

To: Beau Breslin, Dean of the Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs
From: The Government Department Assessment Committee
Re: Government Department Assessment Report, AY 2012-2013
Date: May 21, 2013

Overview

The Department of Government's assessment efforts this year consisted of three elements: (1) The implementation of new policies and materials in response to the findings produced by past assessment efforts, (2) A review of a sample of 100-level exams, and (3) Exit interviews with graduating senior Government majors.

New Policies and Materials Implemented in AY 2012-2013 in Response to the Findings of Past Assessment Efforts

*The Department responded to students' suggestion in Senior Exit Interviews that the Department seek to create more opportunities for majors to meet by holding an "Open House" in spring 2013. The Department targeted, in particular, 1st and 2nd-year students in our introductory courses who might have only a cursory knowledge of the discipline and the major. The event was quite successful, drawing over 40 students, many of whom were non-majors seeking information about the program.

*The Department, by exploiting the preternatural energy and skill of its secretary, Barbara McDonough, reconceived its bulletin boards to feature more student voices. The new bulletin boards sport, for example, student compositions on their study abroad experiences, alumni testimonials on the sundry ways that their Government studies have benefitted them, and pictures of current students. The Department is now also using its bulletin board space to offer students more information about courses and forthcoming events.

*A number of Government faculty have responded to student requests for more training in public speaking by incorporating into their courses opportunities for students to make presentations, debate other students, or simulate political or policy events.

100-Level Exams: Strengths and Weaknesses

The Assessment Committee reviewed fifteen 100-level course exams, five each from the Department's three 100-level courses (i.e., "GO 101: Introduction to American Government," "GO 102: Introduction to Political Philosophy," and "GO 103: Introduction to Comparative and International Politics"). While the

exams varied in format, all of them used short answer and essay questions to evaluate student learning. The committee employed the rubric for evaluating 100-level exams designed by the Department. This rubric is attached to this report.

The committee was impressed with the clarity of the writing in the exams it reviewed. These were all timed exams, with the consequence that the committee anticipated seeing evidence of sloppy composition in at least some of the students' prose. But almost all of the writing we encountered was lucid. We also thought that the students displayed a good purchase on the political science/social science concepts addressed by the exams. Students clearly understood both the meaning and the importance of such concepts as the state of nature, false consciousness, tyranny of the majority, going public, social constructivism, and coercive diplomacy. Where the students stumbled a bit was in their ability to understand the larger themes of the courses and to make connections between the course materials and those themes. This is perhaps not surprising in introductory courses, in which the transmission of material at times must supersede efforts to present an argument that would clarify for students how what they are learning can help them to grapple with important political science questions more profitably. We do, however, think that even in such survey courses we can do a better job of introducing students to political science inquiry and argumentation.

We think that one way that we can provide students in our introductory courses with a better understanding of course themes and questions is to become more self-conscious about providing "meta-presentations" from time-to-time during the semester that address how the topics covered in the past are connected and how forthcoming topics will relate to those already covered. We also think that we can do a better job of helping students to perceive cohesiveness where now many see a pastiche of discrete topics in our introductory courses by pivoting our presentations around a single or a small set of arguments or questions that are currently exercising political scientists in each of the germane subfields.

Senior Exit Interviews

On Thursday, May 16, 2013, Government Department faculty met with six graduating seniors to address a series of questions about the Department's curriculum, pedagogy, and climate. While the discussion was wide-ranging, the attached set of questions provides an accurate depiction of the topics covered during the one hour session.

The session began with a general discussion of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the major. The students concurred that they had benefited from the flexibility afforded to them by the number of different paths the Department gives its students to satisfy the major's requirements. While all of the students in attendance conceded that they had focused most of their attention on one of the four subfields, they all testified that they were happy that they were not required by the Department to declare a "concentration." One student stated that she did wish that the Department had offered a course on statistics or quantitative methods. Her recent experience in the job market had convinced her that quantitative skills are highly prized by many employers.

The students also agreed that our 100-level courses provided them with the knowledge and skills they needed to excel in 200- and 300-level courses. They did, however, make a case for more "hands-on" types of exercises in these courses, ones that would allow them, for example, to debate contemporary issues or explore the practical implications of what they are studying by working with data.

Students thought that the Department was providing them with good feedback on their written work. They disagreed with the proposition that faculty should devote more class time to teaching the conventions of writing in political science. As one student stated, "The only way to learn how to write is to write." Students thought that one change the Department should consider making is adding some writing intensive courses to its curriculum. Most of the students noted that they learned the most about writing through the revision process. Since the size of most of our classes militates against faculty reading and commenting on multiple drafts of papers, a handful of writing intensive courses would give a larger number of our majors the opportunity to improve their writing through the revision process.

The students agreed that the Department's writing materials (Which are both handed out in each class and posted on the Department web site) obviate the need for students to purchase the *Hodges Harbrace Handbook*. Most of the students conceded that they had either not purchased this required style guide or, if they had purchased it, sold it back as soon as they could.

The students offered a number of suggestions for how the Department could cultivate a more tightly knit community among its majors. One student suggested that faculty might every month or so deliver a kind of "TED Talk" on either their work or a topic of current interest. Students also suggested that the Department might consider organizing informal gatherings of students and faculty whenever an important political event occurs either domestically or internationally. A landmark Supreme Court case, a succession struggle in a

foreign country, or a crisis in the international economic system were just some of the possible “triggering events” discussed.

The students, finally, agreed that the Department could do a better job of communicating with its majors about study abroad, internships, and senior thesis guidelines. All of the students confessed that they rarely look at the Department web site. They averred that their neglect was not because they thought the web site was unhelpful but because the site “takes too long to load” (Which seems to be an artifact of the size of the Skidmore web site) and because it is visually unappealing. Students suggested that the Department sponsor “Information Sessions” at least once a year on study abroad, internships, and senior thesis work, sessions that would feature either current or past students who had taken advantage of these opportunities.

Plan of Action for AY 2013-2014

*Government faculty will work on helping students enrolled in their 100-level courses better appreciate how the knowledge and skills taught in these courses can be used to address questions and construct arguments in political science. Faculty will consider organizing introductory courses around a single or a small set of questions (e.g., the ostensibly corrosive effect of partisan polarization; the quest for human dignity in a secular, modern world; the compatibility of technological innovation and political stability, etc.) in ways that will balance coverage of material with intelligent engagement with significant questions in political science.

*The Department will consider ways to give our students some exposure to quantitative methods, including asking Sociology for permission to cross-list “SO 226: Statistics for the Social Sciences” as a Government course and considering the feasibility of delivering a one-credit course on “Quantitative Literacy” that would give students the opportunity to become acquainted with the ways that quantitative methods are used in political science scholarship.

*The faculty will consider both the value and the feasibility of adding a small number of writing intensive courses to its curriculum.

*The faculty will pilot a small number of TED Talks and information sessions to divine student response to these types of events.

Assessment Plan for AY 2013-2014

The Department's Senior Honors Thesis Requirement has now been extant for almost a decade. We thus think that we could profit from reviewing senior honors theses submitted in spring 2014. We plan to review a maximum of five senior honors theses, choosing our sample with an eye toward reviewing theses from as many of the four subdisciplines as possible. Our intention is to determine how well we are preparing students to ask interesting questions, to identify appropriate methods for addressing these questions, to employ primary materials to answer these questions, and to construct persuasive arguments.

Department of Government
Senior Exit Interview Questions

- 1) If someone flirting with a Government major asked you to assess the major, what would you identify as its critical weaknesses and strengths?
- 2) What is your assessment of the way that writing is taught in the Department?
 - a) Do you think that faculty should devote more classroom time to discussing the conventions of writing in political science?
 - b) Would you like to see the Department offer “writing intensive” courses, or do you think that the Department’s efforts to emphasize writing in all of its offerings is a good approach?
 - c) Do you think that the Department’s efforts to provide you with feedback on your writing are helpful? If you could, what would you change about the way that faculty provide you with feedback on your written work?
- 3) Do you think that our 100-level course offerings provided you with adequate preparation to excel in 200- and 300-level courses? If not, how would you improve our introductory courses?
- 4) One of the recurring themes in these senior exit interviews has been that the Department has been less successful than have other departments and programs on campus at building a sense of community among its majors. We took a small step toward addressing this concern this year with our spring “Open House.” We are, however, seeking other ideas for creating a better sense of connection among majors. Do you have any suggestions for how we might do this?
- 5) Do you think that the Department does enough to prepare you for your life after college? Could we do more in both our classes and through experiences such as internships and collaborative research to give you the skills and competencies you will need to excel in your post-Skidmore years?
- 6) Professor Burns’ departure and Professor Natalie Taylor’s move to political theory have given the Department the opportunity to consider ways to fill existing gaps in its curricular offerings in American government. The Department is currently thinking about hiring a new faculty member who would teach courses on elections and campaigns, voting behavior, public opinion, and political parties. Do you think that such a hire would be an asset, or do you think that there are other gaps in our American offerings that should be filled first?

Department of Government
100-Level Exam Rubric

Course #

Exam#

	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
Ability to identify and explicate course themes					
Ability to use and understand the significance of political science concepts					
Ability to see and explain connections among course topics and materials					
Employment of course texts					
Quality of argumentation					
Clarity of writing					