

June 28, 2013

Associate Dean Suzanne Monahan
College of Letters and Sciences
Wilson Hall
Montana State University

Dear Dr. Monahan:

Political Science

I am writing to report the results of the Political Science Department's first annual assessment of student achievement outcomes. I first briefly describe the process, then summarize the results, and close making some observations about strengthening and clarifying this process in the future.

We began by forming a department committee to develop an assessment plan in 2012. That committee was comprised of three faculty members, all with doctoral degrees in political science, and in different areas of political science. We intentionally recruited three faculty members with political science doctorates in different areas of subfield specialization since the assessment plan aims to assess the degree to which political science undergraduate students are achieving broadly conceived intellectual objectives associated with a degree in political science. That committee consisted of Professor David Parker (American Institutions), Professor Sara Rushing (Political Theory), and Professor Franke Wilmer (International Relations). This way, other faculty members could serve on the assessment committee in the future but the plan and criteria would be consistent with the field of political science and its subfields.

Following development of the assessment plan, two faculty members formed an assessment committee – Department Head Linda Young and myself. We began by operationalizing criteria to measure achievement of the outcomes, as measures of the objectives, on a 4-point scale. Those criteria are elaborated on the attached spreadsheet. Then we collected papers from courses corresponding to the outcomes outlined in the assessment plan. For example, Outcome 1 indicates that papers from PSCI 210 can be used to assess achievement of that outcome. Then we randomly selected 5 papers from each course, including the Capstone research course, and independently ranked those papers according to the criteria corresponding to each outcome. After our independent assessments, Professor Young and I met to discuss any discrepancies or differences in our scores for each paper and it was not difficult to come to agreement on a common score.

Now, a few words about the results. Overall, we concluded that our students were demonstrating a level of mastery of “good” to “excellent” on our 4-point scale. We also observed that the scores for assignments in the lower-level courses, presumably taken as foundation courses at the beginning of their tenure as political science majors, tend to be lower than the scores in their upper-level and capstone classes. The capstone was particularly notable for having a higher proportion of “excellent” and “good” assessments. This is what we would hope for – measurable progress from the earliest courses to the final capstone research project. Only one paper across all those assessed was scored as “poor.” It was not only a poorly written paper, but did not demonstrate achievement of the criteria for that outcome (Outcome 3: make reasoned conclusions from the evidence). The paper has some substance, but it was not at all consistent with the assignment. Overall, if we were to view these results on a curve, the curve bends toward the higher end of achievement.

We note that trends from performance in the foundation courses through the intermediary conceptual, methodological, and knowledge-based courses and culminating in the capstone research project do not, as of this assessment cycle, reflect cumulative dossiers on individual students. In other words, the students assessed in Outcome 1 are not the same as those assessed for the other outcomes. That is a function of this being the first round of assessment, as we plan to follow randomly selected students in the future to assess their progress. Future committees will have to balance the need for randomness and evaluation of cumulative individual dossiers.

This last point brings us to the future. One issue both Professor Young and I found troubling is the degree to which papers submitted for the foundation courses are poorly constructed, that is, lots of grammatical, spelling, and word use errors. We have not decided what can be done about this, but Professor Young thinks that our faculty members should largely be evaluating the content and not the lack of basic writing skills evident in these papers. I am not sure of a way to avoid this other than, as I have, urging students to use the Writing Center for review before they turn in the paper. Another is that the criteria we developed to distinguish “excellent” from “good” or even “fair” papers is the presence of some innovative or original thinking.

There were a few cases in which papers were deficient in demonstrating some of the criteria for lesser outcomes but did demonstrate innovative and original thinking. Could we let innovative and original thinking compensate for papers that did not demonstrate the mastery of the criteria for previous levels of competency? We concluded that we could not. In other words, to receive an assessment of “excellent,” a paper had to meet all of the criteria for “good.”

Finally, there were a few cases where the student met all of the criteria for excellent but the paper still had a few minor spelling, word choice, or grammatical errors, presenting us with a similar dilemma. We urge the next committee to review the

outcome criteria and decide whether such errors should be “deal breakers” for papers that otherwise meet all of the achievement objectives *and* reflect innovative and original thinking. To some degree, this problem refers back to the original concern with the technical quality of students’ writing.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss our assessment process and conclusions for 2013 further, please let me know. We hope that this letter will provide guidance for the next year’s committee as well as document the work done this year. The spreadsheet including the numeral scores and outcome criteria is attached.

Sincerely,

Professor Franke Wilmer
Professor and Department Head Linda Young