



AY 19-20 Assessment

Undergraduate Program Report Lars Skalnes, Curriculum Committee Chair

In AY 18-19, the Political Science Department launched a process for surveying undergraduate majors to help assess whether our undergraduate program meets our learning objectives. As was the case in AY 18-19, our assessment tool was an exit survey. The survey was sent to all graduating majors during the Spring 2020 term, covering AY 19-20. This report summarizes the responses from this second survey and provides some comparisons with the results from our initial survey.

Taking the survey is voluntary, and twenty-nine out of 177 students chose to complete the survey, a response rate of 16.4 percent. Our understanding is that this is a bit low for surveys in general, and we may want to consider measures designed to improve this rate, for instance by sending out reminders. We do not have records showing how many students were polled in AY 18-19, so we cannot calculate a response rate for that year. We do know that thirty-three students took the survey in AY 18-19.

A significant majority of respondents, 72 percent (N=21), declared PS as their major in their Freshman and Sophomore years. An even greater majority, 91 percent, did so in AY 18-19. Transfer students accounted for 24 percent of respondents, an increase of about 6 percent compared to AY 18-19. On average, respondents rated their interest in politics as 6.2 on a 7-point scale, an increase of 0.3 points.

This was the second year in which majors could apply for a Career Path Certificate. Eighty-six percent applied (N=22), 24 percent (N=7) did not. Forty-five percent (N=13) applied for one Certificate, 31 percent (N=9) for two. Public Policy and Political Action was the most common Career Path (14), followed by Global Engagement (10) and Politics, Law and Justice (4). Ethics, Identity, and Society (2), Sustainability, Development, and Social Action (1), and Politics of Business (0) brought up the rear.

The first fourteen questions asked students to rate the degree to which Learning Objectives 1 through 7 were met in their case using a seven-point scale (1=strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Responses ranged from 4.9 to 6.7, with the average being 6.0. On seven of the questions, the average response was above 6.0. The highest score (6.7) came in response to the statement “I understand and can explain to others how some social groups may have economic, cultural, or political-institutional advantages or disadvantages in acquiring and exercising political power.” The only score below 5.3, 4.9, came in response to the statement “Because of my courses in political science, I have become better at oral presentations on complex topics.” The AY 19-20 scores were quite similar to the AY 18-19 scores, with eight scores going up, one staying the same, and five scores going down. The average AY 18-19 response was 5.9. Thirty-one percent (N=9) worked closely with a PS faculty member on an individual project while at the University, a drop from 36 percent (N=12) in AY 18-19.



We also asked behavioral questions, using the same seven-point scale. As in AY 18-19, all respondents reported being required to write analytical papers or undertake an independent research project that asked them to evaluate a hypothesis or argument about politics, paying attention to evidence and alternative arguments. A large majority (83 percent, N=24), up from 64 percent in AY 18-19, had undertaken an independent research project that makes a theoretical argument about politics with attention to alternative arguments and evidence. A majority (59 percent, N=17) reported making oral presentations that required them to do the same, and a smaller majority (55 percent, N=16) reported writing a policy memo analyzing various policy options. These numbers are up from AY 18-19, when 48 percent had completed these two types of assignments. Students also read regularly about current events, volunteered with a political or public-policy organization, and were politically active. Very few had held a paid job with some relevance to politics, public policy, law or social movements. Numbers on these dimensions are relatively stable compared to AY 18-19.

Students seemed relatively unhappy with the advising support provided by both the department and the university as a whole. The PS department's rating was 4.66, the University's 4.48. Given that both the department and the University has recently reorganized the advising support provided our students, it will be interesting to see if the scores improve. When asked how positive or negative the students felt overall about their experience in the Political Science Department, the average score was 5.27 out of 7. They were happier about their overall experience at the University, giving it an average score of 5.83.

Questions designed to measure student perceptions of how inclusive the department is toward racial, ethnic, and immigration backgrounds produced average scores ranging from 5.17-6.24. Respondents gave the department a relatively low score on inclusivity toward diverse political viewpoints and beliefs (5.17 out of 7), with some complaining of both student and faculty bias against students with conservative views. The score was better on inclusivity toward diverse sexual and gender preferences and identities (6.24) and toward diverse racial, ethnic, and immigration backgrounds and identities (6.1).

Graduate Program Report

Burke Hendrix, Director of Graduate Studies

Our last substantive report on the graduate program was compiled in Fall 2019, using data from Academic Years 2011-2012 to 2018-2019. This report examines the same metrics for Academic Year 2019-2020 to look for any trends. It also seeks to examine any broader patterns now noticeable in the combined data. Because the second half of AC 2019-2020 was affected by COVID-19, outcomes for this year may be somewhat non-standard, though this is not strongly reflected in the data itself.

Second Year Paper

As noted in our previous report, we have recently changed the character of the department's required field paper. Prior to Fall 2013, students were required to complete a field paper at the time of their choosing prior to the writing of their dissertation prospectus. Students beginning in Fall 2013 and afterward were required instead to complete a second year paper during year 2 of the program, before advancing to their third-year comprehensive exams. The second year paper is now our program's first major benchmark, which is intended to help us recognize students who will struggle in the program early on, before they advance further into their studies. For this reason, we only submit data for the second year paper, rather than the larger set of data reflected in our previous report.

A total of 26 students had taken second year paper to the time of our previous full report. Here are their degrees of success:

2nd Year Paper	Fail	Low Pass	Pass	High Pass
AC Years 2013-14 to 2018-19	1	4	16	5

Here are the results for our most recent data:

2nd Year Paper	Fail	Low Pass	Pass	High Pass
AC 2019-20	0	1	3	1

There is no obvious trend for these recent students that is different from the previous trajectory. Most students complete the second year paper with a grade of "pass", while only a few receive a low pass or a failing grade.

Of the students who passed prior to the previous report, all but 2 were able to pass on the first attempt.

2nd Year Paper	One Attempt	Two Attempts	Three Attempts
AC Years 2013-14 to 2018-19	23	1	1

Of those since, all have passed on their first attempt. Given the small number involved relative to the larger number from the previous report, this outcome is not surprising.

2nd Year Paper	One Attempt	Two Attempts	Three Attempts
AC 2019-2020	5		

It is not possible to see any obvious changes over time in the way that the department has evaluated the Second Year Paper. At one level, this is good, because it shows a general consistency of evaluation across time. On the other hand, it suggests that the second year paper does not strongly signal to students whether they will be able to complete the program successfully or not, since most all of them pass successfully. At the same time, as noted below, departmental metrics have generally done a strong job of recognizing students who will do well on the academic job market, so it may be that we should not aspire to tighten our standards here in any case.

Comprehensive Exams

Our other benchmarks have not changed since prior to AC 2011-2012, so the discussions to follow include data from that time until our previous 2018-2019 report, along with comparisons of the past year. Students must take comprehensive exams in both a Major and a Minor field, generally in year 3 or late in year 2 of the program.

Major Field Comprehensive Exams

Within our earlier sample period, 32 students took Major Field comprehensive exams. Here are their results:

Major Field Exam	Fail	Low Pass	Pass	High Pass
AC Years 2011-12 to 2018-19	1	7	18	6

Here are the results from our most recent data.

Major Field Exam	Fail	Low Pass	Pass	High Pass
AC Year 2019-20	1		4	

The data here needs a bit of explanation. One student failed on the first attempt at the exam, but completed on the second attempt, which shows up as a “pass” rather than as the first fail. The fail noted above indicated a student who had not completed the exam successfully in the time evaluated by this report. They successfully completed it on a later try, but this is outside of our data year.

Although there are no obvious trends here, it is somewhat striking that no grades of low pass or high pass were awarded during this time. It seems useful to keep track of whether these grades continue to be used in the future, or whether we show a departmental tendency to use the binary of “pass/fail”. Given the strangeness of part of the academic year under consideration, it seems possible that faculty have been less nuanced in their evaluations than they sometimes are. But the trend bears monitoring nonetheless.

Within our earlier sample, there were noticeable differences across the difficulty levels of our subfields, with the exam area of International Relations being most difficult:

Subfield	Fail	Low Pass	Pass	High Pass
Comparative Politics		2	5	3
Formal Theory and Methods				1
International Relations	1	4	6	
Political Theory			2	2
US Politics		1	5	

It is not only International Relations that fails students on their major exam, however, as seen in the past year’s data.

Subfield	Fail	Low Pass	Pass	High Pass
Comparative Politics	1			
Formal Theory and Methods				
International Relations			1	
Political Theory			2	
US Politics	1		1	

As noted above, the failing grade noted in US politics was followed by a grade of “pass” on the student’s second attempt. During the time under consideration, the student who failed the Comparative Politics exam had not yet undertaken a second attempt, though she did eventually do so and pass.

It is reassuring that International Relations is not the only subfield in which students fail their major exam, since it suggests that no subfield is especially resistant to failing students when appropriate. While International Relations seems to remain the most difficult field to complete successfully across the range of our data, it does look somewhat less striking in light of last year’s information.

Minor Field Comprehensive Exam

Twenty-nine students took Minor Field comprehensive exams during our prior period of examination. Here are their performances:

Subfield	Fail	Low Pass	Pass	High Pass
Comparative Politics			3	
Formal Theory and Methods			1	
International Relations		4	1	
Political Theory			4	
US Politics			1	1
Public Policy		3	7	4

Here are the results from AC 2019-2020:

Subfield	Fail	Low Pass	Pass	High Pass
Comparative Politics				
Formal Theory and Methods				
International Relations				
Political Theory			1	
US Politics				
Public Policy			3	

As noted in the previous report, the minor-only field of Public Policy remains our most popular option for students seeking a second field of expertise.

As noted in discussing the major field exam, there were no grades of low pass or high pass assigned during the period under consideration. Given this continuity, it seems possible that faculty have not sought to evaluate student work with the full degree of nuance during the odd conditions of the pandemic, with many students taking field exams in exceptional conditions.

Research Prospectus

Our students are required to complete a research prospectus before going on to write their dissertations. A total of 25 students in our earlier sample had advanced to this stage.

Research Prospectus	One Attempt	Two Attempts	Three Attempts
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AC Years 2011-12 to 2018-19	17	7	1
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For our most recent year of data, only two students attempted their prospectus, and both passed easily:

Research Prospectus	One Attempt	Two Attempts	Three Attempts
AC Years 2019-20	2		

Given the paucity of new cases, it is not possible to draw any conclusions about trends in prospectus completion.

Degree Completion

During the period of our previous report, 8 students had completed their PhD degree, all of them from the Fall 2011 and Fall 2012 cohorts. (For our reports, we are only tracking students who began their graduate study in the period under consideration – from Fall 2011 – rather than tracking those who were in the program prior to this period. There were of course more student who completed the degree from earlier cohorts during this period, but they are not part of our study.)

For the period covered by this report, an additional 4 students completed their PhD degree. This included the final student from the Fall 2011 cohort who had not yet completed or departed the program for other reasons. The others in this group represented one student each from the Fall 2012, Fall 2013, and Fall 2014 cohorts. This meant that 2 students from the Fall 2012 cohort still remained in-progress on their degree. From Fall 2013, one student remains in-progress, while from Fall 2014 a total of 3 students remained in progress.

Those who completed during this time period took an average of almost 22 terms, substantially above the 18 terms that we would prefer to see students complete their degrees over. The student from the Fall 2011 cohort took a total of 26 terms to complete the degree.

Career Placement

Of the 8 students who had completed their degree during the period of the earlier report, 4 are currently in term-limited visiting academic positions or post-docs, while 4 are not working in academia. This means that 1 of the students in a term-limited position has left academic employment. Given the uncertainties created by COVID-19 for many institutions, some others may do so in the future as well. Of the 4 students who were not working in academia, 1 works as a policy analyst for the State of Oregon, while 3 are not working in areas that apply their degree directly.

Of the 4 who completed their degrees in our focal year of AC 2019-20, 3 have entered tenure-track academic positions, while the remaining student has not yet found employment. One of these tenure-track positions is in the United States, while one is in Korea (the relevant student's

home country) and the other is in Kazakhstan (not the students home country, but one related to her past life experiences and geographical preferences).

As was true in the previous report, there are unfortunately no obvious patterns in the data showing relationships between our program benchmarks and eventual placement into tenure track positions. The student who received a tenure-track position in the United States, for example, received an evaluation of low pass on all three of her field paper, major field comprehensive exam, and minor field comprehensive exam. The student who took a position in Korea performed solidly on all program benchmarks, but then took an extremely long time to finish his dissertation (26 terms). He is now located at a research-intensive institution. The student who took a position in Kazakhstan did well on most program benchmarks with grades of “pass”, but took two attempts to complete her dissertation prospectus. She is now located in a research-intensive institution as well.

In contrast, the students who are currently in term-limited positions or post-docs tended to show somewhat stronger performance on at least one of the metrics, often showing at least one “high pass” on a field exam, and they generally completed their degrees more quickly. At least 2 of the students who are not making clear use of their graduate degrees also showed grades of “high pass” on their major field exam.

Exactly how the program should react to this data is unclear. It does suggest, however, that we have not been terribly effective in recognizing which students are developing the skills and practices that will allow them to go on to tenure-track academic positions. It may be that we need to begin to examine other metrics to see if there are stronger indicators that we can use to further sharpen best practices for the graduate program.