

Department of Politics and Government

Summary of the Findings of the Spring 2008 Assessment of Programs

This document presents the findings of the Spring Study for the academic year of 2007-08. The Spring Study is a major component of the internal assessment of the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University. It had four components. One, a focus group was held with graduate students in the Department of Politics of Government. Two, these graduate students were also given a survey later in the semester. A number of the questions in the survey were taken from comments made during the focus group to determine the proportion of graduate students who agreed with particular sentiments expressed. Three, seniors who were majors or minors in Political Science were surveyed. Four, a focus group was held with undergraduate majors and minors in Political Science.

Most of the results in this study were positive. Nonetheless, the results indicate two main areas in which the department need to consider putting greater effort for improvement. One, the department seems weaker at developing oral communication skills (e.g., giving formal presentations) than other types of skills, including in critical thinking, writing, and research. This might be a concern since the third learning outcome goal for both the graduate and undergraduate programs states that “the student possesses skills at effective oral and written communication about politics or government.” Two, both the graduate and undergraduate studies indicated that the academic advisement provided by the department to the students could be stronger. Beyond these two primary points, the graduate students made a significant number of suggestions for possible improvement of the graduate program.

Graduate Study Findings:

The study of graduate student opinions in the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University has been conducted since the spring semester of 2006, but this is the first year in which graduate component of the Spring Study had a successful quantitative as well as qualitative side. The graduate student study was conducted in two main steps. First, the program held a focus group with graduate students. This focus group explored how well the department was meeting its learning outcome goals and a range of other factors that affect the graduate student experience. At the request of the graduate students, no faculty members were allowed in the room while the students held their discussion. Instead, the focus group was moderated by Jake Owen, a second year graduate student who concentrated his studies in research methods. Then, during the second half of the semester, the program administered a survey of the graduate students. This survey assessed how well the department has been reaching its learning outcome goals, how satisfied the students have been with their professors and courses, how satisfied they have been with advisement and graduate assistantships, and what new courses they would most prefer. Survey questions were also based on statements made during the focus group to help determine how many students agreed with those statements.

The graduate student study produces these main findings:

Learning Outcome Goals:

The graduate focus group and survey indicate that the graduate program is meeting most of its learning outcome goals. However, the study also suggests that the department might be falling short in teaching students how to give oral presentations and in developing their skills at civic and political engagement.

The following list shows the four learning outcome goals. The bulleted text summarizes how well graduate students believe that the department is reaching these goals:

1. *“The student possesses the ability to understand and evaluate political institutions and processes at an advanced level”:*
 - The survey results indicate that virtually all of the graduate students (94%) believe that they possess or are gaining the ability to understand and evaluate political institutions and processes at an advanced level.
2. *“The student possesses the ability to conduct independent research on politics and government”:*
 - The survey results indicate that the vast majority of students (79%) believe that they possess or are gaining the ability to conduct independent research on politics and government;
 - However, both the survey and the focus group indicate that many students want more advanced training in research methods. Both the focus group and the survey suggest that the students would like at least one more advanced research methods course, though they show no strong preference for whether that additional training should be in qualitative or quantitative methods;
 - The students also show support for more research seminars, like the ones that were introduced during the 2007-2008 academic year (i.e., Research Seminar in Human Rights and Research Seminar in American Third-Parties).
3. *“The student possesses skills at effective oral and written communication in professional communities that deal directly with politics or government”:*
 - Both the focus group and the survey indicate that graduate students are satisfied with their development of written communication skills;
 - However, the focus group and survey indicate that these students would like more training in giving oral presentations;
 - While the survey indicates that most graduate students (61%) believe that they possess or are gaining skills at effective oral communication, only 45% believe that their skills in this area had been improved through graduate courses in politics and government;
 - During the focus group, students argued for a greater emphasis on developing skills at giving formal presentations, including that they would like to give

more formal presentations during graduate courses and get more feedback from professors;

- The students also suggested that they would like to follow professors to conferences in order to see how they give formal presentations.

4. *“The student possesses skills of effective civic and political engagement”*:

- A majority of students (61%) believe that they possess or are gaining skills of effective civic and political engagement; only 15% disagreed;
- However, during the focus group, the students argued that there is very little emphasis on civic and political engagement within the program;
- At least some of the students argued during the focus group that they would like the department to provide them more opportunities for civic engagement, for example, by permitting graduate students to participate in the DC trip.

Teaching and Current Courses:

The Spring Study suggests that teaching remains an area of success in the Department of Politics and Government. The graduate students were positive about the way that faculty members approach their teaching, but they also suggested changes in the graduate courses:

1. The survey results indicate that the students are very positive about the teaching by most faculty members:
 - The vast majority of students (82%) believe that a majority of professors taught in a clear and understandable way;
 - Virtually all the students (97%) believe that a majority of their professors wanted them to do well in class;
 - The vast majority of students (88%) felt that the majority of their professors were approachable;
 - All the graduate students met with their professors outside of class, and the vast majority (82%) did so often or sometimes—even though the survey respondents included students who came to campus for night classes only.
2. The students showed positive reactions to the graduate courses in politics and government, but they also saw areas where these courses could be improved:
 - 91% agreed that their analytic thinking skills improved because of these courses;
 - 85% agreed that their research skills improved because of these courses. Nonetheless, the students indicated during the focus group and other areas of the survey that they want to be given more advanced training in research methods;
 - 79% agreed that their writing skills had improved because the graduate courses;

- Only 45% believed that their skills at giving oral presentations had improved because the graduate courses in the Department of Politics and Government. During the focus group, the students suggested that there should be more training in this area.
3. However, the focus group indicates that the graduate students would like an increase in the number of graduate courses:
 - The students believe that the graduate seminars should be more spread out between the fall and spring semesters;
 - Several students also indicated that there are certain courses in the catalog that they are very interested in but which were not taught during their two years in the department;

New Courses:

Over the past three years, graduate students have argued that they would like more graduate level courses in a number of areas. This year, the survey was used to gauge what types of new courses students want. This was tested in two ways: (1) Students were asked if they strongly agree, agree, are neutral towards, disagree, or strongly disagree with new courses in a particular area, and (2) they were then asked to rank their preferences. The results of the survey are generally consistent with the findings during the focus groups over the past few years:

1. The students' strongest preference was in courses in *international relations*. When asked about new courses in the main areas of political sciences, the highest number of graduate students agreed or strongly agreed (76%) that they would like new courses in this area; it was also the highest ranked area for new courses by students;
2. The students also showed support for new courses in *comparative politics*. The second highest number of students agreed or strongly agreed that they would like new courses in this area (67%), and it was ranked as the third highest area for new courses;
3. The graduate students showed strong support for new courses in *research methods*, which they also indicated during the focus group. When asked about new courses in the main areas of political sciences, 58% agreed or strongly agreed that they would like new courses in methodology, and 36% strongly agreed that there should be new courses in this area, which makes it the area that the most students strongly agree should have new courses. The students also ranked research methods the second highest area for new courses after international relations. They showed no significant preference for either quantitative or qualitative research, and they supported having new research seminars in the areas that faculty members are interested in;
4. The graduate students also showed support for new course in *gender and politics*. 58% strongly agree or agree that there should be new courses in this area. More significantly, 27% strongly agree that there should be new courses in this area,

indicating that there is a significant pocket of support for more coursework in this area. Gender and politics was ranked fourth for new courses by the graduate students, and a student mentioned the need for new courses in this area during the focus group;

5. A significant portion of graduate students strongly agree or agree that there should be new courses in American politics, but when they were asked to rank areas for new courses, American politics received the lowest average score among all the major areas of political science;
6. The students also show strong support for new courses in Middle Eastern politics. When they were asked what region of the world they want new political science courses in, the highest percent (67%) agreed or strongly agreed that there should be new courses in Middle Eastern politics; the highest percent (33%) strongly agreed that there should be new courses on the politics of this region; and Middle Eastern politics received the highest average ranking when students were asked to rank the regions of the world in which they would most like new political science courses.

Academic Advisement:

Politics and Government graduate students were generally satisfied with the academic advisement they received from the program, but the results also indicate that the advisement could be improved in particular areas:

1. The students were generally satisfied with the advisement that they received, and they were also generally satisfied with the overall resources and material that their political science advisor provided them;
 - However, the vast majority of graduate students (88%) believe that the department should offer more advisement to graduate students upon first entering the program;
 - Most (77%) also believe that the department should offer graduate students more advisement on thesis work;
2. While many graduate students believe that the graduate program catalog is a helpful guide that provides clear information on requirements, most (64%) also believe that the catalog should include an example or model of a course schedule, like the type that is given in the undergraduate catalog;
3. Both the focus group and survey indicates that the students were very dissatisfied with advisement related to internships. Not a single student indicated that he or she was satisfied with the internship program;
4. The students were more dissatisfied than satisfied with information given to them related to graduate assistantships. During the focus group, the students also indicated confusion about department policies related to assistantships, including that at least some students thought incorrectly that the department was funding a graduate student who was in another program.

Graduate Assistantships:

During the focus groups with graduate students over the past three years, the students repeatedly indicated that assistantships for master's level students are a primary attraction of the graduate program. This sentiment was suggested again during the 2008 survey. The graduate students who received *graduate assistantships* saw this financial help as a fundamental reason why they entered the program, and many said that they would not have come to the program without the financial assistance. However, the students also had suggestions for improvement related to these assistantships:

- As mentioned above, the students were not very satisfied with the information they received about assistantships, and statements during the focus group indicated at least some misunderstanding on their part;
- The graduate students who received *graduate assistantships* generally believe that this financial help should continue for four semesters instead of three, even if this translates into fewer students receiving graduate assistantships;
- They also believe that assignments to faculty members should be based more on their academic interests than they currently are;
- The graduate students believe that there should be more oversight of *graduate assistantships* so that the department can make sure that faculty members do not require excessive work from their assistants. However, the survey also indicated that very few students believed that they were being overworked by faculty members, suggesting that this is an isolated problem requiring no new department policies.

Undergraduate Study Findings:

The undergraduate aspect of the Spring Study has two main components. First, the program administered a survey of all seniors who were majors or minors in Political Science. The purpose of the senior survey was to determine whether the students themselves believe that the department is meeting its learning outcome goals as well as to measure student satisfaction with the teaching of Politics and Government professors, the learning in political science courses, and the help provided by Politics and Government academic advisors. Second, the program held a focus group with political science majors and minors. In response to graduate student concerns about faculty members being in focus groups, and also in order to give graduate students more research methods experience, the undergraduate focus group was moderated by Nadejda Sledneva, a second year graduate student who is studying research methods. The focus group questions were primarily about the teaching of professors, the quality of courses, and the types of resources the department provides them. The undergraduate study produces these main findings:

Learning Outcome Goals:

Unlike in the graduate study, the undergraduates were never asked directly whether the program was meeting its four learning outcome goals. Nonetheless, for three

of the four learning outcome goals, the students were asked questions that probed how well they believed the department was meeting these goals. Overall, the undergraduate study indicates that the program is meeting most of its learning outcome goals. However, the study also suggests that the department might be weaker in helping students develop skills at effective oral communication about politics or government.

The following list shows the first three learning outcome goals. The bulleted text summarizes how well seniors believe that the department is reaching these goals:

1. *“The student possesses the ability to understand and evaluate political institutions and processes”:*

- The survey results indicate that for each area of Political Science, 59% to 83% of seniors agreed that their knowledge had increased significantly since they began taking political science courses at Illinois State University. No more than 12% disagreed for any of these areas.

2. *“The student possesses the ability to conduct research on politics and government”:*

- The survey results show that 86% of seniors agreed that their political science courses required research, and 70% of these seniors believe that their research skills improved because of these courses.

3. *“The student possesses skills at effective oral and written communication about politics or government”*

- The survey results show that 95% of seniors agreed that their political science courses required them to write papers, and 67% agreed that their writing skills improved because of these courses;
- However, these results indicate that the program is less strong at building oral communication skills among its students. Half of seniors (51%) agreed that their political science courses required oral presentations, and 44% agreed that their ability to give oral presentations improved because of their political science courses.

Professors and Courses:

The focus group with undergraduate political science students and survey of political science seniors strongly suggests that, overall, political science majors and minors are very satisfied with the teaching of their Politics and Government professors and the content of their political science courses. During the focus group, students made a number of very positive statements about these professors, including arguing that they believe it is the best Political Science department in the area, including in relation to the one at the University of Illinois. These students argued that the professors within the Department of Politics and Government are very knowledgeable, approachable and enthusiastic about the subject they are teaching. They are not overtly biased and do not show their political preference. They are well-rounded, and can offer different perspectives based on their own personal experiences.

These results about Politics and Government professors were echoed in the senior survey. For example, 78% agreed or strongly agreed that a majority of their professors taught in a clear and understandable way. 86% agreed or strongly agreed that a majority

of their professors wanted them to do well in class. 75% felt comfortable meeting with their professors outside of class. Two-thirds of the seniors also indicated that they met with their Politics and Government professors outside of class often or sometimes.

The seniors gave similarly positive responses about the political science courses that they took at Illinois State University. For example, 91% agree or strongly agreed that these courses challenge them. 96% agree or strongly agreed that the course material introduces them to new ideas and concepts. 90% agreed or strongly agreed that their critical thinking skills had improved because of these courses.

The evidence from the survey also suggests that overall political science majors and minors are learning a great deal about all areas of political science. For all major areas of political science (that is, American Politics, Comparative Politics, Constitutional Law, International Relations, Political Theory, Public Administration, Research Methodology, and State and Local Politics), most seniors believe that their knowledge has increased significantly since they began taking political science courses at Illinois State University. These results also suggest that the area in which they are learning the most is Political Theory: Even though this is one of the less popular areas among the students, it is also the area in which the largest percent of seniors claim to have learned a great deal.

Academic Advisement:

The results of the Spring Study indicate that while approximately half of undergraduate majors and minors in Political Science are satisfied with the academic advisement they receive, a significant minority were dissatisfied with advisement. The results also suggest that satisfaction with the academic advisement provided by the Department of Politics and Government may have dropped significantly over the past academic year.

During the undergraduate focus group, academic advisement was the primary weakness of the department cited by students. The main problem mentioned was the availability of their academic advisor. These results were echoed in the senior survey. While around 40% to 55% of seniors were satisfied with various aspects of academic advisement provided by the Department of Politics and Government, depending on the specific question, overall approximately one-fourth of the seniors were dissatisfied with the advisement they received. In the 2007 study, the satisfaction level was approximately 15% higher.

The reasons for these results, especially the decline in satisfaction, are unclear. They are especially surprising because the department took steps to improve academic advisement after the 2007 study, including by adding another advisor. Since the survey was of seniors, there might be lagged effect in the results, for example; the changes occurred over the past year, but these students were responding to their experiences over several years. In any case, these findings indicate that the department should continue monitoring issues related to academic advisement.

Improving the Spring Study:

The Spring Study has developed significantly over the past three years. It began as a single focus group with graduate students and is now a four part study implemented primarily by a student research team. The study has also become more integrated than it

was in 2007, and it is more focused on how well the department is reaching its learning outcome goals.

Nonetheless, there are areas in which the Spring Study requires further improvement. One, the role and composition of the student research team could be changed. As the study has developed, the amount of documentation has also increased exponentially. With the current system, this produces a significant amount of work for the Director of Assessment, even with the student help. In order to keep the study sustainable—that is, in order to reduce the amount of time faculty members need to put into this annual study—the research team has to produce a document that is closer to the final product than it currently is. So, instead of having an undergraduate lead the research team, an experienced graduate student on half a graduate assistantship should lead the study. That graduate student should be responsible not only running the four components of the study during the spring semester; he or she should be responsible for producing the entire first draft of this document by early summer. That graduate student will also need two to three undergraduates with UTA's to be research team members who help administer the study and produce that first draft of the final document.¹

Second, the department might consider focusing the study more on the learning outcomes goal, especially in the undergraduate program. Unlike in the graduate study, the senior survey never asked directly if the students believe that the department is meeting these goals, and the issue was not discussed at all in the undergraduate focus group. Moreover, there is no battery of questions in either study about the fourth learning outcome goal, which deals with skill development at effective civic and political engagement. Since this is a learning outcome goal, and since the evidence in the graduate study about meeting this goal are mixed, the department might increase the number of questions in the surveys and focus groups on this issue.

Third, the graduate study ran into two minor issues that should be fixed by 2009. One, students were asked to rank what areas they most want new courses in, but the ranking was done backwards: The low numbers were considered the highest rank, and vice versa. These rankings were then reversed mathematically for the analysis. To simplify the process and avoid error, the rankings should be done from highest to lowest. Two, since the graduate survey is read into SPSS by hand, not by Scantron, numbers should be used for answers instead of letters. This would ease the process of putting the data into SPSS.

Finally, the department might consider getting Institutional Research Board approval for the study. Since the department approaches assessment in a unique manner—that is, by teaching students how to run a study by doing this study—the material produced might be presentable or publishable. The study may also be linked to the research of particular faculty members. For example, new questions on skill development on civic and political engagement could potentially be used in research on student's civic responsibility.

¹ To make this feasible, the Director of Assessment will need to give the graduate student a copy of the final document from the previous year (that is, the goal that the student needs to imitate) and very clear directions on how to administer the study. All the documents the student needs should be in the Spring Study binder.