

PROGRAM REVIEW: POLITICAL SCIENCE (*A.A.LA.POLI.SCI*)

Report of the Political Science Program Review
Bergen Community College

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Introduction

I was charged to review the Political Science Program and visited Bergen Community College on Wednesday, April 25, 2018. Prior to the visit, I reviewed the departmental self-study undertaking by Prof. Pierce Wilkinson. The self-study provides an overview of the Associate of Arts (A.A) in Political Science.

The site visit began with class observation; I sat in Prof. Wilkinson's Political Ideologies class for the greater part of the morning. The rest of the day was taking up by meetings with the following.

1. Students in Prof. Wilkerson's Political Ideologies Class
2. Program Review Team
3. Dr. William Mullaney, Vice President of Academic Affairs
4. Dr. Victor Brown, Dean of BASS and Dr. Jackie Behn, Chair of Social Science Department

I encountered a highly motivated and accomplished administrators, faculty, and students who are directly or indirectly involved in the Political Science option. The Program Review Team were enthusiastic about the strong education Bergen provides and the many possibilities the concentration in politics offer to students. This enthusiasm is supported by data provided the self-study report and by Dr. Mullaney (and easily accessible through the college's website). The data affirm a robust program with linear growth in enrollment. I was impressed by the meticulous way the program was put together.

I describe below my impression of the strengths and weaknesses of the political science option. I follow it up with recommendations and concluding thoughts.

I. Strengths

IA. Strong Curriculum Foundation for Transfer to Bachelor's Degree Programs

The Political Science option offers a strong foundation for students who intend to obtain BA degrees in Politics or allied majors such as Pre-law or Legal Studies. Additionally, the curriculum accommodates the needs of students looking to fulfil general education requirements. The following courses are generally available every semester and form the core of the required courses for concentrators in political science.

POL – 101 American Government
POL – 102 International Relations
POL – 103 Political Ideology
POL – 104 State and Local Government
POL – 106 Themes in U.S. History (Modern American Presidency)
POL – 107 Introduction to Politics

IB. Accomplished and Committed Faculty

I was impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of the faculty directly involved with the political science program. Dr. Jackie Behn and Mr. Pierce Wilkinson have worked to provide students with a rich and meaningful curriculum. In the face of significant challenges --- a single fulltime faculty for political science and an overall decline in the number of students taking political science courses --- the program has chalked many successes and opportunities including stable number of political science concentrators each year.

The faculty and administration take an active interest in ways to enhance student learning and success. Online classes in three courses run successfully. Assessment data back up the excellent work done with over 70 percent of students performing satisfactorily (70 percent) or better.

IC. Satisfaction and Success of Students

The students I met were extremely positive about the education they have received at Bergen Community College. Most indicated that having come to Bergen expecting far less, they found a place to nourish their minds, bring out their talents, and provide them with every opportunity to excel. They feel supported and nurtured by faculty, who, as they explained, are passionate, caring, understanding of students' anxieties, and able to draw out their strengths.

These students intend to go on to four-year degrees, and all feel well positioned to do so though they will find it hard to leave BCC.

II. Weaknesses/Challenges

IIA. Decline in Enrollment in Political Science Courses

The political science program has the largest number of students enrolled in 2013. The peak of 691 students has dropped consistently over a 5-year period to its lowest in 2017 (462). While the reported number of student enrollment in the AA.LA.POLI.SCI option has remained stable, the overall decline in general enrollment in political science courses are not without potential costs. The reasons for the decline are likely complex. No matter the cause, however, this situation is far from ideal for the Social Science department and the option in political science. Increase interest and enrollment in political science courses overall would positively affect enrollment levels for the political science option.

Recommendations

IIA. Consider innovative ways to address the downward trend in the number of students enrolling in political science courses. An intentional outreach to freshmen or during open houses should be considered to make the option in political science visible. If the full-time faculty for the option in political science is to continue doing all advising, an alternative

approach involving academic counselors should be explored in attracting more students to consider the discipline.

IIB. Course Offerings, Curricular Issues

Courses offered in the Associate in Arts (AA) Degree, political science option align with general areas required of all concentrators majoring in the discipline in four-year schools. Several introductory classes are offered every semester that cover Introduction to Politics, American politics, and International Relations. All the other political science courses are transferrable to most four-year colleges. Thus, the curriculum maintains disciplinary focus as shown in the stability of the curriculum over the years.

Recommendations

IIB. Consider the feasibility and usefulness of slightly expanding the curricular. For example, almost political science departments in four-year schools offer the American Government, International Relations, and Comparative Politics as departmental requirement before enrolling in upper-level classes. A new course in Comparative Politics might help students to a seamless transfer into a political science major.

For the first two years of study and as a structured pathway towards a Bachelor's degree, the curriculum is weighed disproportionately towards an area study (POL – 101 American Government, POL – 104 State and Local Government, POL – 106 Themes in U.S. History or Modern American Presidency) and on theory (POL – 103 Political Ideology). There is some concern that students may narrow their course selection more than is ideal for transferring. Given that courses offered in political science fulfil graduation requirements in other programs, the lopsided tilt of the curricular towards area study may stifle broader interest beyond the general education requirements. Consider expanding or alternating non-general education courses in political science by offering courses on Asia, Middle Eastern and Africa, and Europe.

IIC. Assessment Results

The assessment carried out during the 2015-16 academic year shows 70 percent and above of students who met or exceeded expectations. The assessment instrument (sample questions) was not included in the self-study report which makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusion on validity. Still, a robust figure of 70 percent of students who met or exceeded the standard in American Government (POL 101) is highly commendable. While program learning outcomes focusing on research skills, communication, and critical thinking cut across all the branches in political science, there are significant differences when it comes to politics in America versus global politics (International Relations). An assessment in American Government alone misses critical aspects of methodology, theory formation, and institutional analysis in the other branches within the discipline.

Recommendations

IIC. Consider expanding the assessment instrument, after clearly defining the A.A.LA.POLI.SC goals and desired outcomes, to include other courses (Introduction to Politics, International Relations). Also, rather than an exit examination, consider embedding the assessment throughout the entire course work each semester. Ensure that full- and part-time faculty develop syllabi, lectures, and assignments that address A.A.LA.POLI.SC goals and make them clear to students. Determine whether such refinement of the instruments and embedded approach lead to better learning outcomes.

IID. Students' Perceptions on Teaching and Communication

Only three out of six students attended the scheduled meeting during my site visit. As a result, the views expressed may not reflect that of students in the political science option. Two areas the students highlighted as needing improvement are the use of visuals, video shorts and documentaries in the classroom. They did also raise the issue of communication with faculty citing delayed feedback on assignments.

I sat in Professor Peirce's class on Political Ideology during the site visit and found the experience very enriching. Students had a handout laying out the philosophical underpinning of Authoritarian and Totalitarian political systems. The lecture and handouts made distinctions among the various regimes clear especially to a student with some familiarity of the subject matter. I spoke with few students after the class and they grasped the core points. However, the mentioned lack of visuals like photographs and video shorts and short documentaries to bring to life the consequences of the ideas discussed.

Recommendations

IID. Consider the feasibility and usefulness of alternate modes of delivery in the classroom. Pilot test active learning methods ('swapping of classroom' approach, problem-solving intervals during lecture) and determine whether this model is worth pursuing on a broader scale.

Conclusions

The political science option is enjoying a great deal of success and has maintained stable enrollment at present thanks to the hard work and commitment of its faculty and the administration. However, there are challenges to this success, and without growing interest in political science courses, further growth may not be possible. I urge College administrators to allocate resources so that the lone faculty in charge may continue to meet the needs of the many students in the program.

The program should consider concentrating on the freshman year, making connections across courses, exposing students to all branches in political science, social science research and

statistics that will prepare students well for the BA and/or careers in the political/social sciences. Continued emphasis should be placed on creating strong out-of-class experiences (the Model UN is a good example) and venues for faculty-student interactions to enhance student learning and help bond students to the program and the College. Increased communication with current students and alumni via email and a web page would provide a mechanisms to obtain feedback to guide future initiatives.