**2009 Assessment Plan - Political Science Department**

**Program Mission**

**Step 1: Department Mission**

The study of politics is informed by longstanding questions about power, freedom, justice and equality. More specifically, the study of politics focuses on how a polity organizes for collective action and the tensions between public authority and private rights: what role should government play in a democratic society? In practice, the study of politics often entails a systematic but also critical examination of institutions and governmental processes at domestic and international levels of analysis.

The Department of Political Science covers the spectrum of national, global, and sub-national politics; it contrasts the American experience with political structures and processes in other parts of the world. Special attention is paid to the intricacies of relationships between nations with widely differing political traditions and often conflicting understandings of government or perceptions of national interest. We examine the dynamics of political forces at all levels, from the working of municipal governments to international relations. It includes courses in such areas as: American national government, political parties, campaigns and elections; interest groups, social movements, constitutional law, civil rights and civil liberties, political theory, international relations, comparative politics, public policy analysis, and methodology.

We conceive of the Political Science major as firmly located within the larger context of a traditional liberal arts education. We do not define the study of politics as narrow professional training, although we hope that our students will develop the skills and modes of thinking that will foster a deeper understanding of the world, an appreciation of its diversity, and a respect for pluralistic points of view – all factors that will lead to success in law school, graduate school, and public service careers. Our goal is to create an intellectual environment where students can fully develop their academic skills, think more critically about their world, and prepare to become engaged citizens and productive members of society through acquisition of those intellectual tools that will better enable them to interpret their own experience.

**Step 2: Goals/Learning Outcomes**

1. To promote critical thinking. Our goal is for students to learn to weigh and assess competing arguments and not simply accept, without question, conventional understandings of an issue.

2. To enable students to develop the ability to engage with difficulty texts, to master the skill of reading. Our goal is for students to be able to extract and evaluate material from their assigned reading and other textual sources, be they books, films, or other relevant materials.

3. To enable students to write clearly and effectively. Our goal is that students be able to make arguments about arguments, supporting their positions with relevant evidence. To this end, a related goal is that students demonstrate an ability to convey complex information. Students should be able to assess, weigh, and apply evidence when making arguments. This includes being able to recognize appropriate supporting evidence as well as assessing the evidence used to support competing claims.

4. To equip students with the ability to undertake and evaluate quality research. Students should be able to gather, synthesize, evaluate and present competing arguments and evidence.

5. To increase students’ global understanding. As a result of globalization, national borders have become increasingly permeable. Students need to place American institutions and values in comparative perspective. They need to recognize where American attitudes and political processes are exceptional. They also need to recognize the perspectives deriving from political cultures and historical experiences different from that of the United States. Consequently, students should have some understanding of politics outside the United States: how American institutions, processes, and policy choices compare to that of other nations; how the U.S. fits in the international system; how interdependency and globalization means that the questions of American politics cannot be treated in isolation, that in the forthcoming years the actions of external actors and forces will have an even greater influence on American life.

6. To enable students to understand political events within their historical framework. Political processes and government institutions evolve over time. Students should be able to identify key events in American and world history and understand how they influence politics today or how they were a product of a different era. A historical understanding (including an understanding of women’s suffrage and civil rights) will increase student knowledge of ethnicity, diversity, and questions of underrepresentation.

7. To enable student to confront the basic questions of political philosophy. Students should be able to understand and evaluate competing political theories and normative views of government. They should be familiar with the debate for and against increasing the role of government in society, with appropriate respect for such concerns as individual freedom, civil liberties, civil rights, equity, and economic efficiency. Classical debates should inform student understanding of the trade-offs inherent in contemporary policy choices.

8. To give students a basic understanding of the American political system and it’s processes; to increase civic understanding. Students should be prepared to participate meaningfully in politics in an informed manner with a respect for basic democratic values and opinions contrary to their own.

**Step 3: Relevant Program Components**

1. “Gateway” courses to the major: students are required to take two introductory courses – PLSC 101 (‘The Politics of American Democracy’) and PLSC 105 (‘Introduction to Political Thought’) – that introduce students to ideas, institutions, traditions of inquiry, and modes of political argument that will be referred to and developed in upper-level courses in the major.

2. The ‘Subfield Distribution Requirement’: students are required to take at least one course in each of the major ‘subfields’ within the discipline – American Politics, Comparative Politics, International Relations, and Political Theory.

3. The *Methods* Requirement: students are required to take PLSC 201 (‘Scope and Methods of Political Science’), a methods seminar that focuses on the interplay between problems and sources and the process of defining researchable historical problems. The course introduces students to the study of descriptive statistical methods, their uses and abuses, and qualitative issues concerning sources, interpretation and narrative, with an emphasis on examining primary sources.

4. The ‘Upper-Level Theory Requirement’: students are required to complete at least one 300/400 level course in political theory. Enrolled students further develop textual interpretive skill first introduced in PLSC 105. Students must engage in close readings of primary texts, and learn to deploy textual evidence from those texts in support of their interpretive arguments.

5. A proposed summative ‘capstone’ experience: the senior capstone will be in the form of an advanced topical seminar that requires the student to engage in intensive writing and independent research, while affording the opportunity to apply theories and concepts acquired in previous classes to new ideas, problems, and cases. Students will be required to demonstrate an ability to understand and explain complex ideas and arguments of others, in the process of articulating and defending their own scholarly point of view.

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**Step 4: Methods Used to Assess Learning Objectives**

1. Senior exit survey. This contains numerically coded responses to derive and analyze summary quantitative indicators of learning objectives. Open-ended qualitative responses are also evaluated. The survey focuses on student attitudes about the Department. Students are asked how satisfied they were with several different aspects of their department experience. Future surveys will include questions to determine, on average, the number of hours they studied, how much they participated in class, how much they read, and how much contact they had with professors.

2. Alumni survey. Like the initial survey, this contains open-ended questions as well as questions that can be coded into discrete responses to make quantitative summary assessments. Alumni will be asked to consider, in retrospect, which courses proved most valuable to them, and to explain why.

3. Collaborative departmental qualitative assessment of the senior ‘capstone’ paper. Members of the Department will meet to discuss common strengths and weaknesses in the paper (e.g., how well do students use evidence to support an argument). The collaborative assessment will provide an immediate ‘snapshot’ of student strengths and weaknesses.