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ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT REPORT (2024-25)

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 59103: Research Methods in Political Science
- PLSC 59403: Advanced Research Methods in Political Science
- PLSC 51603: 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 52003: Seminar in American Political Institutions
- PLSC 52103: Seminar in American Political Behavior
- PLSC 55003: Comparative Political Analysis
- PLSC 58003: 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 52003, PLSC 52103, PLSC 51603, PLSC 55003, PLSC 58003). 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 students' methodological knowledge and their qualitative and quantitative data analysis abilities (PLSC 59103, PLSC 59403). 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 also 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

Although the retention and timely graduation of students may not directly align with the previously outlined program goals and learning outcomes, they remain important indicators for evaluating the program's effectiveness in achieving its stated objectives and outcomes.

Assessment Results

The majority of students enrolled in the PLSC M.A. program successfully graduate within the expected timeframe, showcasing their commitment and dedication to their academic pursuits. Nevertheless, some students encounter a few challenges that result in delayed graduation. These challenges can range from difficulties in keeping pace with the demanding curriculum, often due to personal issues or unexpected events, to deliberate decisions to defer thesis defense or comprehensive exams. Reasons for such deferrals may include engaging in full-time employment outside the campus, addressing personal responsibilities such as marriage or childcare, or fulfilling professional obligations. Our recent graduate program alumni survey conducted in the summer of 2024 offers valuable insights on this. Among the 35 PLSC M.A. alumni who responded to the survey, many confirmed that they were able to complete the program within the expected timeframe. However, consistent with our observations, some respondents shared experiences of delayed graduation due to personal or professional obligations. In open-ended responses, alumni described the need to balance coursework with full-time employment, relocating for family reasons, or managing childcare responsibilities. While the program's traditional structure supports timely completion, these survey findings suggest the value of increasing flexibility and institutional support for students facing such challenges. Despite these challenges, the PLSC M.A. program continues to offer steadfast support and assistance, providing the necessary resources and support to ensure the successful completion of all students' academic endeavors.

Improvement Plans

We are considering several improvement strategies, including:

- Enhancing our recruitment efforts to attract a diverse group of exceptional students by collaborating with community organizations (e.g., Arkansas Municipal League), bolstering our marketing and outreach initiatives (e.g., KUAF/KUAR radio advertisements), and offering more compelling financial aid packages.
- Implementing a more thorough evaluation of students' performance in their first semester in collaboration with the graduate faculty responsible for core required courses.
- Improving academic and career coaching to ensure students understand the qualifications needed for their chosen career paths, enabling them to align their educational objectives more closely with their professional aspirations.
- Intervening early for students who are struggling with their coursework and external responsibilities, helping them to regain their footing and prevent them from falling behind.
- Participating in major political science association meetings, such as APSA (American Political Science Association), MPSA (Midwest Political Science Association), ArkPSA (Arkansas Political Science Association), and NCOBPS (National Conference of Black Political Scientists) to connect with other M.A. programs, expand our knowledge, and gain valuable insights in the field.

2. Curriculum

The curriculum plays a crucial role in ensuring a high-quality graduate education. It is important that our current curriculum aligns with our program's objectives and adequately addresses our students' needs. To guarantee that our courses remain contemporary and pertinent to our students' career aspirations, we conduct regular reviews, ensuring they are both current and relevant.

Assessment Results

We offer a comprehensive curriculum across diverse areas such as American Politics, International Relations, Comparative Politics, Public Policy, and Research Methods. Our accomplished faculty members deliver courses that are both intellectually stimulating and academically rigorous. Consequently, our students consistently achieve laudable learning outcomes that align with the program's objectives previously outlined. One challenge faced by the program is its limited cohort size, which restricts our ability to offer a wide array of elective courses tailored to individual student interests. As such, students frequently have to pursue independent studies or courses outside the department to fulfill their degree requirements. While this situation is not ideal, efforts are underway to address this limitation. Our recent graduate program alumni survey offers valuable insights on this. In general, our curriculum was well-received by survey respondents. Across five curriculum evaluation items, alumni rated the quality of the academic experience very positively. Approximately 45% of all ratings were "Excellent"

(58 out of 130 total responses), 42% were “Good” (55 responses), and 25% were “Fair” (32 responses). Only 5 responses (4%) rated any part of the curriculum as “Poor.” These ratings reflect a strong endorsement of the program’s intellectual rigor and relevance, especially in core areas such as American Politics, Public Policy, and Research Methods. Nevertheless, some respondents expressed a desire for a broader range of course offerings, particularly electives in niche or emerging subfields. A few alumni noted that they relied on independent studies or took graduate courses outside the department to meet their specialized interests or professional goals. While this is understandable given the program’s relatively small cohort size, it nonetheless highlights a recurring concern. These findings support the program’s ongoing efforts to diversify elective offerings and explore strategic collaborations with other departments, online platforms, or inter-institutional partnerships to expand curricular options for students without compromising quality.

Improvement Plans

We are considering several improvement strategies, including:

- Enriching our curriculum with additional courses in the politics of international law, southern politics, and politics of race/ethnicity. Our goal is to further diversify our elective offerings, enabling students to delve into new areas of interest and acquire essential skills for success in their chosen careers.
- Enhancing our faculty by welcoming four to five tenure-track assistant professors over the course of the next three academic years, particularly specialists in American Politics and International Relations. This expansion significantly broadens our capacity to offer a more diverse range of courses to our Political Science M.A. students. We successfully recruited three new faculty members in this area during the last hiring cycle, but we need more.
- Improving the enrollment of PLSC M.A. students in our program, maintaining robust numbers while expanding our course offerings.
- Boosting our visibility and marketing strategies to appeal to a wider pool of prospective applicants. This includes marketing the J.D./M.A. dual degree program in partnership with the Law School, providing students the chance to earn two graduate degrees within a shortened period.
- Engaging actively in key political science association conferences, such as APSA (American Political Science Association), MPSA (Midwest Political Science Association), ArkPSA (Arkansas Political Science Association), and NCOBPS (National Conference of Black Political Scientists). These engagements will foster connections with other M.A. programs, broadening our perspective and bringing invaluable insights into our program.

3. Career Preparation

Career preparation stands as an important component of graduate education. The PLSC M.A. program is committed to ensuring the success of its students in their selected career paths. Not merely important, career preparation is indispensable in any graduate studies. With a clear understanding of its critical role, the PLSC M.A. program is dedicated to offering extensive support to its students, guaranteeing their achievement in their chosen professions.

Assessment Results

We strongly encourage our students to seek internship opportunities and present their work at professional conferences. Both the Graduate School and the PLSC department provide funding for students to showcase their research at reputable conferences. Moreover, the department is committed to providing essential computing tools for both students and faculty, thereby facilitating collaborative endeavors. As such, a considerable number of students secure internships with prestigious organizations and present their research at major conferences under the guidance of their graduate faculty mentors. These initiatives are aimed at enhancing student learning outcomes and improving job placement prospects. Our recent graduate program alumni survey offers valuable insights on this. In general, career readiness emerged as a major strength of the PLSC M.A. program, as evidenced by the survey results. 28 out of 35 respondents (80%) listed a current or most recent job title, including a wide range of professional positions such as Special Assistant for Policy & Strategy, Associate Director, Strategist, Headmaster, and Professor of Political Science. In addition, 30 alumni (86%) reported the number of positions they have held since graduating, with many indicating a strong and stable trajectory in public service, higher education, or the nonprofit sector. Open-ended responses underscored the value of professional development experiences embedded in the program. Several alumni highlighted the importance of faculty mentorship in shaping their career direction, as well as the role of internships and opportunities to present research at conferences in building their credentials and networks. These reflections reaffirm the program's commitment to supporting professional pathways and suggest areas for growth, including formalizing internship pipelines, expanding alumni mentorship opportunities, and enhancing career services coordination with the Graduate School. These efforts would further enhance the job placement rate and long-term professional success of future graduates.

Improvement Plans

We are considering several improvement strategies, including:

- Increasing student engagement in internships, especially for those poised to join the workforce right after graduation. Our strategy involves building some meaningful connections between students and pertinent organizations, ensuring they gain invaluable practical experience, and delivering expert advice on career progression.

Our goal is to equip our students with the necessary skills and confidence to excel in their chosen careers.

- Enhancing and expanding our engagement with community partners significantly. Through deeper collaboration and active engagement, our goal is to generate a broader spectrum of career opportunities for our students.
- Improving the quality of our graduate students' presentations at prominent academic conferences. To accomplish this, we will strengthen the collaborations between our graduate students and faculty members. By nurturing this collaborative environment, we aim to offer our students comprehensive guidance, mentorship, and knowledge, empowering them to give exceptional presentations that foster their academic and professional development.
- Strengthening our alumni relations to ensure a lasting bond with our program. Our goal is to build an engaged and dynamic community that provides meaningful support to our students, enhancing their success. By implementing a range of initiatives and opportunities, we intend to nurture enduring connections and ensure our alumni play a crucial role in the ongoing development of our program.
- Attending leading political science association meetings, including those hosted by the APSA (American Political Science Association), MPSA (Midwest Political Science Association), ArkPSA (Arkansas Political Science Association), and NCOBPS (National Conference of Black Political Scientists). Our goal is to forge connections with other graduate programs, enhancing our understanding and gaining critical insights in the field.