

## **I. Executive Summary**

The faculty in the political science major focused our assessment discussion on the topic of the senior experience, specifically: the senior seminar, senior thesis and public presentations, the comprehensive exam, and prerequisites in courses. Given that we graduated 3 seniors in Spring 2012 and worked with 2 seniors in Fall 2012, we were able to discuss the preparation students had for their senior project and implications of the shift to a one-semester model initiated in 2011-2012. Our findings indicate a need to prepare seniors for the thesis prior to the fall semester. Our focus for the upcoming year will be working to develop senior skills and initiate plans to highlight the research design course requirement for juniors and sophomores so that they are ready for their senior experience.

## **II. Summary of Annual Assessment Review and Planning Discussion**

Faculty members agreed that the topic of the senior experience was to be the focus of our assessment discussion. The format of the senior seminar and thesis changed with the launching of the new major such that what had been a two-semester process (senior seminar and thesis design in the fall; data gathering, analysis and thesis completion in the spring) was condensed into a one-semester course in the fall. Political science requires an original data gathering and analysis for our senior thesis projects so the ability of students to complete the project requires a clear conceptualization and strict implementation plan very early in the fall semester. Given that not all students have had the newly required research methods course (SOC 394) prior to their senior year, students may be at a disadvantage. The experience with the most recent students to work through this process revealed that even with this course under their belt, the ambitious nature of many projects makes the one-semester model difficult to implement successfully. Students sometimes need extended time to work through the process of determining their interests and developing a workable research design. We wish to encourage this thoughtful process but find that doing so may end up limiting the time that students have to actually do their research. This results in projects that are either under-developed or less ambitious than they may otherwise have been; both are undesirable outcomes. Faculty decided that one of the ways to mitigate this problem is to discuss senior thesis topics with juniors in their spring semester and encourage them to use the SOC 394 course to explore research design options. We will also make an effort to communicate with students over the spring and summer to be sure that a topic area has been selected and explored. The intention is that seniors will come into their senior fall with preparations for the thesis project in place, affording them more time for refining research design, gathering data, performing analysis and writing results and conclusions.

### **III. Plans for Coming Year**

Faculty agreed that our focus for the coming year would be improving the senior experience for students. We believe that preparation will be a key component for student success and will begin to work with Sociology faculty teaching the research design course and meeting with juniors early in the spring semester to alert them to the nature of the thesis process. We will encourage them to explore thesis topics and design options. In advising, we will continue to encourage students to take the research design course as sophomores or as juniors and not to leave it to their senior spring.

In addition to this focus on the thesis itself, our ongoing review of the senior experience will include an assessment of the extent to which the senior seminar provides students with a useful platform for their thesis work. At present, the seminar class does “double duty” in introducing a common theme for the beginning of the course (a mini topics course of sorts) but transitioning to an individualized format for the second half of the semester. We will investigate the utility of this model by asking if the initial portion of the course might be eliminated and instead a research implementation model be adapted instead. In this model, the course would meet weekly with student reports regarding their progress toward common benchmarks in the thesis process and discussion of approaches, difficulties, strategies, solutions and results.

Also with regard to the senior experience, we aim to develop a better model for senior thesis presentations. At present, presentations are generally scheduled during finals week of the fall semester. While this coincides with the completion of the project, it also means the attendance by other students is constrained. A group presentation schedule and/or poster model may serve students better. An additional solution might be to schedule these presentations earlier in the semester but far enough into the project such that most substantive work has been completed.

Internships are a way for students to gain practical and applied experience in utilizing the concepts developed in their academic study. Political science requires an internship for all graduates. As part of the enhancement of the major, we intend to continue to focus our efforts toward encouraging students to fulfill their internship requirement prior to their senior year so that experience can contribute to their overall understanding of our subject matter.

Comprehensive exams form the final element of the senior experience in political science. We transitioned from oral to written comprehensive exams in 2009. Going forward, we will revisit the current structure of comprehensive exams, what we expect them to demonstrate and how they can best achieve those goals.

As a new major, we continue to review our structure of pre-requisites and the developmental structure of our offerings. In the past, we have had a relatively open major such that students focusing on other fields can easily enroll in our upper level seminars. While we enjoy this openness and opportunity to reach students outside the major, we are concerned that our upper-most courses may be suffering because of a difficulty in starting with assumed levels of

knowledge about basic concepts. It should be added that we do not yet have any comparative trends in terms of how students are expressing their interests in taking general political science courses as elective versus the required courses. It might take a while to identify those trends.

#### **IV. Updated Assessment Plan**

As Political Science is a new major, separated from the former Public Affairs major in Fall 2012, it does not yet have a unique assessment plan. Such a plan will be crafted in 2013 and will be implemented with the January 2014 assessment report.

#### **V. Summary of Data Used**

Data used for this report are anecdotal recollections and experiences of faculty working with individual students in 2011 and 2012. Faculty discussed their impressions of the process, student preparedness and resulting thesis project quality, comparing them with expectations and long-range goals for improvement.