BA and BA Honours in Political Science Curriculum Review
Public Report

Department of Political Science
University of Calgary
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Executive Summary

The Department of Political Science offers BA, Honours BA and minor programs in Political Science. The BA is one of the largest disciplinary programs in the Faculty of Arts, with 587 majors (as of October 2018). The Honours BA is smaller, with approximately 25 enrolees in any given year. Where the BA program's goals are to provide depth and breadth in an understanding of the discipline, the Honours BA aspires to offer a greater depth of understanding of the discipline as well as a foundation for advancing to graduate studies in the discipline. In addition to differing course and language requirements, the Honours BA adds an honours seminar and honours thesis to the program requirements. The requirement for completing the minor in Political Science is the completion of a set number of courses from the discipline.

The questions guiding this review include:
1. How is the program set up?
2. Why is the program set up in this manner?
3. What components of the program's design and delivery are working well and less well? For students? For the Department?

The Program Learning Outcomes for both the BA and Honours programs include:
1. To understand the nature, processes and effects of politics in all its dimensions: ideational, individual, groups, society, state and the international system
2. To understand the core Canadian political institutions and processes
3. Develop clear and effective written skills
4. Develop clear and effective oral skills
5. Ability to analyze and critically evaluate arguments and evidence
6. Ability to marshal evidence from a wide range of appropriate sources, to construct an informed assessment and/or argument
7. Ability to develop questions, formulate hypotheses, gather and evaluate evidence, and render conclusions using disciplinary research methods
8. Develop an understanding of the importance of citizen engagement
9. Understand the role of ethical reasoning in politics

The Curriculum Review exercise employed a curriculum mapping exercise to identify the degree to which our courses were meeting these program learning objectives (PLOs), and to examine the range of teaching and learning activities as well as the assessment tools employed in POLI courses. The course outcomes for over 90 course sections were mapped onto the program PLOs to identify gaps and overlap across courses. Data for the review provided by the Office of Institutional Analysis included program-based data; student survey data (NSSE and Alberta Graduate Outcomes Survey); student demographic data; and course data. To supplement these, the Department of Political Science surveyed all registered Political Science Honours and Majors in March 2016 to collect information on what drew them into the program, their overall satisfaction with it as well as with its various elements, any difficulties encountered in attempting to complete the program and general demographic information.

The findings suggest that the course offerings are largely achieving the PLOs. There are nevertheless a few weaknesses in this regard. Moreover, the teaching and learning activities that we employ, as well as the range of assessment tools, centre largely around those traditionally employed in the discipline. There is, however, some evidence that this repertoire is slowly expanding over time.

The findings suggest that a significant share of students registered in our courses, and at all levels, are non-POLI majors. As such, a review of our course offerings with this finding in mind, especially at the 200 and 300 levels, is recommended to ensure that our courses are most effective at meeting the needs of all our enrollees. Such a review could also be undertaken with a view to addressing the few inconsistencies in course learning objectives across the various sections of multi-sections courses.

Student survey data also point to a disjuncture between faculty and student perceptions regarding the meeting of program objectives, particularly regarding the value of group exercises and class presentations, and in the degree to which assessment tools assist in the development of written and oral skills. Student responses also suggest that they desire enhanced feedback on their work, particularly at the draft stage.

A set of recommendations has been developed to address these various points, including formalizing and expanding the Departmental student survey to provide a concrete mechanism for investigation them further.

Findings

The curriculum review exercise was guided by three questions:

1. How is the program set up?
2. Why was the program set up in this manner?
3. What components of the program's design and delivery are working well and less well? For students? For the Department?

The first two questions are connected. The overriding objective of the programs (as laid out in the PLOs and more broadly by the programs' administrators) is to ensure that students come away with a firm understanding of the breadth of content studied in the discipline, a deep understanding of topics that are the focus of some fields in the discipline, and a set of skills largely focussed on the ability to conduct research, to undertake a critical examination of the discipline's literature, to undertake statistical analysis, and to write up and orally present these findings in a sophisticated manner. Additionally, honours students are expected to complete an honours thesis and an honours seminar, both intended to prepare them for studies at the graduate level, and to have some language training. Finally, and in line with the objectives of a liberal arts education more broadly, the programs seek to produce students who are critical and thoughtful citizens.

As noted above, the programs are largely achieving these objectives. Each of the PLOs are being met in the programs' courses and at a reasonable level. The programs employ a core set of teaching and learning strategies, with some variation across instructors. The range of assessment tools employed in POLI is also wide, although centred around a handful of traditional methods. The programs are structured in such a way that the requirements that must be met ensure that students meet the breadth and depth objectives in disciplinary content. There are very few visible and glaring concerns related to the achievement of stated goals.

What is clear from the curriculum review exercise is that while our programs are designed with majors in mind, a significant percentage (indeed a majority at the 200 and 300 levels) of the students registered in our courses are not program majors. As such, a review of the objectives and goals of our 200 and 300 level courses given this finding is required, to ensure that we are meeting the needs of the full range of students enrolled in our courses. This review would also be helpful for addressing inconsistencies in the course learning objectives identified across some multi-section courses as well as overlap in course learning objectives across some 200 and 300 level courses.

Moving beyond the curriculum mapping exercise, however, provides a further window into the success of the programs. A review of student enrolment and retention rate data suggested that greater attention to these might be warranted given trends.

The student survey data identified a possible mismatch between our perception of meeting program objectives and the perceptions of our students. This was clear, for example, in the degree to which students found group exercises and class presentations to be valuable learning exercises and that our courses developed their written and oral skills. The limited use of feedback mechanisms for papers and essays is likely tied to this finding.

Some of the responses provided by students require further thought. The variation in the percentage of students who offered that they would recommend the program to others, for instance, suggests that we might consider ways to increase overall satisfaction with the programs. The Departmental student survey offers an important mechanism for digging further into what might be driving these perceptions and attitudes.

The student surveys additionally identified learning practices that might not line up with teaching faculty expectations. Teaching faculty might well believe that students have a better understanding of effective learning practices than they do in practice.

Action Plan

Short-term: One year or less
Medium-term: Two to three years
Long-term: Four to five years

Recommendation: Curriculum	Action Items	Timeline for Implementation	Lead Responsibility	Evaluation
Identify main course learning outcomes for 200 and 300 level courses.	Identify objectives of 200 and 300 level courses in light of balance between major and non-major enrolment	Medium term	Undergraduate Committee	
	Identify minimally required course learning outcomes for 200 and 300 level courses in light of multi-level courses and to minimize overlap between 200 and 300 level courses	Medium Term	Department Head, Field co-ordinators	
Review POLI 310	Review need for a 6 credit course in Political Theory	Medium Term	Undergraduate Committee (including the Theory Field)	

Recommendation: Administrative	Action Items	Timeline for Implementation	Lead Responsibility	Evaluation
Monitor enrolment and retention rates	Continuously monitor enrolment and retention rates to detect concerns early on and, where possible, take appropriate action	On-going	Department Head	
Regularize and expand the Departmental student survey	Student survey should be administered regularly (perhaps biennially) and expanded to include non-majors, with questions targeting	On-going	Department Head	

	issues raised by the curriculum review			
Increase focus on writing and oral presentation skills development	Establish committee to review potential mechanisms to assist faculty in developing student writing and oral presentation skills	Medium term	Department Head	
Timetabling	Review timetabling with a view to minimizing overlap where possible	On-going	Department Head	
Calendar Offerings	Ensure courses listed in the calendar are offered on a regular basis	On-going	Department Head	
Program Requirements	Review the set of program requirements for the BA and honours programs to ensure they are in line with the PLOs	Medium term	Department Head and Undergraduate Committee	

Recommendation: Faculty/ Professional Learning Development	Action Items	Timeline for Implementation	Lead Responsibility	Evaluation
Role of class and group presentations	Encourage discussion and review of best practices for class and group presentations	Short term	Department Head	
Student learning practices and strategies	Encourage discussion on developing the use of effective learning strategies amongst our students, especially at the 200 and 300 levels, including enhanced feedback on drafts, assignments, tests and exams where possible	Short term	Department Head	