

**Review Report to the General Education Committee Concerning  
Political Science 114: American National State and Local Government  
November 1, 2006**

**1. Indicate how the goals of the course relate to the General Education goals for the specific designator.**

The goal of courses designated as Social and Behavioral Science courses is for students to be able to “demonstrate knowledge of past and present human endeavor.” The two criteria which apply to this course are “a. Courses designated SBS are based on empirical research and human experience,” and “c. Courses designated SBS will describe ways in which civic, economic, and/or social relationships are determined.”

The overall goal of Political Science 114 is to “enable students to acquire the information and skills they need to function as intelligent citizens.” Information needed to function as an intelligent citizen includes knowledge of “the basic structure, institutions, actors and processes” of our political system, “fundamental values and value conflicts that inform debates in American politics,” and contemporary “issues of public policy.” This knowledge is an integral part of America’s “past and present human endeavor” and meets criteria “c” of the SBS designator by describing “the ways in which civic... relationships are determined.” The necessary skills for citizenship include critical thinking skills to evaluate public policy issues and choices that citizens are presented with throughout their lives. Wrestling with the conflicts over values and policy in American politics helps to develop these skills. In addition, learning the methods of empirical social science research reinforces such skills. (The complete catalogue copy and objectives from the official course syllabus can be found in Appendix I).

**2. Describe the assessments (assignments) used to evaluate how well students achieved the outcomes for the SBS designator. Append sample assignments and/or test questions (not student work). If this is a multiple section course, explain how consistency in assessment was insured across the sections.**

The first outcome of the SBS designator is “Students will demonstrate knowledge of diverse principles that explain human behavior.” The second outcome of the SBS designator is “Students will apply the methods of the social sciences.” The department has developed 65 multiple choice questions for a pre-test that is administered to students in all sections of the course in the first week of class. To assess how well students meet the first two SBS outcomes, a common set of 20 questions from the pre-test are incorporated into the regular course exams in all sections of the course. Ten of these questions focus on “diverse principles that explain human behavior,” and ten focus on the application of “methods of the social sciences.” (Sample test questions can be found in Appendix II).

The third outcome of the SBS designator states that “students will identify and analyze human activities and/or institutions in the broad variety of human contexts within past and/or present time.” To assess how well students are able to do this, a common paper assignment is given in all sections of the course. This assignment asks students to analyze two written essays which take different positions on a single issue related to American political institutions, behavior, and/or procedures. The actual essays assigned may vary from section to section. However, to promote consistency between sections, the directions to students and the grading rubric is the same in all sections of the course. In addition, this semester all faculty members will evaluate a common sample of the papers to see if there is basic

consistency in our use of the rubric. If our assessments of the same papers vary widely, we will make adjustments to be more consistent in how we apply the rubric. This comparative evaluation exercise will be repeated periodically to ensure that consistency is maintained. To help prevent plagiarism, all students are required to post their papers to the Turn It in website. (A sample paper assignment can be found in Appendix III. The grading rubric for that assignment is in Appendix IV).

**3. Provide a summary and analysis of the data collected as part of the assessment process.**

The department plan approved by the General Education Committee specified that data on student achievement in Pols 114 would be assessed one semester each year. During the 2005-2006 academic year, the assessment data was collected and aggregated for the spring semester.

The data suggest that overall most students have been meeting the three outcomes successfully. Those areas in which fewer students were successful provided us with information on how to improve student learning, as will be discussed under item 4.

Ten multiple choice questions were used to assess students' knowledge of diverse political principles and concepts, and ten to assess students' understanding of methods in the social sciences. Table 1 in Appendix V shows the topic of each of the 10 questions about political principals and concepts, the percent of students who answered each question correctly on the pretest, the percent of students who answered each question correctly on the post-test, and the percentage point change from the pretest to the posttest. Table 2 in Appendix V shows the same information for the 10 questions about methods in the social sciences.

Data from the third outcome is based on faculty members' evaluations of the written assignment (Appendix III) using a common rubric (Appendix IV). Table 3 in Appendix V shows the aggregate results from all 3 faculty members that taught sections of Pols 114 in the spring of 2006.

**4. Discuss how the assessment information has been used for course improvement. If it has not been used, explain why not.**

Department members teaching Pols 114 have met and discussed the information gained in the assessment process in order to identify areas for improving the course and the instruments we use to assess the course. These meetings have included formal sessions on 1/17/06, 5/18/06, and 10/27/06, and numerous informal discussions. We have analyzed the specific data detailed in this report and also examined faculty member's impressions about what worked, what did not work, and what students need more assistance with.

Assessment data from the multiple choice items has been used by the department to distinguish between the topics in the course that most students master from the topics that substantial numbers of students do not master. For example, the data from the spring of 2006 indicate that most students gained a good understanding of representation, but that far fewer learned the importance of partisanship in the organization of Congress. This alerted faculty to the need to refocus our emphasis when discussing Congress. The assessment data collected this fall will help the faculty determine if the changes they instituted to improve the course in this area were successful. The same process is used for items on the multiple choice exam that focus on social science methods.

In the course of analyzing the data from the multiple choice items, department members also figured out ways to improve the assessment instrument and procedures. First, instead of determining what percent of all the questions each student answered correctly, the department looks at questions one at a time and calculates what percent of students answered each question correctly and incorrectly. This way of grouping the data is more valuable when the department wishes to identify strengths and weakness with the course, rather than strengths and weaknesses of particular students. It is also a preferable way to organize the data when the department tries to evaluate results of changes made to specific aspects of the course. (Dr. Tricia Davis, the Assessment Coordinator, was consulted about this change, and indicated it was an appropriate way to organize the data.)

Another change in the assessment procedure was to reduce the number of items from the pre-test that are incorporated into exams given throughout the year from 40 to 20. This change is the result of Dr. Barbara Walvoord's presentation on campus this fall. She suggested selecting a relatively small number of areas to try to improve upon each year. Twenty questions is ample for the department to identify areas that need attention. As improvements are made and documented in those areas, some of the 20 items can be replaced with new items focusing on other political concepts and methods that reflect outcomes 1 and 2.

A final change, to be instituted this semester, will affect the content and assessment of the course. Faculty were pleased that students, who came into the course with very little background in methods, made such dramatic progress in the course learning about social science research methods. However, due to time constraints and thoughts about what was appropriate in 1xx-level courses, the department decided not to include hypothesis testing as one of the methods to be taught or assessed in this course.

The written assignment, used to assess student progress toward meeting the third outcome, was first used in the fall of 2005. Before the spring semester, instructors reflected upon the assignment at a formal meeting in January and also informally. Faculty members judged it to be a good assignment, but noticed it was very difficult for a good proportion of the students. They identified strategies to help students more fully develop the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills called for in the paper and implemented those during in the spring of 2006. In addition, faculty members identified inconsistencies between the assignment's directions and grading rubric and made small changes to make them consistent. In the spring of 2006, data about student achievement on this assignment was aggregated from all sections of the course. In reviewing the distribution of papers in the 5 categories ranging from "excellent" to "unacceptable," faculty were somewhat concerned that such a large proportion of papers were classified as "excellent." While some factors may explain the high scores, including the improvements made to the course specifically to strengthen student's abilities to succeed with this assignment, the department intends to keep a close eye on this. Even before viewing this distribution, the department had planned to have all Pols 114 instructors assess a sample of the papers turned in this spring, to see how consistent we are in using the rubric.

## **APPENDIX 1: RELATIONSHIP OF GOALS OF THE COURSE TO THE GOAL OF THE SBS DESIGNATOR**

Designator SBS (Social and Behavioral Sciences):

Demonstrate knowledge of past and present human endeavor.

Catalogue description of the course:

An examination of American government at the national, state, and local levels including an assessment of the key philosophical and ideological roots of the American experience, the components of the policymaking process, as well as major actors and institutions in the American political system from the national, state and local levels of government.

Objectives for the course in the official syllabus

The overall goal of the course is to enable students to acquire the information and skills they need to function as intelligent citizens. Specifically the course

- 1) introduces students to the basic structure, institutions, actors and processes that shape contemporary American politics at the national, state and local levels;
- 2) introduces students to the fundamental values and value conflicts that inform debates in American politics;
- 3) introduces students to the issues of public policy that dominate contemporary public discourse; and
- 4) helps students develop the critical thinking skills they need to evaluate the public issues and choices they will be presented with throughout their lives.

## Appendix II: Sample Multiple Choice Test Questions

### First Outcome -- Political Principles and Concepts

In a representative democracy

- a. all the citizens vote directly on issues of public policy.
- b. only those with high levels of education are allowed to vote directly on issues of public policy.
- c. the citizens participate in policy decision making indirectly through the election of officials.
- d. all policy issues are decided by initiative and referendum.

The chairs of the committees of the current Congress

- a. include both Republicans and Democrats, but more Republicans since they are in the majority in both chambers.
- b. are all Republican in the House and are all Democrats in the Senate.
- c. are all Democrats.
- d. are all Republicans.

An example of indirect interest group lobbying involves

- a. nominating individuals for elective office.
- b. lobbyists visiting with member of Congress in their offices in Washington DC.
- c. putting ads on TV to try to convince members of the public to write their members of Congress in support of the interest group's policy position.
- d. filing a friend of the court brief in a legal case.

Voter turnout

- a. is generally higher in the United States than in most other Western Industrial Democracies.
- b. tends to be highest among low income individuals because they want to see the most changes in government policy.
- c. tends to be lower among the youngest individuals eligible to vote than among the middle age population.
- d. tends to be low among upper income individuals who are generally content with how things are going.

It was very important to the framers of the constitution that

- a. judges' decisions, while separate from the legislative and executive branches, would be strongly influenced by popular opinion.
- b. ultimately the President could remove judges from the federal bench, if those judges' decisions contradicted the President's understanding of the law or the U.S. Constitution.
- c. judges would carefully avoid making decisions that contradicted popular viewpoints.
- d. there be an independent judiciary in which judges could make unpopular decisions without the fear that they would lose their jobs.

## Appendix II: Sample Multiple Choice Test Questions (continued)

### Second Outcome -- Methods of the Social Sciences

If used on an opinion survey, which of the following would be an example of a leading question?

- a. Which presidential candidate did you vote for in the last 2004 election?
- b. Recognizing that no public investment gives society a greater return as investments in education, do you favor increasing funding for public schools?
- c. Are you a regular voter?
- d. Are you in favor or opposed to increased spending on defense?

If a talk show host conducted a poll by asking his or her listeners to call in and state their view on a particular issue, this would violate which principle of scientific polling?

- a. Polls should require respondents to write their responses down, and not merely provide oral responses.
- b. All scientific polling must be conducted by individuals with a graduate degree in public opinion polling and generally talk show hosts do not have such a degree.
- c. It is not a valid way of obtaining a representative sample.
- d. To obtain a valid estimate of public opinion on a political issue, one must conduct an exit poll, otherwise non-voter's views will be mixed together with voter's views.

Which provides a better description of social science research?

- a. A researcher lays out one or more hypotheses and gathers data that can test the validity of those hypotheses.
- b. A researcher takes a position and tries to find accurate and timely information to support that position.
- c. Evidence which contradicts a researcher's original hypothesis can be safely ignored if a thorough enough job went into the development of the hypothesis.
- d. Only research which ends up confirming a hypothesis is of any value in furthering our knowledge.

Which of the following is the better example of a normative question?

- a. Are more students required to take civics classes in high school now than they were in 1950?
- b. How much do Americans know about their government?
- c. Do American women or men know more about the workings of our government?
- d. How much should Americans know about their government?

When a social science researcher begins investigating a question of interest

- a. it is important to review the research that has been conducted on the topic by other researchers.
- b. it is best if they ignore previous research in the area so they won't go into the topic with preconceived notions of what they will find.
- c. it is unnecessary to consult previous research done on the topic because the world is changing so fast these days, previous research will never be relevant.
- d. it is important for that person to avoid studying any topic that has already been studied by others.

## **Appendix III: The Paper Assignment**

### Political Science 114: Written Assignment

The purpose of this assignment is for students to write a critical analysis of two competing perspectives on a specific issue in American Politics.

You are to read the two contrasting perspectives presented in the readings and submit an analysis of the articles. In that analysis you should do the following:

First, determine the basic position or argument of each of the authors. What conclusion does each author want the reader to make after finishing each article?

Second, show how each author supports his or her main ideas. How does each author develop his or her argument? What types of evidence are used to support the arguments? How does the evidence used compare to what you have learned about this topic in class and the textbook?

Third, evaluate the articles. This means comparing the relative strengths and weaknesses of each perspective. How convincing was each author? You should not just state your conclusions, but also give a reasoned explanation for why you reached the conclusions that you did about each article.

The paper is to be 3-4 typed, double-spaced pages in length. Since clarity will be taken into account when grading, be sure you carefully proofread your paper before handing it in. Papers must be posted to [www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com), which is a website that checks for plagiarism.

## **Appendix IV: Grading Rubric for Written Assignment**

### **Criteria for Evaluating Political Science 114 Written Assignment**

#### **Criteria:**

- 1) The basic position of each author is accurately and clearly identified.
- 2) The supporting arguments made by the authors of each article are clearly, accurately and completely stated.
- 3) The evidence used by each author is clearly and fully summarized, and student compares evidence used by the authors with information learned about this topic in class or the textbook.
- 4) The strengths and weaknesses of the two articles are evaluated and conclusions are presented about how convincing each author was. This conclusion should not just indicate the judgment reached, but also the reasons for reaching it.

#### **Evaluation:**

Excellent	(meets all 4 criteria using standard, formal prose)
Good	(3 out of 4 criteria)
Adequate	(2 out of 4 criteria)
Marginal	(1 out of 4 criteria)
Unacceptable	(0 criteria)

Papers must be written using standard, formal prose. Essays that contain more than 3-4 spelling, grammar, punctuation and/or usage errors per page will result in a lowering of the evaluation of the assignment by one category.

**Appendix V: Data Collected in the Assessment Process, Spring 2006**

**Table 1: Outcome 1: Diverse Principles and Political Concepts N = 140 - 151**

Diverse Principles and Political Concepts	Pretest (percent of students answering question correctly)	Posttest (percent of students answering question correctly)	Percentage Change from Pretest to Posttest
Representation	71	91	+20
Majority Rule & Minority Rights	54	83	+29
Federalism	82	96	+14
Individual Liberties	34	86	+52
Partisan Organization of Congress	4	31	+27
Ideology	50	70	+20
Political Socialization	59	72	+13
Promotion of Group interests	48	87	+39
Voting Behavior	74	94	+20
Judicial Independence	41	81	+40
Mean	52	79	+27

**Table 2: Outcome 2: Methods of the Social Sciences N = 140 - 151**

Methods of the Social Sciences	Pretest (percent of students answering question correctly)	Posttest (percent of students answering question correctly)	Percentage Change from Pretest to Posttest
Survey Question Wording	51	77	+26
Sampling	50	85	+35
Margin of Error	58	72	+14
Sampling	50	81	+31
Content Analysis	63	79	+16
Research Design	40	68	+28
Normative versus Empirical	15	66	+51
Literature Review	47	74	+27
Interpreting Data in Tables	24	76	+52
Hypothesis Testing	45	79	+34
Mean	44	75	+31

**Table 3: Outcome 3: Human Activities and Institutions N = 186**

Excellent (meets all 4 criteria using standard, formal prose)	41%
Good (3 out of 4 criteria)	31%
Adequate (2 out of 4 criteria)	17%
Marginal (1 out of 4 criteria)	3%
Unacceptable (0 criteria)	7%

**GOAL TWO – Demonstrate knowledge of past and present human endeavor  
Social and Behavioral Sciences (SBS)**

*All courses with a General Education designation will include, to the extent possible, critical thinking, written composition, oral discussion, and graphic components.*

*To obtain the SBS designation, the proposed course must meet **at least two of the criteria and all of the outcomes listed below.***

Check which of the following criteria apply to this course (you must check at least two.)

**Criteria:**

- a. Courses designated **SBS** are based on empirical research and human experience.
- b. Courses designated **SBS** will analyze the interconnectedness of local and global concerns.
- c. Courses designated **SBS** will describe the ways in which civic, economic, and/or social relationships are determined.
- d. Courses designated **SBS** will apply historical perspectives to contemporary issues.
- e. Courses designated **SBS** will examine factors that affect the development of human behavior and adaptation.

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>How will outcome be met?</b>	<b>What assessment procedure(s) will be used?</b>
Students will demonstrate knowledge of diverse principles that explain human behavior.	Students will be presented with the normative and empirical concepts used by political science to understand the the American political system. These include, but are not limited to, democracy, freedom, equality, representation, citizenship, political culture, political participation, federalism, public opinion and ideology, and voting behavior.	The instructors in this class all use a common text book that includes a set of standard questions. A Pre-test of 50-60 questions is to be administered during the first week of class; an agreed set of about 20 of these questions will be incorporated into the exams that are given throughout the semester. The responses to the questions for all sections will be compiled. For each question, the percent of students who answered it correctly will be determined. About 10 of the 20 questions will test the students' grasp of the major concepts used to understand American politics.
Students will apply the methods of the social sciences.	The results of survey research, content analysis, quantitative statistical analysis and other social science methods that are employed by political scientists to to understand political behavior such as voting and political participation will be part of class readings, lectures, discussions and assignments. Students	About 10 of the 20 mulitple choice questions noted above will test the students' understanding of the practices used by political scientists to research and draw conclusions about institutional and individual human behavior.

	will be shown how to properly interpret the results of empirical research and will be exposed to the basic methods used to conduct such research	
Students will identify and analyze human activities and/or institutions in the broad variety of human contexts within past and/or present time.	Students will study the institutional framework of the American political system in lectures, class discussions and readings. Students will study how the American political systems has changed over time. They will study the major political institutions of American politics (the legislative, executive, judicial branches of government) as well as non-governmental political actors such as interest groups, political parties, and the media. They will also examine how these political actors and institutions interact in order to reach political and policy decisions.	Students will apply the concepts and empirical evidence from the course in order to address different perspectives that exist regarding various components of the political system in a written assignment comparing two perspectives on a single issue. Assignment and evaluation criteria are attached.

All General Education courses will be reviewed by the General Education Committee. What data will be provided to the committee to demonstrate the extent to which students in this course are meeting the outcomes?

One semester each year the scores on the multiple choice questions will be aggregated and analyzed to determine the degree to which students grasp the various concepts and methods included in the questions. An aggregate evaluation of the written assignments will also be completed. It will compile the number of assignments that fell into each category indicated on the evaluation criteria. The yearly reports will be available to the General Education Committee as will the actual multiple choice questions used and examples of graded assignments falling into each of the categories defined in the rubric.