherwise be on campus that day. It is important then to think in terms of career competencies that may be developed in traditional POL classes, but for the most part they are developed through other contacts with faculty and staff.

Career Competency Items:

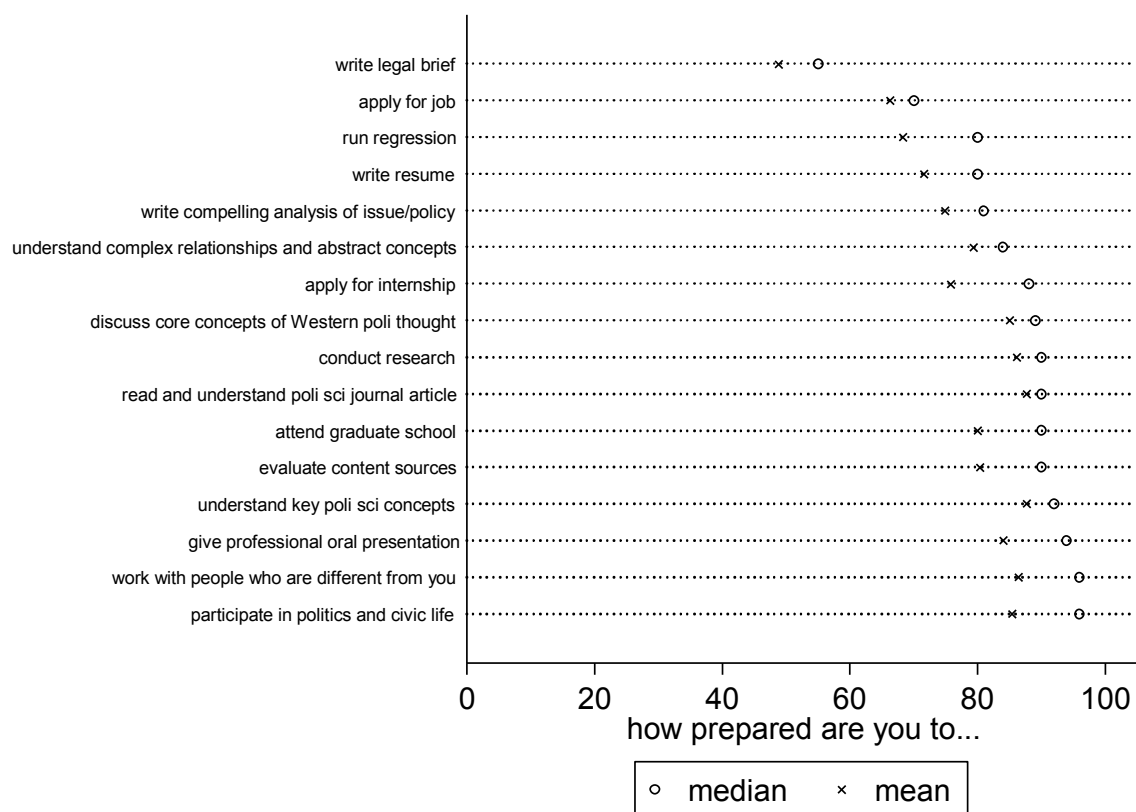
In exploring the Department's success in the career preparation area it is important to examine the degree to which majors develop specific competence through the Department and related offices through means that go beyond simply attending their twelve required POL courses. The latest HSS Survey of Students collected information from 81 Political Science majors. With respect to future plans, 51.9% plan to attend a professional school (almost all law), 30.9% plan to attend a graduate program (mainly public policy/administration or political science), 11.1% plan to directly enter the workforce, and 6.2% plan to enter public service. The Mean responses and (Standard Deviation) for various competency items related to career development are reported below, with two more problematic areas flagged in red text. Competency items were answered on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Competency Items from HSS (Dahling) Survey	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I know how to create an ePortfolio.	1.91	1.31
I know how to write a career plan essay.	2.23	1.34
I am personally interested in obtaining an internship.	4.28	0.86
I know where to find information on internships.	3.46	1.19
I know how to apply for an internship.	3.20	1.30
I understand the importance of letters of recommendation and professional references.	4.20	0.95
I understand the process for obtaining letters of recommendation or professional references.	3.32	1.36
I am personally interested in continuing my education in a graduate or professional school.	4.43	0.92
I feel prepared to apply for graduate/professional school.	3.19	1.20
I have a current, functional résumé.	3.35	1.37
I know how to prepare a cover letter for a job position.	2.93	1.30
I am familiar with the post-graduate jobs available to me.	2.86	1.20
I am familiar with the careers that graduates from HSS have attained.	3.00	1.13
I know how to conduct a job search.	2.85	1.26
I feel prepared for a job interview.	3.22	1.14
I am familiar with the purpose of an informational interview.	3.06	1.19
I know how to establish a professional network.	2.98	1.16
I am aware of the services offered by Career Services.	3.19	1.24

One concern that the Department has with this HSS data is that it reports of on all POLS majors, and that first or second year students are likely less focused on and knowledgeable about career preparation and related career-oriented competency items. Nevertheless, in looking at the lowest means above, it should be noted that the Department does not ask students to create an ePortfolio, require a career plan essay, or formally teach resume writing or conducting a job search. One exception is that students in the POL 300 course are told how to apply for Civil Service positions. Overall, while some of these competencies where majors score lower might be learned through the Office of Career Services, it seems probable that students are not using these services—they should be more encouraged to do so, or Departmental solutions should be pursued.

The difficulty in separating out underclassmen in interpreting the above responses, in part led to the Department collecting its own data, as described above. The following figure reports on several competency items drawn from the 2012-13 Political Science Assessment Survey of Seniors. Some items are more targeted toward POL majors than items on the HSS survey, like writing a legal brief, running a regression, reading a professional journal article, giving a profession presentation, etc. The following figure and subsequent discussion focuses on specific job-related skills appropriate for the political science major as listed in Question #7 of the survey and the responses of the 27 students. Median scores on a preparation scale of 0 to 100 exceed 80 on almost all skills, although preparation for applying for a job fell short of that mark. Students felt better prepared for applying for an internship or graduate school than a job.

Competency Items from 2012-13 Political Science Survey of Seniors



Clearly, when asking only senior POLS majors, versus all POLS majors, scores on competencies related to preparation for “write resume,” “apply for an internship,” and “attend graduate school” one sees the mean scores rise significantly—most to a general range indicating positive incomes. The lowest mean is associated with “write a legal brief,” a competency taught thoroughly but only in select pre-law courses, so the score here is not a problem area for senior majors as a whole. Still the lowest means on the POL Survey include “apply for job” and “write a resume,” rather basic skills that almost any student should possess. Again, since it would

seem probable that students fail to sufficiently utilize Career Services, they should be more encouraged to do so, and/or Departmental solutions should be pursued. Additionally, the HSS Survey indicated a desire by pre-law students in Philosophy and History for more classes on “legal writing,” LSAT preparation, and law careers, as well as more legal internships. Therefore, it might be beneficial to consider collaborative workshops, team-taught courses, or other ways to serve the population of pre-law students that are distributed through our School.

Internships:

Internships potentially serve many useful purposes, including career testing, the development of career-related skills, and the creation of a professional network. A few POL majors attending the TCNJ/Washington Center Semester have an elaborate career preparation component to their work. (The Department allows some ungraded credit for this component.) Closer to home, about 15-25 students a year work in the greater Trenton region (sometimes outside) and enroll in POL 399/Internship in Public Affairs. They work in a very broad range of activities. A potentially significant number of POL majors do internships without enrollment.

The Departmental survey findings (to Question #9) indicate that 7 of 27 seniors indicated that they had enrolled in POL 399/Internship in Public Affairs; the vast majority (as indicated in open-ended Question #10) found it a very valuable experience for the above reasons. One termed the Washington Semester (technically POL 401) “life-changing.” Another eight of the 27 indicated they completed an internship, but did not register, although again most indicated it was valuable in preparing for a career. No smoking gun appeared as to why students doing an internship did not enroll. Reasons ranged from preferring a traditional course in their particular schedule, to the internship being possibly outside the major, to a lack of a need for credit, etc. One noticeable trend is that because of the “extra” tuition cost involved, students no longer enroll during the summer, unless they need the credit to graduate. The Department has begun allow some summer interns to enroll in the fall semester, provided a significant amount of the field and/or related academic work carries over into the fall semester.

All evidence points to internships being a key component in the career development of POLS majors. To make this evidence more complete, the Department will both refine the senior survey instrument and develop a new survey instrument to be administered by the POL 399 instructor(s) since the present course evaluation form does not focus on outcomes.

Departmental Advising and Programming:

Departmental faculty members, who interact continually with majors can be an important source of career advice—be it as formal or unofficial advisers or as classroom instructors. Frequently this role extends beyond graduation. Department faculty, sometimes with the help of guest speakers, also provide special career workshops or programs. To tap these dimensions, Question #8 of the Political Science Survey asked students if they had received career advice from their academic advisor or another PoliSci faculty member and how valuable it was. Fifteen of 27 students had sought such advice and 13 of the 15 found it “pretty helpful” (8) or “very helpful” (4). Responses to Question #8 also indicated only 4 of the 27 had attended a departmental session on careers or career development. Perhaps the only thing that makes

this last figure less problematic is that the large number of pre-law seniors received advice principally one-on-one from Dr. Fair or through the Pre-law Society.

Annual career sessions through the department are limited—in part by the realities of a very busy, small faculty (7) serving over 170 majors. Much attention centers on one-on-one advising at student entry and especially at registration time. Beyond this, Drs. Chartock and Bowen conduct an annual workshop on attending graduate school; Dr. Potter routinely brings to campus a Foreign Service Office to discuss careers in the State Department; and Dr. Koch orchestrates a day-long program each semester with a representative of the Washington Center. The Department cooperates with and publicizes Career Fairs, as well as visits by representatives of the Bloustein School for Public Policy and Planning and other programs. We have experimented on rare occasion with programming mixing students and alums.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The above data and discussion indicates a quite positive series of outcomes relate to Active Learning/Public Service and Career Preparation. POLS students are intellectually stimulated, align closely with their major and field over time, and engage in a broad range of significant extra-curricular activity. They are given significant insights into careers related to the discipline and how to proceed in their preferred direction through courses, internships, faculty advising, and Departmental programming. Undoubtedly some of this depends on the students' willingness to seek out faculty advice and attend programming amidst a great deal of immediate pressure (fire-fighting) to prepare for class and meet course deadlines. One sometimes encounters students who deliberately put off career planning until after graduation. The Chair and other faculty members, who also do our own fire-fighting, seek to guide students on the right career paths, despite an institutional culture that simply does not reward faculty for these efforts.

That said, the department is in the process of considering further several of the above-mentioned recommendations including:

- Seeing that students are better educated in the mechanics of career planning, where needed—resume writing, etc.—by Career Services or by the Department or both. A non-credit course or portfolio could be required and will be focused on next year as part of assessing curricular outcomes. (Interestingly the College requires all students to pass a tutorial on information literacy—something academic departments do instinctively—but does not require a tutorial or portfolio on career planning—something departments do less naturally.)
- Getting more students involved in the formal structure of the POL 399/Internship in Public Affairs course so as to derive related educational and career planning benefits. At the same the development of career competencies among student interns should be better measured in conjunction with the course—through a new instrument to replace the largely irrelevant course evaluation.

- Possibly assigning the development of career competencies to other existing courses and measuring them there, although POLS majors take few required courses in common. (Alternately, the advisement process might be used on a limited basis.)
- Re-evaluating how to make existing programming for students more beneficial, to expand such opportunities in conjunction with the Department's Strategic Plan, and to increase attendance at such events.
- Better utilizing our departmental web-pages and other communication vehicles for career development purposes. Dr. Nick Toloudis is developing one such webpage already.