

Assessment Report for Academic Year 2020-2021  
TCNJ Political Science Department  
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In AY 2020-2021, the Political Science Department assessed how well students understood the breadth of the discipline. The department's first learning goal requires: "Students will demonstrate an understanding of political science and politics, including key substantive knowledge in the discipline and its major fields." Progress towards achieving this outcome was assessed using a multiple choice exam, administered to first-year students enrolled in a first-year seminar, and seniors, who were enrolled in a senior seminar. This exam contained five questions for each of the four subfields. The exam was analyzed by a four-member Assessment subcommittee, which prepared this report.

As this was the first use of this exam tool, this report will cover the results of the exam, but also evaluate the tool itself. This exam was administered during an academic year when courses were being offered remote-only. The First-Year students took the exam about a month into the Fall semester. Seniors took the exam about two months into the semester, either fall or spring. Students received course credit for completing the assignment. There was an 82% response rate for the exams.

The top-line results indicate that political science students are gaining a broader knowledge of the field over their time in the major. Table 1 reports overall results from this multiple choice exam. Senior seminar students performed better than first-year students on the assessment. The difference of means between the two groups of students was 10 percentage points. This indicates that students are expanding their knowledge of the breadth of the discipline as they progress through the political science program.

Table 1: Summary of Breadth Assessment Exam

Class	Respondents	Average	Standard Deviation
First-Years	21	54%	14%
Seniors	24	64%	13%

At first glance, the levels of performance in the survey are not particularly high. The mean for seniors was 63.7%, and the first-year mean was 53.6%. But these levels should not necessarily be compared to a typical letter grade, as they were deliberately designed to be challenging. In a way, this indicates that the exam is a valid instrument for assessing performance, and should provide a high enough ceiling to identify top performers. In this cycle, no student graded higher than 85%.

This is the first cycle that the exam was administered to both first-year and senior students. These results may be a lower-bound of the difference between seniors and first-years, as first-year students, while new to the discipline, were more likely to be presently enrolled in the survey courses that introduce "breadth" knowledge. First-year students often enroll in our survey courses (POL 110, POL

130, POL 150), which convey the key “breadth” knowledge relevant to this assessment, early in their course of study.

Another advantage of this assessment tool is its ability to identify trends within the different subfields of political science, including international relations (the study of politics between international actors), comparative politics (the study of internal politics of different countries), American politics (the study of the politics of the United States) and general political science content (particularly political theory and methods). Table 2 reports subfield specific results from the exam for these subfields. Student means by subfield also indicate that senior students mostly outperform first-year students on breadth learning, suggesting that students deepen their knowledge as they proceed through the political science major.

Table 2: Summary of Subfield Specific Statistics on Breadth Assessment Exam

Class	Respondents	American	Comparative	General	International Relations
First-Years	21	56%	65%	56%	43%
Seniors	24	76%	59%	61%	56%

There is one unexpected result in Table 2, which is that senior students in the Comparative Politics subfield underperformed first-year students by 6 basis points. An item-by-item analysis revealed that one of the questions (about Max Weber’s classic definition of the “state”) is common in survey courses taken by first-year students and this tool was administered about a month into Fall 2020 semester when students were covering such content. So a positive takeaway is that these survey courses are delivering the content the department deems necessary. However, it also indicates that students may be absorbing such a definition for a period of time, but not retaining it. So while understandable, this result suggests certain topics that could be better reinforced over students’ careers in the department.

A point touched on earlier is worth emphasizing: while the questions in this assessment tool were deliberately designed to be challenging, there may be gaps in instruction. One comparative politics question about the role of proportional representation in electoral studies only had 22% of the students answer correctly, which is essentially “chance” as students were choosing between four multiple choice answers. Therefore, neither first-year or senior students are demonstrating comprehension of the material in this question.

However, that question is an isolated occurrence, and overall, this assessment of the “breadth” goal indicates that TCNJ students are making progress in key areas of conceptual competency as they advance through the political science major. Future reports should consider if gaps of instruction (such as on the electoral systems question) continue to persist. Also, the first-year students will take this exam when they are seniors, allowing for a more precise “dynamic” measurement of student knowledge acquisition.