

**Department of Political Science  
Assessment Plan (2014-17)**

**A. Department Student Learning Statement**

The study of political science at Macalester emphasizes making connections between the theory and practice of politics. Concerns range from perennial philosophical or normative issues regarding power, justice, freedom, human dignity and social responsibility to practical political matters such as policy making and public problem solving.

The political science department seeks to cultivate in its students a wide range of practical and scholarly competencies, including several we consider to be centrally important. First, the department seeks to help its majors develop a mature *political imagination*. By this we mean a capacity to approach important social problems and issues as a political scientist. A mature political imagination includes an ability to envision what constitutes an important political question/issue; to understand the various ways in which a political scientist might address such a question/issue; to conduct social inquiry into that question/issue employing methodologies and techniques appropriate to political scientists; to recognize the partiality of political science questions, explanations and forms of social inquiry and the importance of insights from other disciplines; and an ability to think creatively about humane solutions to the *political problems and challenges* confronting the world today.

Second, the department seeks to cultivate in its majors *specific knowledge competencies*. These include both a sound understanding of facts relevant and necessary to the study of political life (including a working knowledge of the key actors, structures, institutions and historical dynamics that constitute the contemporary political order) and a well-developed understanding of the major theoretical trends, perspectives, concerns and debates that have shaped the evolution of the discipline and/or its sub-disciplines over the past several centuries. Political science graduates should be able to engage the world — whether as political scholars or political actors—with theoretical sophistication and confidence.

Third, the department seeks to cultivate in its majors a range of cognitive or *intellectual competencies*. These include a well-developed ability to think conceptually, critically, synthetically, analytically, and rigorously about the world of politics. The political science faculty believes that the development of these higher-order cognitive skills comprises the core of the department's collective endeavors.

Fourth, the department seeks to help political science majors develop a number of *practical competencies*, including:

- a capacity for close, focused, and critical reading of political texts;
- an ability to convey information, analysis and persuasive arguments in written and oral forms clearly and effectively;
- a well-developed capacity for democratic deliberation;
- a level of numeracy appropriate to a student's research interests and the demands of contemporary political life;
- an ability to conduct sound and rigorous social inquiry using appropriate methodologies and techniques;
- a capacity for effective collaboration with others; and,
- a capacity for effective problem-solving;

Finally, the department believes that educational excellence in political science should not only involve the development of intellectual capacities, but also the *civic competencies* required for humane leadership in a multicultural and globalizing world. Cultivating a capacity for effective civic engagement and leadership is central to the goals of a first-class political science program.

### C. Department Learning Goals and Outcomes

Against the backdrop of this broad aspirational vision, department's assessment priorities are as follows.

#### 1. Inquiry and Analysis

*Learning Goal:* Graduating seniors should be able to conduct independent inquiry and analysis.

*Definitions:* Inquiry is a systematic process of exploring issues, objects or works through the collection and analysis of evidence that results in informed conclusions and judgments. Analysis is the process of breaking down complex topics or issues into parts to gain a better understanding of them.

*Learning Outcomes:* Upon completing a major in Political Science, students will be able to:

- Identify a creative, focused, and manageable topic that addresses potentially significant yet previously under-explored aspects of the topic.
- Synthesize in-depth information from relevant sources representing various points of view/approaches.
- Skillfully develop all elements of the methodology or theoretical framework.
- Organize and synthesize evidence to reveal insightful patterns, differences, or similarities related to focus.
- State a conclusion that is a logical extrapolation from the inquiry findings.
- Insightfully discuss in detail relevant and supported limitations and implications.

## 2. Critical Thinking

*Learning Goal:* Graduating seniors should be able to think critically.

*Definitions:* Critical thinking is a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.

*Learning Outcomes:* Upon completing a major in Political Science, students will be able to:

- State clearly and describe comprehensively the issue/problem to be considered critically.
- Interpret/evaluate information taken from sources in order to develop a comprehensive analysis or synthesis.
- Thoroughly (systematically and methodically) analyze one's own and others' assumptions and carefully evaluate the relevance of contexts when presenting a position.
- Take into account the complexities of an issue.
- draw conclusions that are logical and reflect the student's informed evaluation and ability to place evidence and perspectives discussed in priority order.

## 3. Written Communication

*Learning Goal:* Graduating seniors should be able to convey information, analysis and persuasive arguments in written form.

*Learning Outcomes:* Upon completing a major in Political Science, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate a thorough understanding of context, audience, and purpose that is responsive to the assigned task(s) and focuses all elements of the work.
- Use appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to illustrate mastery of the subject, convey the writer's understanding, and shape the whole work.
- Demonstrate detailed attention to and successful execution of a wide range of conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task (s) including organization, content, presentation, formatting, and stylistic choices.
- Demonstrate skillful use of high-quality, credible, relevant sources to develop ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing.
- Use graceful language that skillfully communicates meaning to readers with clarity and fluency, and is virtually error-free.

#### 4. Quantitative Literacy

*Learning Goal:* Graduating seniors should be able to reason and solve quantitative problems encountered in a wide array of authentic contexts and everyday life situations. They should be able to understand and can create sophisticated arguments supported by quantitative evidence and they can clearly communicate those arguments in a variety of formats (using words, tables, graphs, mathematical equations, etc., as appropriate).

*Learning Outcomes:* Upon completing a major in Political Science, students will be able to:

- Provide accurate explanations of information presented in mathematical forms and make appropriate inferences based on that information. *For example, accurately explain the trend data shown in a graph and makes reasonable predictions regarding what the data suggest about future events.*
- Skillfully convert relevant information into an insightful mathematical portrayal in a way that contributes to a further or deeper understanding.
- Successfully perform calculations necessary to solve a problem. Present calculations elegantly (clearly, concisely, etc.).
- Use the quantitative analysis of data as the basis for deep and thoughtful judgments, drawing insightful, carefully qualified conclusions from this work.
- Explicitly describe assumptions and provides compelling rationale for why each assumption is appropriate. Demonstrate awareness that confidence in final conclusions is limited by the accuracy of the assumptions.
- Use quantitative information in connection with the argument or purpose of the work, presents it in an effective format, and explicates it with consistently high quality.

#### **D. Department Assessment Strategies: Measuring Student Performance**

In order to make assessment both meaningful (by which we mean likely to lead to improvements in student learning) and sustainable (by which we mean minimally burdensome to both students and faculty), the Department will assess student performance with respect to these learning goals/outcomes on a rotating basis. Specifically, we will assess no more than two of these goals per year, where possible “piggy-backing” on routine college assessment efforts.

Among the various strategies that might be employed to measure student performance, we have chosen the following:

Capstone Project Assessment: Where possible we plan to apply the AAC&U VALUE rubrics to our majors’ culminating projects (either Senior Seminar Paper or Honors Thesis). This will provide us with a direct assessment of their mastery of the relevant learning goals.

Exit Interviews: In the past, we have used exit interviews to provide indirect assessment of student learning. We plan to continue this practice.

Stand-Alone Direct Assessment: For some learning goals (eg. Quantitative Literacy), there may be no practical form of embedded/authentic assessment. In these cases, we will develop both a direct assessment instrument and evaluation rubric (probably to be administered in the Senior Seminars).

#### **E. Four Year Assessment Plan**

The PS Department will assess student learning according to the following timetable:

1. *2014 – Critical thinking*
2. *2015 – Inquiry and Analysis*
3. *2016 – Quantitative Literacy*
4. *2017 – Written Communication*

#### **F. Assessment Rubrics**

These are available online at [http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/index\\_p.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/index_p.cfm)

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