

Part I. General Information

Program(s) Discussed: Political Science Major

Current Semester: Fall 2017

Date of Assessment Meeting(s): September 6, 2017 (this was the meeting at which data were shared with Dept. members. Other discussions took place as part of scheduled department meetings throughout the academic year 2015/7).

Participants in Assessment Meeting(s): All full time Dept members and some part-time.

All Annual Assessment Reports are available to the appropriate Associate Dean, Dean, and the Provost, as well as to other administrators for institutional effectiveness and accreditation purposes. Please indicate the degree to which your program would like this information more widely shared.

On-Campus Users	Off-Campus Users
X Freely available	X Freely available
0 Available upon request	0 Available upon request
0 Unavailable	0 Unavailable

Part II. Assessment Process

Prompt: In one or two paragraphs, describe your assessment process. Did you gather data on all of your program's student learning goals? If not, which student learning goals did you measure in this assessment cycle? What tools did you use to attempt to measure student learning? Where and how were they administered? Who scored them?

In accordance with the department's Assessment Plan, the original "plan" for 2016-17 was to focus on Goals I-III of the department's Learning Goals (For details on the departmental Learning Goals and on how they align with JCU's Institutional Academic Learning Goals we refer back to the 2014-15 report). As will be explained in more detail below, we made an adjustment toward the end of the year to substitute Goal IV for Goal III and postpone the initial assessment of Goal III to next year.

To assess our Learning Goals, we employed three measures: (1) the Political Science Major Field Test (MFT), which we have administered to all graduating political science majors for the past 20 years and which includes, in addition to the standard questions on substantive political science knowledge, several items on academic and intellectual/critical analysis skills; (2) the Political Science Dept. Rubric for Assessing Writing Assignments, which we developed specifically for this purpose; and (3) the Political Science Oral Presentation Rubric, likewise specifically created for this purpose by the department (see attached). **New for this year is the analysis of the senior exit interviews.**

The MFT was administered online, at the end of April, in a session proctored by the assessment coordinator, to the entire PO graduating class through an interface provided by ETS. The assessment of writing took place, through the instructors, in PO 300 (required for majors) as well as PO 458 (a class accessible to non-majors as well). Oral presentation skills were assessed in PO 300 only. The Senior Exit Interview was appended to the MFT.

Part III. Findings

Prompt: Along with this report, please submit the data charts the program used during the assessment meeting. Describe, in words, what your program learned about student learning during this assessment cycle. What were your strengths? In what ways did students fail to meet the goals you set for them?

GOAL I - Demonstrating Knowledge in the Major Fields of Political Science:

As can be seen in Table 1 below, the **2017 MFT** scores (mean/median), and subfield scores, are in line with those of previous years. The Total Test score of **153/156** is slightly lower than in 2016 (**155/157**), but higher than every year of the 2011-15 sequence (see Table 2), and above the 2011-16 average. The Subscores are in line with the average of the previous 2 years, as would be expected. Small variations up and down should not be over-interpreted. Trends over time are more important (see Table 2).

The **Methodology** “Assessment Indicator” is higher than in 2016, and the one for **Political Thought** is quite a bit lower than in both 2015 and 2016. The score for **Analytical & Critical Thinking** is lower than in 2016, but higher than in 2015. The data suggest that both Methodology and Analytical & Critical Thinking are **key strengths of our department** (this is confirmed by the comparative analysis shown in Table 3 below). The standard deviations for the 2017 scores declined a bit, indicating that we had a more cohesive group of graduating seniors this year, although a 3 point difference between mean and median of the total score suggests that one or two low scores drag down the average noticeably.

Table 1 DEPARTMENTAL SUMMARY OF TOTAL MFT TESTSCORES, incl. SUBSCORES, 2015-17

	Mean/Median			Standard Deviation (2017)
	2017	2016	2015	
Total Test Scaled Score	153/156	155/157	151/153	11
Subscore: American Govt	54	56	52	11
Subscore: Comparative	52	50	50	12
Subscore: Intern. Rel.	53	54	50	9

Assessment Indicator Number	Assessment Indicator Title	Mean Percent Correct		
		'17	'16	'15
1	Analytical & Critical Thinking	61	64	59
2	Methodology	61	59	47
3	Political Thought	49	54	52

Trends: (Table 2) As stated above, the 2017 scores are in line with previous years, and overall the second highest of the 2011-2017 time period (data for 2014 is missing. Due to a technical malfunction of the JCU computer system, the test could not be administered on the designated day). Some random fluctuation can be expected (e.g., Political Theory), but the upward trend for methodology, observed last year, has been confirmed, and reflects positively on the additional emphasis that our department has placed on this subfield, with two additional courses (PO 200, a few years back, and PO 105, more recently).

Table 2 TREND JCU-MFAT 2006-17

	2011	2012	2013	2015	2016	2017
Mean	152	152	148	151	155	153
Median	154	154	148	153	157	156
US	50	52	47	52	56	54
Comp	51	51	53	50	50	52
IR	55	52	50	50	54	53
Meth	67	45	49	47	59	61
Pol Th	51	55	47	52	54	49
Crit Th	68	58	56	59	64	61
N	42	29	32	32	24	21

Benchmarking (Table 3): One of the shortcomings of the MFT is that it does not automatically provide any reference points for comparing a given institution's performance. As last year, we created a proxy measure, using the MFT comparative analysis tool. Unlike last year, it was not possible to create three reference groups because far fewer schools are in the comparison pool for 2017. Instead, we used data from 12 schools: 6 from last year's "similar" group, and 3 each from last year's "better" and "worse" groups.

Table 3 INSTITUTIONAL COMPARISON 2011-17

	JCU 11-15	JCU 16	2016 "Similar"	JCU 17	New Reference
Mean	150.8	155	156	153	156
Median	152.3	157	155	156	155
US	50.3	56	56	54	56
Comp	51.3	50	56	52	57
IR	51.8	54	56	53	58
Meth	52.0	59	48	61	54
Pol Tht	51.3	54	58	49	56
Crit An	60.3	64	64	61	66
N inst	1	1	11	1	12
N students	159	24	515	21	147

As can be seen in Table 3, our 2017 scores lag behind the new reference group by about 2-3 points, on average (except that our **overall median** and **Methodology** subscore are higher). One should be careful not to make too much of individual scores. Instead one should look for patterns. The patterns observed in Tables 2 and 3 clearly show (1) continued improving performance by our students, and (2) performance roughly in line with expectations, based on comparisons to similar institutions.

Discussion: The MFT is an imperfect tool to assess achievement in the major, partly because it is primarily knowledge focused (as opposed to skill focused), but also because there is a significant random element in the question selection. Our major at JCU does not mandate a particular sequence or combination of courses (beyond PO 101-104), so the degree of "expertise" in given areas varies from student to student and year to year – causing random fluctuations in the scores. Nevertheless, it is important to know that our students' performance has (1) trended upward, (2) is stronger in areas we emphasize, and (3) is roughly in line with their peers at similar institutions across the country.

GOAL IIa - Assessment of Writing:

The Rubric developed and employed by the department is appended to this report. It is based on similar rubrics that are used by other departments (e.g., HS) or that can be found at universities across the nation.

Table 4 - ASSESSMENT OF WRITING, 2015-17

Key: 0 = below expectations
 1 = meets expectations
 2 = exceeds expectations
 /% = percent of students below expectations

Course	Instructor	RQ/Thesis	Organization	Evidence	Sentence Structure	Grammar	Sources	Average
2015/6	Multiple (N=59)	1.2/21%	1.3/7%	0.8/39%	1.0/27%	1.2/27%	1.1/18%	1.1/27%
2016/7	Multiple (N=22)	1.5/4%	1.5/0%	1.8/9%	1.6/0%	1.9/0%	2.0/0%	1.7/2%

The department assesses writing within the major at 3 distinct points within a student’s 4 year passage through JCU: in PO 200 (usually taken during 2nd year), PO 300 (typically taken during junior year), and at the 400-level (each student is required to take at least one 400-level class before graduation). Other upper-division classes may serve to provide additional data points. It is hoped that a, over time, progression can be detected and documented, with students’ reaching the highest point of writing proficiency in their 400-level classes. The scores from spring 2015 to 2017 will continue to serve as baselines for future assessment.

As can be seen in Table 4, while the average writing assessment score(s) during **2015-16** were at or above the level of “satisfactory” (i.e., 1.0 or higher; the overall mean was 1.1), on average about a quarter of students (27%), scored below expectations on the six categories of assessment (across multiple classes). A year later (**2016-17**), the picture had changed dramatically with not only the average score(s) having improved significantly (overall mean 1.7), but the percentage of writing assignments below the level of satisfactory declined to insignificance (2% overall). While this is a positive trend, possibly reflecting the greater attention to writing by faculty, more data, particularly at the 200 and 400 level classes, will have to be collected in future years to confirm this trend and document that it is not just random fluctuation. The department is committed to providing more guidance and support for students who are struggling with their writing. Perhaps the results of those efforts are already showing up

GOAL IIb - Assessment of Oral Communication:

The oral communication assessment rubric used by the department is an abbreviated version of the one developed by JCU’s dept. of Communications. During the spring semesters of **2016 & 2017** the department assessed the oral communication skills of our political science majors in one class: PO 300.

Effective oral communication was assessed in ten separate categories, grouped into three areas: (1) Content/Substance; (2) Structure; (3) Delivery. The ratios of satisfactory scores to total N in each respective category were as follows:

Table 5 – ASSESSMENT OF ORAL COMMUNICATION 2015-16, 2016-17

Content/Substance

Saliency **9/9 4/6**

Reasoning **7/9 5/6**

Quality & use of evidence **6/9 5/6**

Structure

- Effective introduction 8/9 4/6
- Effective conclusion 7/9 4/6
- Effective limitation of ideas 8/9 4/6
- Effective organization and development of ideas 7/9 4/6

Delivery

- Vocal variety 8/9 5/6
- Style 7/9 5/6
- Facial Expression & eye contact 7/9 5/6

While most students scored satisfactorily, in both years several students (up to 1/3) did not. And these tended to be the same individuals who showed weaknesses across all areas. It is hard to interpret these results: on the one hand, unlike writing, oral presentation skills are not as intensively taught or practiced in our classes; on the other hand, most of us would agree that over the years the quality of our students’ presentation skills have improved. This is a testimony not only to the success of the JCU commitment (through the core) to proficiency in that area, but also to the availability of presentation software, which has made such assignments easier and more fun to carry out. The department endeavors to improve student proficiency in this area.

GOAL III - Awareness of, and Engagement in, Local, National and Global Politics:

Unlike academic knowledge and skills, awareness & engagement are not straightforwardly assessable within the classroom context. We kicked around various ideas, including taking attendance at departmental and campus events, but came to the conclusion that such measures were not sufficiently systematic and thus unreliable. In the end it was decided to revise our (written) senior exit interview and include in it items designed to gauge awareness & engagement. This will happen next year (Spring 2018). To make up for this, we will present data on Goal IV, which was originally scheduled to be assessed in 2017-18.

GOAL IV - Preparation for Graduate Programs and Careers related to Political Science:

Our existing Senior Exit Interview asked two questions that are pertinent – directly as well as indirectly - to Goal IV. Table 6 (a & b) presents data collected over the last 3 years (2015-2017).

Questions:

1. What are your plans for next year?
2. Do you feel that your political science coursework has sufficiently prepared you to execute your future plans?

Table 6a: P

	LANS FOR AFTER JCU			
	<u>2015</u>	<u>2016</u>	<u>2017</u>	(mean)
Law or Graduate School	42%	30%	37%	36%
Politics related job/internship	15%	15%	21%	17%
Teaching or service	15%	4%	5%	8%
Private sector job	13%	36%	21%	23%
Other (e.g., gap year)	15%	15%	16%	15%

Table 6b: BEING PREPARED FOR LIFE AFTER JCU (self –reported)

Well Prepared:	81%	67%	74%
Moderately well prepared	19%	33%	21%
Not well prepared	0%	0%	5%
N=	26	27	19

As Table 6a shows, a plurality (36%) of political science graduates opt for law or graduate programs, about 20% take jobs in politics, teaching, or service, and the remainder chooses other private sector occupations, the military, or is unsure or future plans. And as table 6b shows, a clear majority feels **well prepared** for their chosen career path (2/3 to 4/5), with almost all of the rest feeling **moderately well prepared**. Only one out of 72 students over the last 3 years reported that (s)he did not feel well prepared. Without benchmark data it is not immediately clear whether these numbers stand out in any way. It is however noteworthy that almost all students have specific plans for the time after graduation, and a clear majority plan to move into careers that are at least related to their major field (if one includes teaching and service in that group). This suggests that political science is a substantively relevant major at JCU, and not just a “pass-through.”

Part IV. Planned Changes to the Assessment System

Prompt: What changes, if any, do you need to make to your assessment system? (Questions to consider include: 1) Do your measures and processes provide useful data with a reasonable amount of effort? and 2) Are your measures reliable, valid, and sufficient?) On which student learning goals do you plan to focus your attention during the next assessment cycle? Do you need to implement additional formative assessment tools to better understand some of your findings? If so, describe those here.

Our plan was (and is) to cycle through our four departmental learning goals (LGs) by assessing one additional LG during each successive year, starting in 2014/15. We now have assessed Goal I three times, and Goal II twice. We did not assess Goal III as planned and instead moved up the assessment of Goal IV by a year. Goal III will be assessed for the first time next year.

At this point several lessons are clear. (1) The MFT is a useful and practical instrument that provides us with important baseline information to assess the content of our program as a way of insuring that it is in line with “industry standards.” The evidence, accumulated over multiple years, clearly shows that it is. In addition it provides us with feedback on content improvement (positive trend) and whether or not our program adjustments (e.g., strengthening our methodology section) are showing the expected effects (they do). The MFT can also serve as a “warning signal” that certain areas of competence are potential weaknesses for us, although the time-lag between getting the information and implementing changes can be considerable (in part because one does not want to make wholesale changes just because the scores are “low” in a given year). So the MFT will remain the center piece of our assessment arsenal.

(2) We need to make better use of our “senior exit interview.” At present this “interview” takes the form of open ended questions added to the annual MFT questionnaire. That is a useful format: it is efficient in terms of use of everyone’s time; the students typically are highly focused; and it is in written form and therefore can be analyzed and preserved. The plan is to adjust the current questionnaire by eliminating some questions (“evaluation”) and replacing them with new ones that are more explicitly “outcome” oriented. (3) We need to double down on our assessment of writing by increasing the number of data points we are collecting from our majors.

Part V. Planned Changes to the Program in Response to Data

Prompt: What changes, if any, do you need to make to your program in response to what you now know about student learning? (Possibilities include changes to learning goals, pedagogy, assignments in particular classes, activities, and curricular requirements and/or structure.) What is your anticipated timeline for both implementation and assessment of the planned changes?

As discussed in the previous sections, the data we have collected up to this point have indicated several positive trends: strong showing in the areas of **methodology, critical thinking, and written communication**, as well as improvements in the area of **comparative politics**. A potentially negative could be seen in the area of **political theory** – at the risk of over-interpreting short term “blips” in the data (in comparative politics the downward trend was short-lived).

We are strongly committed as a department to provide our students with opportunities to hone their

writing skills. There is a continuing discussion in the department about the best ways to bring that about. One example is to assign more short-essays with additional opportunities for feed-back as opposed to longer, end-of-semester “term-paper” assignments that usually do not allow for any feedback (because it is too late in the semester). Several department members are already doing this.

We are further committed to increasing our department’s organizing of, or participation in, public discussions and debates about current political and policy issues (**Goal III**). We have recently begun to organize such events several times each semester. Students have been invited not only to attend but also to participate in these discussions, either as panelists or through open forums. They take place off campus in a more relaxed and casual setting. We have also begun a second public lecture series, the Suopis Lecture Series, in addition to the Woelfl Seminar in Public Policy. Whereas the Woelfl takes place in the spring semester, the Suopis occurs in the fall semester; both are donor-funded.

Finally, we are committed to increasing our students’ opportunities to improve their professional skills (**Goals IV**) by working with the JCU Center for Career Services to publicize their services and make them more relevant and accessible to political science students. Likewise, we have redoubled our efforts to help our students gain access to meaningful professional internships and the number of students who have completed such internships has increased recently. The Pre-Law Advisor is now also situated in our department (Dr. Stiles).

Further discussions will be had, and adjustments be made, as the APR becomes available.

Supporting documents to follow:

1. Political Science writing assessment rubric
2. Political Science oral communication assessment rubric.