

Department of Politics and Government

Assessment Program Report Summer, 2004

Purposes of this Report:

This is prepared to comply with the recent Illinois Board of Higher Education directive:

By 2004, all academic programs will systematically assess student learning and use assessment results to improve programs.

Measurement of student learning outcomes.

For the past several years, the Politics and Government Department has employed a systematic research design to measure student learning outcomes. The design involves a pre and post test measurement of student knowledge about politics and government employing a multiple choice and essay examination.

The Departmental Assessment exam consists of two parts, each of which are weighted equally. The first part consists of multiple choice questions that are largely descriptive in nature and which utilize recall. The questions are evenly divided among the subfields in the discipline. The second part consists of a single essay question that is largely analytical and which allows the students to answer the question from any subfield of their choosing.

The essay question reads:

“Select any issue of politics or public policy, explain its significance, institutional and philosophical aspects, and propose solutions to the problem identified. Defend your answer.”

The test has been administered four times, in the spring semester of the 1998, 2000, 2001 and 2002 academic years.

Results:

The results of the testing are presented in table 1. Examining the multiple choice scores, the data show consistent learning gains between the freshman and senior year.

The results for the essay portion of the test indicate a large decline in the quality of student essays in the 2001 academic year. Fortunately, the scores returned to their pre-2001 levels in the next year. The 2001-2 decline could be attributed to many factors, such as student distraction after the 9/11 tragedy, or a general student malaise follow the debacle of the 2000 presidential election, or poor student choice of essay topics in that year. The decline also may have been due to the faculty graders applying stricter standards in their grading of the essay portion of the text.

The gains are even greater if one considers that students increasingly take more than four years to complete the undergraduate programs; if we use the 2002-03 data as a

measure of the senior year of the 1998-99 freshman cohort, substantial gains are indicated on both portions of the test.

Table 1:

Department of Politics and Government: Student Learning Outcome Measures				
	1998-99	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03
Multiple choice				
Freshmen	15.3	16.6	16.1	17.9
Seniors	21.3	21.0	18.7	18.9
Graduate Students	25.0	23.0	21.2	24.6
Essay				
Freshmen	25.1	23.0	7.0	26.0
Seniors	29.3	28.9	16.7	29.0
Graduate Students	31.3	32.0	23.7	30.5
Combined Score				
Freshmen	40.4	39.6	23.1	43.9
Seniors	50.6	49.9	35.4	47.9
Graduate Students	56.3	55.0	44.9	55.1
Senior-Freshman				
Multiple Choice	6.0	4.4	2.6	1.0
Essay	4.2	5.9	9.7	3.0
Combined	10.2	10.3	12.3	4.0

Evaluation of the data:

Although the annual test does comply with the objective of measuring student learning outcomes, the Department has recognized faults with the data and its collection and is changing its assessment mechanisms.

“Sample mortality” is the first threat to internal validity. For the university as a whole less than 70% of the freshman make it to their senior year, and a much smaller percentage make it to their senior year in their original major. Political science programs generally have a high turnover in majors, and our program is no exception. Thus the most probable explanation for the higher senior year scores on the test is that the students who tended to do poorly in the freshman test were not around to take the senior exam.

Often, changes in before and after comparisons of test scores are merely the result of student “maturation”. Students write better essays in the senior year than in their freshman year because they are older.

Potential “history” effects would occur if in a given year certain questions on the test became the subject of national publicity. If, for example, the test included a question on impeachment, student will tend to do better on the test when the president is being impeached.

Similarly the procedure is subject threats to external validity. Whether the students selected for the examination are representative of all the programs’ majors is questionable (only certain classes are selected) as is the issue of whether the test actually measure what we hope our students to learn.

Recommended program improvements.

The results of the assessment tests, however, did alert the Department to some changes to be made in the major. One result of the assessment exam was that there were subfields within the discipline which it appeared that students tended to avoid or failed to remember the information asked. An examination of the curriculum demonstrated that there was a high degree of variability in the subfields of courses taken and this was reflected by the questions students answered incorrectly on the exam. To correct this deficiency, the Department revised its curriculum to require all majors to take an introductory course in each of the major subfields of political science.

The second result of the assessment exam has opened a discussion on whether or not to require a capstone experience in the major. The Department has begun to offer a Senior Seminar to its major highlighting the key issues of the day as well as encouraging students to engage in service learning projects and/or internships.

Another program improvement recommended by our evaluation of the learning outcome data is that the Department will discontinue the use of the learning outcome test.

To implement a more reliable and valid assessment program, the Department proposes the following changes:

- The Department will develop a database based on the departmental course evaluation. The politics and government student evaluation data are particularly appropriate for this task because they go beyond the traditional measures of student opinion of the courses and measure aspects of student behavior in the course that are directly related to student learning outcomes. Among the questions that do so are the following:
 - What is the average number of hours per week you spent on this course (above and beyond class)?
 - How often did you participate in class discussion?
 - Extent to which writing assignments required library and/or field research.
 - Extent to which instructor allowed students to consider and evaluate contrasting viewpoints.
 - The amount of knowledge gained in this course.

- Extent to which course helped you improve your writing skills.
 - Extent to which course helped you improve your thinking skills
 - In addition the department will begin preparation of a on-line senior exit survey (or in the case of our Masters programs, a graduating-student survey) measuring student learning outcomes. The survey will be required of all students in the final semester of their program, this pending approval of the Department and College curriculum committees.
 - Note also: The Department attempted to also acquire data on the graduating students GRE scores, but the data are not available at the departmental level (the data are coded only for social science). In addition. the Department is investigating the possibility of compiling LSAT data for our majors.
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