

**Social and Applied Sciences Department
Unit-Level Assessment Liaison Report
Fall 2017**

**Liaison Project Start Date: Fall 2017
Liaison Report prepared by Ingrid Riedle**

I. Department Buy-In and Outcome Definition

The unit level project for the Social and Applied Sciences Department (SAS) initially focused on assessing the Political Science 201 course and in particular the statement that taking the course would present the equivalent of passing the U.S. Constitution examination graduation requirement. This statement appears in the course description in the college's course catalog (and still does). After consultations with the Department Chairs, Dr. Domenico Ferri and Dr. Michael Heathfield, with Vice President Armen Sarrafian, Child Development Professors Carrie Nepstad and Jennifer Asimow, along with political science colleagues at other City College campuses, it was determined that no such graduation requirement exists, wherefore the project was terminated and relegated to the Curriculum Committee.

The focus on political science remaining, attention now shifted to a course-level student learning outcome (SLO) as stated in the master syllabus: students are able to explicate pro and con arguments for various current political debate topics. After developing an assessment tool and pilot testing it, it will be applied to various assignments colleagues developed in their course sections to measure this outcome. Generally, eight faculty members teach the eleven sections of POL 201, four of which are offered online.

A rubric was to be developed to measure how well students were meeting this specific SLO and to determine if the SLO was indeed measurable and therefore valuable and legitimate. The rubric needed to be generic enough to be used for assessing this particular outcome regardless of the different assignments colleagues had developed. Four skills essential to the SLO were isolated: (1) identify the relevant/key arguments in support of pro and con sides of a current political debate topic, (2) ground the arguments in supporting information such as theories, statistics, studies, (3) organize the information logically, and (4) use political science terminology throughout.

II. Assessment Research and Design

In discussions with Erica McCormack, Vice Chair of Unit-Level Assessment, and with feedback from members of the Assessment Committee who attended weekly meetings, a rubric was created to determine whether or not, and to what extent, students were meeting the SLO in question. Three levels of achievement were determined: Weak/Beginning, Emerging/Needs Work, and Excellent/Exemplary. Students who scored in the Excellent/Exemplary category were considered "meeting" the outcome. In the process, it was decided to add a fifth row to the rubric which measures the number of topics students were examining: were they meeting the outcomes for one or two debate topics, or for none? This row was

added as the SLO asks of students the ability to perform on multiple (“various”) current political debate topics.

III. Pilot Assessment Tools and Processes

The pilot project was launched in the final week of the fall 2017 semester in the courses Political Science 201 sections G and K (The National Government), generating 60 responses.

IV. Administer Specific Assessment

Using the rubric, students’ debate fact sheets were assessed. As the pilot was conducted by only one professor (myself), no norming session was necessary. Each student had completed two debate topics (orally in the classroom) and had turned in fact sheets for each on Blackboard, citing key arguments and supporting information. Each student’s debates 1 and 2 were scored per rubric, along with how many topics (zero, one, or two) they were exploring through their debate.

V. Data Analysis

After a meeting with data analyst Sarah Kakumanu, it was decided that I could analyze this project by myself and that future assessment processes would include Open Book data on each student so that more detailed analyses could be undertaken based on student ID numbers. For the pilot, however, no student ID numbers were entered.

An initial overview of the results suggests that students are meeting the SLO reasonably well. 33/60 students scored excellent/exemplary on identifying the key arguments of a topic; 28/60 organized their arguments logically in a manner excellent/exemplary; 22/60 students were excellent/exemplary in using political science terminology throughout, and the same number of students did very well in the supporting information category. Lowest values in each category were the following: content/key arguments 6/60; supporting information 19/60; organization 4/60; and terminology 17/60. The chart’s (see appendix) middle column, showing the emerging/needs work values, as well as the final column (# of topics) will be discussed in the recommendations section below.

VI. Supporting Evidence-Based Change (Use of Findings)

The results of the assessment can indicate to political science instructors the levels of students’ abilities to craft persuasive pro and/or con arguments based on evidence. Findings may prompt instructors to integrate more discussions on the difference between opinions and facts, and of literature or news sources which support either. It becomes clear that instruction in news literacy is an important component of political science courses. Assessment results will also help instructors to focus on areas of student weaknesses which can inform more effective teaching and learning practices. Perhaps, results may also guide instructors to integrate more structured debates into the classroom, or assign writing exercises on specific current political discussion topics. Additionally, focus on - and awareness of - pressing current news items and issues may become more prominent in the POL 201 classrooms.

Success Factors

While this project is still in its early stages and changes to the research design are inevitable, some success can be noted. (1) Communication among the political science faculty, adjunct and full-time has increased and initial inconsistencies on course SLOs have been noted and corrected. (2) A tool is available now with which to assess this SLO and with which to close the loop on teaching and learning. (3) Better teaching and assignment structuring has resulted from formal assessment of the SLO in question, i.e. how to prompt relevant assignments to maximize student learning. For example, the expectations of student achievement are more clearly conveyed in the assignment prompt (4) The importance of creating measurable course SLOs has become evident and will lead to an examination of other political science SLOs as well as SLOs across the Social and Applied Sciences Department (5) Discussion of the project with colleagues has raised enormous interest among the latter, to the extent that two of my colleagues are eager to join the Assessment Committee as soon as possible.

A less obvious success factor may also be the insight that the course description of POL 201 is outdated and needs editing (see opening statement of this document). In political science discipline meetings, the new language for the course description is being discussed and produced. The Harold Washington College Curriculum Committee is involved for guidance on how to proceed with the edits.

Recommendations

It is clear that the last skill measured (how many topics the student is performing on) should be decoupled for accurate assessment and measured separately. In addition, as noted above, student ID numbers should be added to gauge more directly whether students can meet the outcome for “various” current political debate topics. Evidence gathered on this part of the outcome was the least conclusive. Alternatively, as SLOs ought to be measurable, it may be advisable to amend this particular SLO on the course master syllabus.

Another improvement would be to add a fourth value category, that of “meets outcome.” From the results it is evident that most students do meet the outcome but this finding would be stronger and clearer had it been assessed more directly. As it is, the middle value (emerging/needs work) is the only one which may indicate the number of students who meet the outcome, however the wording is not allowing this reading as it is deemed “emerging.” An easier and faster way to address this issue is to rename the rubric categories themselves.

Moreover, “organization” as a measure seems somewhat superfluous. If students can identify the key arguments, they are “clearly tied to an idea” as well as they are “building well on each other.” Thus, this category is redundant. Perhaps more significant would be to assess wherefrom students draw their information than whether they are organizing it satisfactorily.

A final recommendation is to align course SLOs of POL 201 online and face-to-face sections, as they are different. To discuss this option, a meeting with Coordinator of Assessment of Online Learning, Jennifer Asimow will be set up, and a master syllabus review will be undertaken.