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ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT REPORT (2021-22) POLITICAL SCIENCE M.A. PROGRAM

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Program Goals of the Master of Arts in Political Science

The Master of Arts (M.A.) in Political Science is a 36-hour, two-year degree program offered by the Political Science (PLSC) Department. The department also offers a J.D./M.A. dual degree program with the University of Arkansas Law School.

Currently, the PLSC M.A. program offers graduate-level courses in three subfields: (1) American Politics, (2) Comparative Politics, and (3) International Relations.

All PLSC M.A. students are required to take the following three core courses focusing on political methodology and public policy theory.

- PLSC 5913: Research Methods in Political Science
- PLSC 5943: Advanced Research Methods in Political Science
- PLSC 5163: Public Policy

In addition, all PLSC M.A. students are required to take three of the following four subfield-specific seminars depending on their primary area of study.

- PLSC 5203: Seminar in American Political Institutions
- PLSC 5213: Seminar in American Political Behavior
- PLSC 5503: Comparative Political Analysis
- PLSC 5803: Seminar in International Politics

Upon completion of additional coursework relevant to their primary area of study, all PLSC M.A. students must either (1) complete six hours of thesis credit and defend the thesis or (2) pass a written comprehensive examination to graduate.

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

- acquire a general knowledge about theoretical, methodological, topical trends in political science. (Goal 1)
- apply that knowledge to specific policy or political contexts by employing relevant theory and empirical evidence. (Goal 2)
- understand global trends in areas such as governance and political economy, as well as complex policy issues involving gender, race, and ethnicity. (Goal 3)
- conduct independent research and communicate the results effectively in both oral and written form. (Goal 4)

Evaluating Student Learning Outcomes

We evaluate said program goals and related student learning outcomes by:

- assessing students' performance on an array of assignments such as writing assignments, presentations, and examinations.
- providing a rigorous assessment of students' work performed in internships and other experiential assignments, preferably by seeking feedback from clients with whom they interned.

- having students demonstrate 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.

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

- Goal 1 can be assessed by introductory level required graduate courses that provide students with a general knowledge of the literature in these fields (e.g., PLSC 5203, PLSC 5213, PLSC 5163, PLSC 5503, PLSC 5803). Given the breadth 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 reviews, research papers and examinations 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.
- Goal 2 can be assessed in courses that are specifically designed to enhance the student's methodological knowledge and their qualitative and quantitative data analysis abilities (PLSC 5913, PLSC 5943). Students are directed to appropriate courses for their fields as well as courses in which skills overlap across political science subfields. The faculty members are able to assess this knowledge through literature review essays and research papers, quantitative and qualitative data sets, or other applied research with which the faculty member may be involved.
- Goal 3 can be assessed in our international relations and comparative politics classes in political science or international affairs classes in 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.
- Goal 4 can be most readily assessed when students participate in internships or other experiential assignments that bring them in contact with institutions and organizations they analyzed in their academic readings. Students also can meet this goal through their classroom participation/presentations, conference participation/presentations, and other relevant scholarly activities.

Assessment Results and Improvement Plans

We discuss assessment results and improvement plans in the following while focusing on (1) retention and timely graduation, (2) curriculum, and (3) career preparation.

1. Retention and Timely Graduation

The retention and timely graduation of students is not a direct outcome measure that is linked to the program goals and learning outcomes we discussed earlier. However, it still is a meaningful indicator for evaluating how successful this program was in achieving those stated goals and learning outcomes.

Assessment Results

Most students in the PLSC M.A. program graduate in a timely manner. However, a few students do not graduate in time for various reasons. Some students find it challenging to catch up with the coursework. Other students complete their coursework in time but delay graduation by postponing their thesis defense or a comprehensive exam for personal/professional reasons (e.g., off-campus full-time job, marriage, childcare).

Improvement Plans

The following are some of the improvement plans that we have considered.

- We plan to improve recruitment efforts to attract more and better students with diverse backgrounds, while partnering with community organizations, investing marketing and outreach efforts, and offering more attractive financial aid packages.
- We plan to conduct more rigorous assessment of the student's performance in the first semester while working with graduate faculty who teach core required courses.
- We plan to improve academic/career coaching to better familiarize students with the qualifications required for their specific career path so that students can better align their learning goals/outcomes with their career goals.
- We plan to take early intervention with students struggling with their coursework and off-campus responsibilities, which can help them get back on track and avoid falling behind.

2. Curriculum

The curriculum is an integral part of the effective and efficient graduate education. It is important that our existing curriculum meets the aforementioned program goals and the needs of our students. We regularly review our courses to ensure that they are up-to-date and relevant to the career goals of our students.

Assessment Results

Many of the required courses in American Politics, International Relations, Comparative Politics, Public Policy, and Research Methods are taught by highly experienced faculty members. The course contents and instructional approaches are both robust and rigorous. As a result, students, in general, achieve commendable learning outcomes as they pertain to the program's stated goals discussed earlier. One issue the program faces, however, is that, due to its relatively small cohort size, we cannot offer a diverse range of elective courses to meet each student's specific needs. As such, students must often enroll in independent studies or some courses outside the department to complete their degree requirements. This is not an ideal situation, but we are currently working on it.

Improvement Plans

These issues are being addressed and improvement plans are in place, as follows.

- We recently added more courses in politics of international law and southern politics, but we should continue diversifying our elective courses. This will allow our students to explore new areas of interest and develop the skills they need to succeed in their chosen field.
- We expect to hire two new assistant professors in Latino Politics and International Relations. This will undoubtedly help us offer more PLSC M.A. graduate courses in the future.
- We intend to expand the number of PLSC M.A. students in our program. By doing so, we can ensure that enrollment numbers stay high even when more graduate courses are offered.

- Relatedly, we are working on increasing our visibility and marketing efforts to reach a wider pool of potential applicants. We will also continue to increase awareness of the J.D./M.A. dual degree program while closely working with the Law School. This dual program allows our students to earn two graduate degrees in a shorter time frame than if they pursued each degree separately.

3. Career Preparation

Career preparation is a critical aspect of graduate education. To that end, the PLSC M.A. program is committed to helping its students succeed in their chosen careers.

Assessment Results

We encourage students to take advantage of internships and opportunities to present their work at professional conferences. The Graduate School and the PLSC department fund students to present their work at a reputable conference. Also, the department continues to invest in technology for our students and faculty members collaborating with them. As a result, a significant number of students take an internship with reputable organizations and/or present their research at major research conferences while working with their graduate faculty mentors. All these efforts are expected to contribute to better student learning outcomes and job placement.

Improvement Plans

- We will continue to improve the student participation in internships, especially among those who are planning to enter the workforce directly after graduation.
- Relatedly, we plan to expand the relationship with our community partners to create more career opportunities for our students.
- We will continue to improve our graduate students' paper presentations at major academic conferences through meaningful collaboration with the graduate faculty.
- We will continue to improve our alumni relations to keep them engaged with our program and receive their continued support for our students.