PLSCMA Program Assessment Plan and Program Review Report 2015-16

Academic Assessment Plan with Reported Outcomes

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Contact: Dr. Margaret Reid, Chair
mreid@uark.edu
T: 575-5352

MA in Political Science

M.A. Program Goals

The M.A. in Political Science is a 36 hour, two-year, program. In addition, the Department also offers a dual degree program with the UA Law School that focuses on international affairs and law. Currently, the department offers regular courses among three subfields that include American Politics, Comparative Politics, and International Relations. All students must complete several research methods seminars to satisfy the degree requirements: a basic statistics class, a research design class and a seminar in public policy. In addition, all students are required to take at least once class in the area of American Politics and one class in either Comparative Politics or International Relations to facilitate discourse across the subfields in political science. Finally, all students must either (1) complete six hours of thesis credit and defend the thesis, or (2) pass a written comprehensive examination.

At the end of their program, students should be able to:

(1)   demonstrate a general knowledge about trends in the discipline of political science, including epistemological diversity when studying complex issues

(2)   demonstrate the ability to apply that knowledge to specific policy or political contexts by using qualitative and quantitative data;

(3)   demonstrate an understanding of global trends in areas such as governance and political economy, as well as complex policy issues involving, gender, race and ethnicity.

(4)   demonstrate the ability to conduct independent research and communicate the results effectively in both oral and written form.

Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes
These educational goals are evaluated by departmental faculty by:

- Assessing students' performance on a diversity of assignments that support the above goals.
- Providing a rigorous assessment of students' work performed in internships and other experiential assignments, preferably by seeking feedback from clients with whom they interned.
- Demonstrating their writing and analytical capabilities through the successful completion of a thesis, research/conference paper or a comprehensive examination that is reviewed critically by a committee of faculty members.

Because Political Science students can pursue different emphases, a generalization across the student body is not possible. A student in comparative politics, for example, will be assigned different projects than a student in American politics.

The following are examples of processes used to determine student competency aligned with those goals.

<u>Goal 1</u> may be assessed by introductory level graduate classes that provide students with a general knowledge of the literature in these fields. Given the diversity of student intellectual and academic backgrounds, we examine how students develop capabilities to critically assess materials that expose them to complex policy or political issues. The faculty use literature review essays, research papers and exams in these courses to assess student progress. Moreover, faculty can assist students by identifying knowledge or methodological deficiencies early in their course of study when they can be more readily rectified.

<u>Goal 2</u> may be assessed in courses that are specifically designed to enhance the student's methodological knowledge and their qualitative and quantitative data analysis abilities. Students are directed to appropriate courses for their fields as well as courses in which skills overlap across political science subfields (such as policy analysis). The faculty members are able to assess this knowledge through literature review essays, research papers, work with statistical and other data sets, or other applied research with which the faculty member maybe involved.

<u>Goal 3</u> is assessed in our international affairs classes in political science or other departments as appropriate. Faculty members assess students' understanding of these issues in the quality of their research papers or applied projects that test their ability to use their knowledge in specific policy or political arenas.

<u>Goal 4</u> is most readily assessed when students participate in internships or other experiential assignments that bring them in contact with institutions and organizations which they analyzed in their academic readings. Students also have the ability to meet this goal by conference participation or other scholarly activity. In addition, interaction with our Executive-in-Residence can help them gain a better understanding of necessary career preparations in their chosen fields.

A report is annually submitted to the Dean of the college and includes the following:

- Results of analysis of assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

- Any changes to degree/certificate planned or made on the basis of the assessment and analysis

- Any changes to the assessment process made or planned.

Results of Assessment of Level of Achievement of Program Learning Outcomes
Results of the assessment of the level of achievement of specific program learning outcomes by students close to the end of their degree program involves the following:

1. Improving Retention
- Periodic assessment of our advising practices has provided the following areas requiring improvements:
    - Improved rigorous assessment in the first semester by working with faculty teaching required courses
    - Improved professional orientation to better familiarize students with the demands in specific careers so that students see a better connection between classes taken and career goals
    - Early intervention with students struggling in their course work

- The department is developing an exit survey for graduating students that should be ready by December 2016 to help provide additional feedback on the program.

2. Internationalizing our Curriculum
- Two thirds of our MA students focus their studies on the international affairs curriculum, but a small number of our graduate classes are offered as pure graduate classes, forcing the students to take 4000-level classes and thus providing them with a less challenging academic environment
- Lack of faculty knowledge diversity (one person per field exposes students to less knowledge diversity)
- Lack of opportunity to interact with high quality guest speakers, small forums or panels of experts

3. Enhance Career Preparation
- Continue to improve the rate of graduate student paper presentation at academic conferences. For the last three cohorts (2012-2014 entering classes), 78 percent of students presented at least one paper prior to graduation (Goals 1 and 2).
- Work to improve the rate of participation in internships, especially among students who are planning to enter the workforce directly after graduation. For the last three cohorts (2011-2013 entering classes), 33 percent of students participated in internships prior to graduation (Goal 4).
- Encourage more students to attend sessions conducted by the departmental Executive-in-Residence (Goal 4).
- Increased awareness of Dual Degree Programs: (Goals 3 and 4)

Challenges: Cuts in GSIE funding has placed increased stress on already tight departmental budgets to fund students who have papers accepted at national conference venues.

Planned Improvements

1. Improving Retention:

Retention starts with high quality screening and advising before students enroll in a graduate to ascertain their suitability for that program. Historically, all applicants have met for 30 to 40 minutes

with the graduate coordinator either in person or over the phone to discuss career goals and the suitability of the program relative to those goals. Students who have been admitted to the program are strongly encouraged to attend a Graduate School, Mullins Library and departmental graduate orientations which are held early in the fall semester of each year. Students meet with the Coordinator at least twice a year to discuss progress, examine career goals, and explore professional opportunities.

While all students receive a comprehensive evaluation at the end of each school year, earlier methods of intervention may be needed to identify struggling students and provide them with support. This requires closer cooperation with faculty teaching introductory level classes and by those faculty offering a written status report on students by mid-term. Struggling students will then be monitored to better address areas of deficiencies and chart a suitable course of classes for those students, including some remedial work if needed.

Efforts are ongoing to determine if these activities have improved retention and graduation in a timely manner. Results will not be immediately available. However 76 percent of MA students in the last three available cohorts (2012, 2013 and 2014) finished the program in two years. Three of the seven students who did not complete their degree were students in the JD-MA dual degree programs who elected just to finish their JD.

Conversations with faculty in the international affairs area are ongoing to better structure the curriculum. The hire of a new tenure track faculty member in International Relations should continue to improve the quality of a graduate level classes as well as exposure to career opportunities.

2. Internationalize our Curriculum

The department will continue to improve its international relations and comparative politics curriculum by continually monitoring student interest in our core areas (Latin America; Middle East; Asia) and some of our international relations classes.

We will also continue to increase awareness of the dual degree program (JD/MA) by making sure that the graduate advisor works closely with the Dean of Academic Affairs Office at the Law School to recruit students to the joint JD-MA in international law and trade. This effort will take several years to determine improved outcomes (see next section).Since 3 of the last 8 students admitted under this track did not complete the dual-degree program, this issue is a concern and warrants increased monitoring of why students left the MA program.

3. Improve Career Readiness

Continue to increase awareness of the *Executive-in-Residence* program by holding workshops specifically designed for graduate students. We also plan to encourage students to take advantage of internships and opportunities to present their work at professional conferences. This is occurring; the department has financially supported graduate students out of its own funds to be able to attend and deliver research presentations at a second conference.

- In the absence of a Teaching and Research lab, the department has made major investments in our departmental library to provide research space for our students and faculty members collaborating with them. In addition, the department acquired 10 I-PADs and set up a mobile computer lab.

Exit surveys: We are incrementally phasing this process for our degree programs and we hope to have an exit survey to our MA graduates in 2016. As part of our 2012 ADHE reaccreditation, we did conduct interviews with recent MA graduates who were in PhD programs or professional occupations. Based on their feedback, we instituted a change in the MA curriculum by increasing the number of <u>required</u> courses and to offer students more opportunities to develop defined skill sets. As mentioned earlier in the report, the survey is still be finalized and the incoming chair and graduate coordinator of the department will need to discuss any adjustments to this new curriculum.

Analysis of post-graduation career and employment outcomes: Because of the varied tracks that our graduates and the relatively small sample size (i.e., 5-10 graduates produced per year), it is difficult to make generalizations about post-graduation outcomes. One of our biggest challenges is to track students after they leave our programs. With the creation of Facebook and LinkedIn sites we have been able to track the majority of our students. None of this is done in a systematic fashion, however.

Going forward, the plan is to utilize measures such as data from the Economic Success Metrics (ESM) to analyze outcomes. However this aspect is the most difficult of the assessment efforts to improve within a short time frame as it requires additional staff resources to track students since the information in the ESM is rapidly becoming outdated.