Department of Political Science
Student Learning Assessment
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Assessment Report
June 30, 2018

WHAT WAS ASSESSED?

The Department of Political Science assessed the following two program-level student learning outcomes (SLOs) for this biennial cycle:
- *Demonstrate effective oral and written communication in political science.*
- *Examine, evaluate, and construct arguments about political affairs and/or solutions to political problems in ways that demonstrate analytical and critical thinking ("critical analysis").*

The department's assessment plan defines these goals and their relationships to UMBC's Functional Competencies (FCs) as follows:

Oral and written communication:
Most fundamentally, effective oral and written communication presents information, ideas, and arguments clearly and coherently in correct English grammar. It abides by conventions pertaining to the specific nature of the communication (i.e., its purpose, audience, and format) (FC 1). Effective communication is based on appropriate sources, and it acknowledges and documents its sources (FC 1).

Critical analysis:
The science and practice of politics often entails diagnosis, dialogue, and prescription. Given that, POLI classes provide opportunities for students to analyze, articulate, and evaluate claims about how some aspect of the world is or should be. They expose students to the types of questions often asked in this line of work, including those pertaining to the identification of assumptions, the quality of supporting evidence, the content of alternative points of view, and the implications and consequences of a claim or course of action. They also develop the information literacy, reasoning skills, and creative capacities that will help students reach their own answers to such questions. The goal is that students will be able to construct cogent arguments whose conclusions follow from relevant information, evidence, principles, and/or logic and to assess the arguments of others based on such criteria (FC 3 and 5).

HOW WERE DATA COLLECTED? WHICH DIRECT MEASURES WERE USED?

Data collection proceeded according to the November 2017 assessment plan.

To recap, the department collected data from the courses in Table 1:

Table 1: Courses in the 2016-18 POLI Assessment Sample

Communication (Written)	Communication (Oral)	Critical Analysis
POLI 423 (Presidential Elections, fa16)	POLI 350 (The Policy-Making Process, fa17)	POLI 200 (Introduction to Political Science, fa17).
POLI 448 (Internship in Policy, Politics, and Public Administration, sp17)		POLI 471 (Globalization and Transitional Justice, fa17)
POLI 281 (Introduction to International Relations (writing intensive version), sp17)		POLI 488 (Politics and International Relations of South Asia, sp18)

These courses were selected for assessment from the pool of those previously identified by the department as espousing the relevant SLOs. Selection was based primarily on the willingness of faculty members to contribute data, but also with an eye toward building a diverse sample of classes. While not perfectly representative of the department's curriculum, these courses capture important variation with respect to level, subject matter, and other variables. POLI 423, for example, was taught at the Shady Grove campus while the rest were taught on the main campus. POLI 448 is a traditional class that is paired with experiential learning; it is also one of a small number of POLI classes that requires departmental permission for registration. All courses were taught in face-to-face mode, as fall and spring POLI classes nearly exclusively are. Six different instructors, all tenured or on the tenure-track, taught these seven courses.

For each of these classes, scoring distributions for multiple items on rubrics associated with paper assignments (and in the case of POLI 350, an oral presentation) served as the direct measures of student learning. Instructors designed rubrics independently to suit their pedagogical needs. Table 2 summarizes the assignments and scoring categories for each class. An appendix contains original rubric documents supplied by the instructors for six of these seven classes.

Course instructors performed the rubric evaluations. All instructors reported aggregate data, and in most cases also individual-level data, to the department's assessment coordinator. Some analysis was performed by the course instructors themselves, while some was performed by the assessment coordinator.

This report also presents or discusses the following indirect measures of student learning:
- students' rating of their own learning on official course evaluations;
- results from an anonymous survey of POLI 423 students concerning the procedures students employed in writing their research papers;
- a summary of key observations and conclusions drawn from an ad-hoc discussion of student writing among departmental faculty.

Table 2: Assessed Assignments and Rubric Scoring Categories

Course	Assessed Assignment(s)	Relevant Rubric Categories
POLI 423 (Communication – Written)	Final research paper on student-selected topic + full draft	Question Research Organization Writing Presentation
POLI 448 (Communication – Written)	Final research paper on student-selected topic + drafts of first and second halves of paper	Clarity Correctness Credibility Concision Technical Writing
POLI 281 (Communication – Written)	Three five-page essays that respond to prompts designed to elicit an analytical response + optional revised versions of two of those three essays	Thesis and Argument Set Up Quality of Argument Style Grammar
POLI 350 (Communication – Oral)	8-minute AV-assisted oral presentation on the politics and status of a current policy debate	Voice projection Pace Smoothness of speech Eye contact Engagement with audience Projection of expertise and professionalism Clarity of message Comprehensiveness and depth Neatness and visual appeal Adherence to time limit
POLI 200 (Critical Analysis)	Letter to student's elected representative, advocating specific policy or legislation	Clarity of projected policy outcomes Logic of projected policy outcomes Evidence supporting projected policy outcomes
POLI 471 (Critical Analysis)	First and last of 3-4 page weekly essays applying course readings to answer an instructor-written prompt	Thesis Structure Application of course readings
POLI 488 (Critical Analysis)	First and last of three 1,300-word analytical essays applying in-class materials and external sources to answer instructor-written prompt	Thesis Argumentation Quality of sources

WHAT WERE YOUR FINDINGS? IF RELEVANT, HOW DO THESE FINDINGS RELATE TO PAST ASSESSMENT FINDINGS? IS THERE OTHER CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION TO HELP MAKE SENSE OF THESE FINDINGS?

This section presents its findings on the direct measures and their context course by course, first for written communication, next for oral communication, and last for critical analysis. It then summarizes an indirect measure of student learning, self-reported learning from official course evaluations, for all classes.

Written Communication: Direct Measures

Evidence from POLI 423

POLI 423 (Presidential Elections) assessed student writing on a 20-page term paper addressing a topic of students' choice related to presidential elections. Students completed the project in three stages: 1) a planning document and bibliography, 2) a full first draft, and 3) a final version. The instructor prepared the students to write the paper with six in-class sessions lasting 15 minutes to one hour each. These sessions covered paper guidelines, library searches, the rubric, paper organization, plagiarism, and editing; the latter involved a workshop in which the class collaborated to improve the grammar and style of sample paragraphs from four (anonymous) students' drafts. The instructor also provided detailed handouts on much of the covered material.

The instructor's rubric, which is reproduced in the appendix, rated five attributes of students' written communication:
- Question: assessed the extent to which the paper posed a clear, interesting, answerable, and relevant research question;
- Research: evaluated the quality, quantity, relevance, use, and citation of sources;
- Organization: considered flow, headings, transitions, introduction, and conclusion;
- Writing: considered style, grammar, syntax, punctuation, and diction;
- Presentation: captured papers' adherence to formatting guidelines.

The rubric rated students in each category on a four-point scale corresponding to four proficiency levels: exceptional, good, poor, and failing. The rubric defines each of these levels.

Of the 17 students registered for the course by the end of the term, 13 turned in a term paper. Of these 13, 12 turned in a first draft. Figure 1 contains students' mean scores on these assessments.

Figure 1: POLI 423 Mean Written Communication Scores
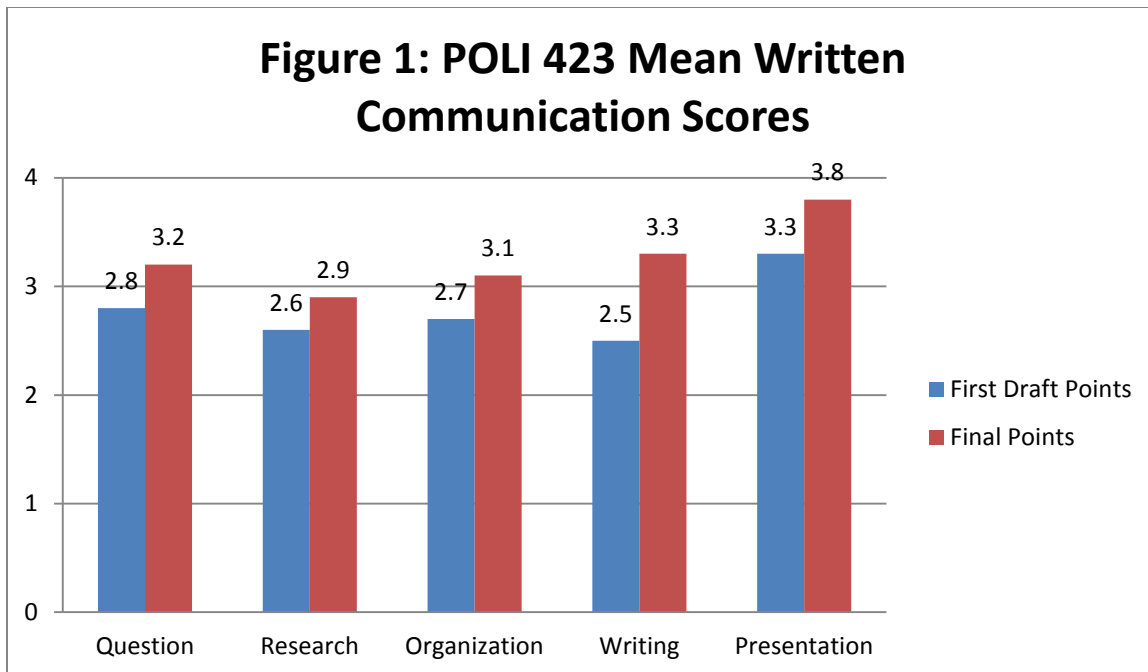
Student scores improved considerably between the first draft and the final version. Considering points from all five categories, the average overall score at the first draft stage was 13.8 points (69% of possible points). By the final stage, the average improved by 2.5 points, to 16.3 (82% of possible points). Between the two stages students improved most in writing and presentation: in the former (according to the instructor) because there was so much upside for improvement; in the latter, because students who ignored the presentation requirements at draft stage could easily fix any extant problems or oversights. On the final paper, class mean scores for most categories and overall corresponded to a proficiency rating of "good" (3 points on the 4-point scale). In the case of presentation, which simply involved following the instructor's formatting rules, the mean falls just short of the "exceptional" level. Students' weakest area in written communication was in the research category: the quality of the sources backing their claims and their success following conventions in how they cited those sources.

Unsurprisingly, there is some individual-level variation beneath these means. Two students received a perfect 20/20 overall score at the final version stage. Seven others received between 16 and 18 of the 20 possible points, and the remaining four received between 12 and 14 points.

The course instructor offered several conclusions based on these results:

Students continue to struggle to produce long-form papers. Their problems include everything from how to turn a subject of interest into a clearly articulated question, to how to find professional sources, to how to structure a research paper consistent with traditional norms for academic presentation. Beyond these fundamental problems, their prose is typically plagued by every grammatical problem imaginable.

Providing structure helps. It was my hope in advance – and is my belief in retrospect – that the series of instructional sessions conducted throughout the term helped provide

students sufficient guidance on how to write a term paper. Presumably, the rubric also made perfectly clear to students the standards for performance and provided them a clear sense of what it takes to produce a quality paper. Based on the rubric results, however, they clearly improved with the additional time and the extra iteration of a full first draft. Nevertheless, improving papers to B-level quality requires a significant amount of pedagogical investment and imposed structure in the paper-writing process.

There is also a high fail rate for assigning term papers – an assignment that students indicate is increasingly rare even in upper-division or writing-intensive courses.

Evidence from POLI 448

POLI 448 (Internship in Policy, Politics, and Public Administration) also used a final long-form research paper (15-20 double-spaced pages, excluding references) along with intermediate deliverables to assess writing skills. The assignment challenged students to recommend a research-based course of action to solve some practical problem relevant to their internship work. Students were required to incorporate analysis of quantitative and/or qualitative data into their research. They were instructed to write the report as a memorandum addressed to some interested actor in the policy process.

Students' written work was evaluated according to the "Measures of Excellence" enumerated by Catherine Smith in the 2nd edition of *Writing Public Policy* (Oxford University Press, 2010): clarity, correctness, credibility, and conciseness. The instructor's rubric also rated technical writing (pertaining to grammar) and noted the extent to which papers followed directions with respect to purpose, form, length, and the data requirement. Students were exposed to these criteria in advance through an excerpt of the Smith text assigned for class and the dedication of class time to explanation and discussion of Smith's measures of excellence. The instructor also rated two drafts, covering the front and back halves of the paper, using the Smith-based rubric. The rubric (see appendix), defines excellence for each of these categories. Student achievement was ultimately rated as "excellent," "good," "adequate," "minimally acceptable," or "poor" in relation to these definitions of excellence.

Figure 2 presents distributions of scores across achievement levels for the 13 students (out of 15 enrolled at semester's end) who submitted a final paper. Next, figure 3 shows changes in student scores from drafts to the final product, presenting achievement levels as means (for parsimony). Means were calculated by converting the five achievement levels to a 1-5 scale where 1 signified "poor" and 5 signified "excellent." Half points were used when the instructor placed a student on the border between categories.

Figure 2: POLI 448 Final Paper Written Communication Score Distributions
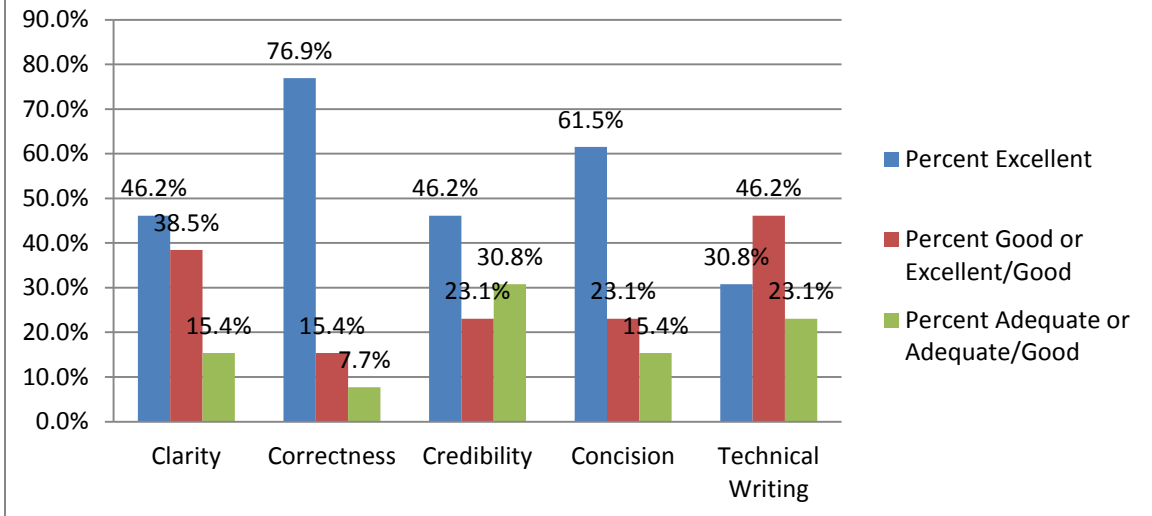
In all cases, mean scores fall between "good" and "excellent" achievement. Additionally, every student achieved at the "adequate" level or higher. Students posted their strongest achievement in correctness and their weakest in technical writing. The modal student achieved at the "excellent" level in every category but technical writing, where that modal student scored at a "good" or "excellent/good" level. The percentage of students achieving at the "excellent" level ranged from 31% in technical writing to 77% in correctness.

Figure 3: POLI 448 Change in Mean Achievement Levels
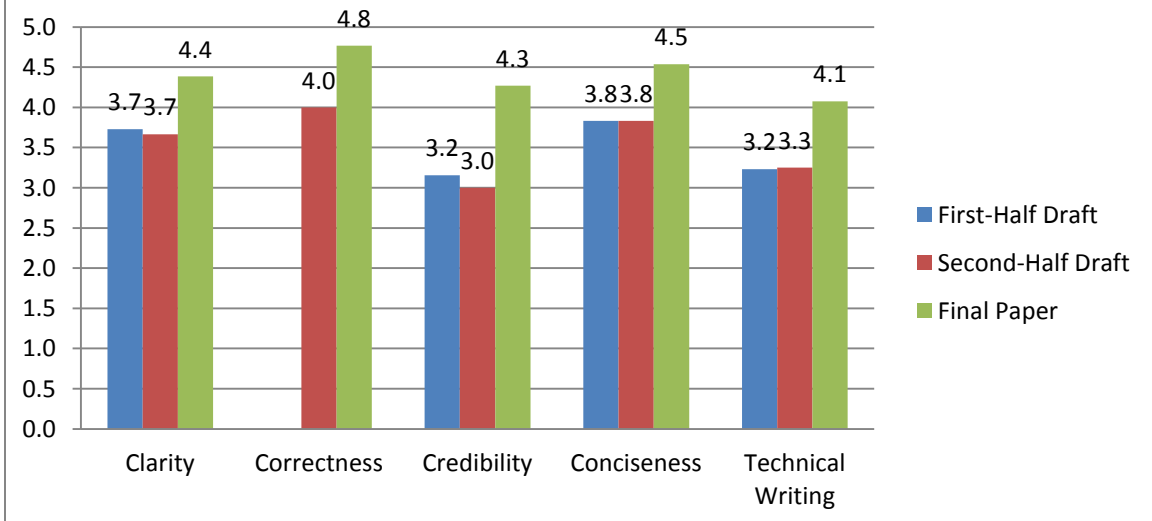
Most students raised the level of achievement they demonstrated between submission of drafts and the final paper. Of the 11 students who submitted both a draft of the front half (problem identification and background) of the paper and a final paper, improvements in scores average, in points on the 1-5 scale, 0.41 for clarity, 0.95 for credibility, 0.25 for conciseness, and 0.77 for technical writing (correctness is omitted because the instructor did not provide formal ratings for some students on the first draft). Of the 12 students who submitted both a draft of the back half (research results and recommendations) and a final paper, changes in scores average 0.83 for clarity, 0.88 for correctness, 1.4 for credibility, 0.79 for conciseness, and 0.83 for technical writing. How much of the improvement reflects a natural increase in student effort as the stakes of the assignment for the course grade rose versus real learning in response to instructor feedback cannot be determined with this research design. The instructor does report, however, providing multiple students with intensive assistance as their work on the paper progressed, especially with the data analysis (whose proper execution played an important role in students' correctness and credibility scores).

The relatively high marks earned by this class likely reflect the fact that only students accepted into the department's internship program could enroll. The program requires a minimum GPA of 3.0, although in practice that class included some students with lower GPAs who were admitted on the basis of other credentials. On the other hand, one might ask whether stronger performance should be expected from such a relatively high-achieving class of students: should any such students be submitting written work that in some aspects is "adequate" rather than "good" or "excellent"? Another concern is the failure of multiple students to submit drafts or the final paper. Several students credibly shared with the instructor a perception that the quality of their work had been compromised by the time they spent at their internships, which sometimes exceeded the minimum number of hours required for academic credit.

Evidence from POLI 281

The syllabus for POLI 281, the writing intensive (WI) version of "Introduction to International Relations," translated the written portion of POLI's communication SLO into the following course-level learning objective: "By the end of this semester, students should be . . . able to write a clear, well argued, well-written analytical essay." It assessed this with a series of 5-page essay assignments. These essays, which students write in response to a prompt provided by the instructor, conclude three "exam cycles" that coincide with the one-third, two-thirds, and final-third marks in the course. The instructor designs the prompt to elicit an analytical response, and directs students to employ (only) material from the course (lecture/ discussion, textbook, articles assigned on Blackboard) to support their arguments. The course syllabus includes one single-spaced page of detailed directions and advice regarding formatting, style, writing technique, and other aspects of effective written communication.

The essay is scored against a six-category, 24-point rubric. For the first two cycles, students are offered the option to redraft the essay based on the category-specific comments they receive on their first drafts. Essay rubrics included the following categories relevant to assessing written communication:
- Thesis and Argument Set Up
- Quality of Argument

- Style
- Grammar.

These categories are scored on a 4-point scale:
- 4-points, "Exemplary"
- 3-points,"Proficient"
- 2-points, "Meets Minimum Expectations"
- 1-point, "Below Expectations"
- 0-points, "Ignored/ Not attempted".

The rubric (available in the appendix) defines these achievement levels for each category.

Levels of student achievement and improvement are graphically depicted in the series of charts below (Figures 4-8).

Figure 4: POLI 281 Essay I/ 1st Draft Score Distributions

Figure 5: POLI 281 Essay I/ 2nd Draft Score Distributions
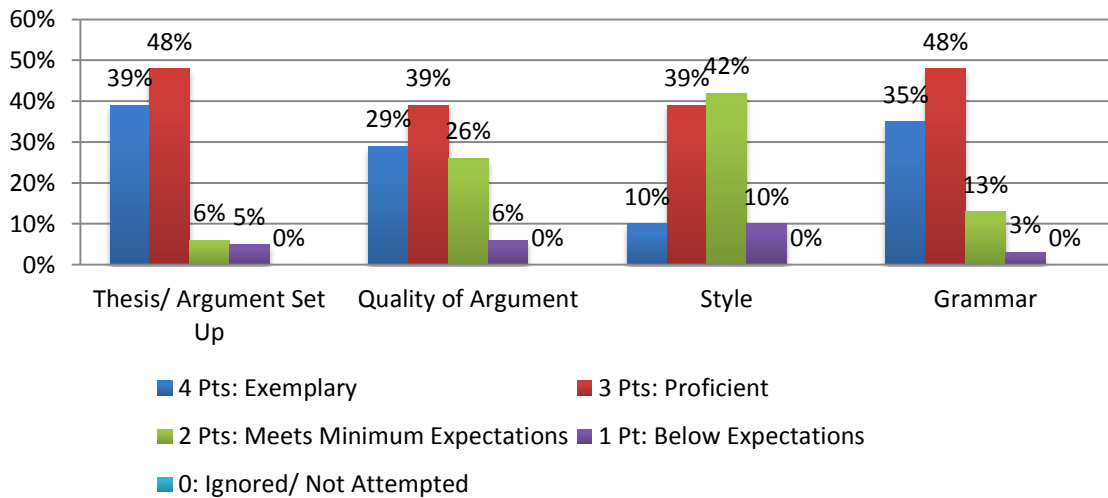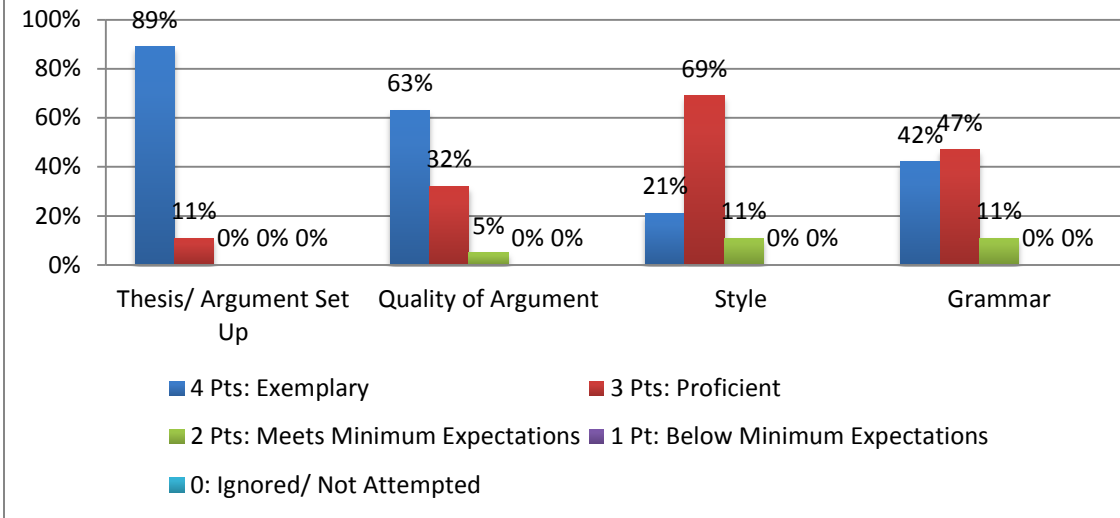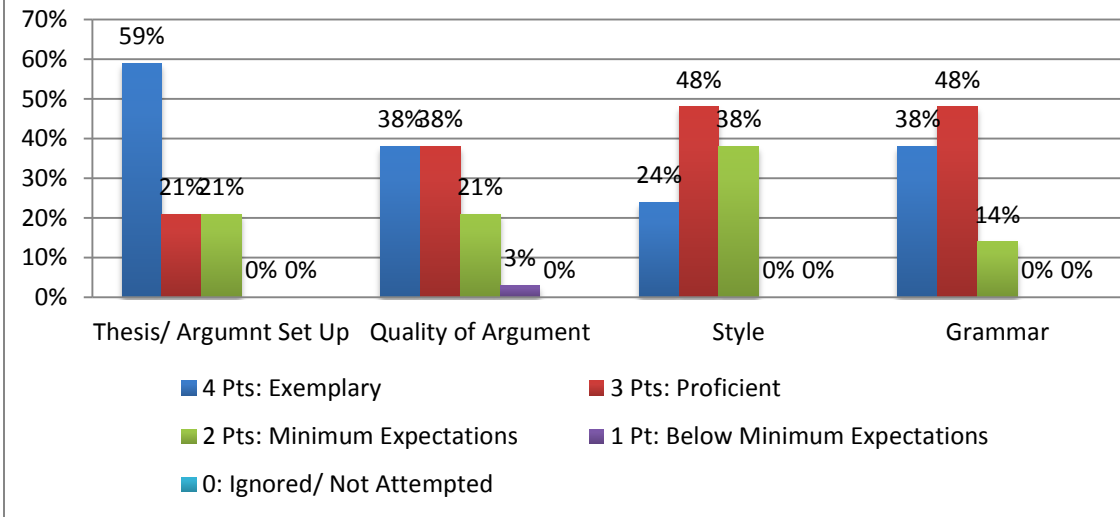
Thesis/ Argument Set UP: 4 Pts: Exemplary 50%, 3 Pts: Proficient 18%, 2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations 23%, 1: Below Minimum Expectations 9%, 0: Ignored/ Not Attempted 0%

Quality of Argument: 4 Pts: Exemplary 36%, 3 Pts: Proficient 45%, 2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations 14%, 1: Below Minimum Expectations 5%, 0: Ignored/ Not Attempted 0%

Style: 4 Pts: Exemplary 27%, 3 Pts: Proficient 45%, 2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations 23%, 1: Below Minimum Expectations 5%, 0: Ignored/ Not Attempted 0%

Grammar: 4 Pts: Exemplary 23%, 3 Pts: Proficient 55%, 2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations 18%, 1: Below Minimum Expectations 5%, 0: Ignored/ Not Attempted 0%

Legend:
- 4 Pts: Exemplary
- 3 Pts: Proficient
- 2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations
- 1: Below Minimum Expectations
- 0: Ignored/ Not Attempted

Figure 6: POLI 281 Essay II/ 1st Draft Score Distributions

Thesis/ Argument Set Up: 4 Pts: Exemplary 39%, 3 Pts: Proficient 48%, 2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations 6%, 1 Pt: Below Expectations 5%, 0: Ignored/ Not Attempted 0%

Quality of Argument: 4 Pts: Exemplary 29%, 3 Pts: Proficient 39%, 2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations 26%, 1 Pt: Below Expectations 6%, 0: Ignored/ Not Attempted 0%

Style: 4 Pts: Exemplary 10%, 3 Pts: Proficient 39%, 2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations 42%, 1 Pt: Below Expectations 10%, 0: Ignored/ Not Attempted 0%

Grammar: 4 Pts: Exemplary 35%, 3 Pts: Proficient 48%, 2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations 13%, 1 Pt: Below Expectations 3%, 0: Ignored/ Not Attempted 0%

Legend:
- 4 Pts: Exemplary
- 3 Pts: Proficient
- 2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations
- 1 Pt: Below Expectations
- 0: Ignored/ Not Attempted

Figure 7: POLI 281 Essay II/ 2nd Draft Score Distributions

Bar chart showing score distributions for Essay II/2nd Draft across four categories:

Category	4 Pts: Exemplary	3 Pts: Proficient	2 Pts: Meets Minimum Expectations	1 Pt: Below Minimum Expectations	0: Ignored/ Not Attempted
Thesis/ Argument Set Up	89%	11%	0%	0%	0%
Quality of Argument	63%	32%	5%	0%	0%
Style	21%	69%	11%	0%	0%
Grammar	42%	47%	11%	0%	0%

Figure 8: POLI 281 Essay III Score Distributions

Bar chart showing score distributions for Essay III across four categories:

Category	4 Pts: Exemplary	3 Pts: Proficient	2 Pts: Minimum Expectations	1 Pt: Below Minimum Expectations	0: Ignored/ Not Attempted
Thesis/ Argumnt Set Up	59%	21%	21%	0%	0%
Quality of Argument	38%	38%	21%	3%	0%
Style	24%	48%	38%	0%	0%
Grammar	38%	48%	14%	0%	0%

Figures 4 and 5 report relevant rubric scores for the first and second drafts of the first essay assignment. Figures 6 and 7 do the same for the second essay assignment. Figure 8 shows relevant data from the sole iteration of the third essay assignment. In order to assess student learning in terms of effective written communication in international relations, these data need to be evaluated both within and across exam cycles.

The instructor's evaluation of written communication in the thesis/argument set-up category focuses on each essay's introductory paragraph. It considers: Does the essay's introductory

paragraph(s) place the thesis in a theoretical and/or historical context? Is the thesis well-articulated and sufficiently developed to give the reader a clear sense about how the essay will unfold? Students receive a score (4: "exemplary," 3: "proficient," 2: "meets minimum expectations, 1: "below expectations") that corresponds to the quality of the essay's introduction.

On the initial draft of the first essay, 73% of students were able to articulate a thesis and set up an argument in defense of it at the "meets minimum expectations" level or above. Only 6% of students scored at the "exemplary" level (4 points), while 25% scored at the "proficient" level (3 points). A disproportionate 42% only met "minimum expectations" level (2 points). Having received category-specific comments on initial drafts, student scores on the second draft submission improved markedly—91% of students who elected to submit a redraft met "minimum expectations" for thesis/argument set-up. Of these, 50% received "exemplary" scores and 18% received "proficient" scores.

The quality of argument category aims to capture how well students execute the "game plan" for their essays that they have set up in their introductions. It evaluates how well the essay develops the key points of the argument. It assesses the extent to which these points build on one another. It considers whether counter-arguments are acknowledged and how well they are refuted. It also weighs the effectiveness of the concluding paragraph.

On the initial draft of the first essay, 71% of the class met or exceeded "minimum expectations" in the quality of argument category. However, of this 71%, 31% just met the minimum expectations standard. Considerable improvement was achieved in the second draft, where 95% of students met or exceeded minimum expectations with 81% achieving "exemplary" (36%) and "proficient" (45%) scores.

On the first draft of the second essay assignment, student performance in the quality of argument category was considerably better than on the first draft of the prior assignment—94% met or exceeded minimum expectations. On the second draft, this percentage rose to 100%, with 95% scoring at the "exemplary" (63%) and "proficient" (32%) levels. On the third and final essay assignment, without benefit of a redraft opportunity, 97% of the class met or exceeded expectations in the quality of argument category, with 76% scoring at the "exemplary" (38%) and "proficient" (38%) levels.

Style and grammar are writing-specific rubric categories. The grammar category assesses students' command of English grammar and word usage. Style is a more eclectic category. It is meant to school the "etiquette" of effective written communication and clean presentation in essay writing. This is the rubric category that insists, for example, upon correct and consistent citation method, a "typo-free" submission, and appropriate word choices (see rubric in the appendix). Scoring these writing categories is a more precise undertaking than the scoring for the other rubric categories. A half-point (0.5) penalty is exacted in both of these writing-focused categories against each type of error. This means that those who make the same grammar error multiple times throughout an essay, but make only that one kind of error, receive a 3.5 in the grammar category, while those who make a series of different kinds of errors are marked down for each.

On the first draft of the initial essay assignment, 85% and 80% respectively met "minimum expectations" in the grammar and style categories. Scores improved on the second draft where 98% met minimum standards. This result is nevertheless disappointing when it is remembered that all error-types in these writing-specific categories are noted on the first draft. (Not every instance of a repeated mistake is indicated, but each particular kind of mistake is.) It is not unrealistic, therefore, to anticipate that 100% should meet the "exemplary" standard in these two categories on the second draft. Only 25% (grammar) and 27% (style) did.

On the second iterated essay, 96% and 91% met "minimum expectations" in the grammar and style categories. This improved to 100% in both categories on the second draft. Once again, however, considerably less than 100% performed at the "exemplary" level (42% in grammar and 21% in style).

On the not-iterated third essay, 100% met minimum standards in both the grammar and style categories. Of these, 86% (grammar) and 72% (style) wrote at the "proficient" or "exemplary" levels. Given how these categories are scored, these essays contained no more than two mistakes per writing category. This is an improvement over the first draft performances in both the first and second essay assignments.

Based on the data reported above, the course instructor concluded that the vast majority of students who took POLI 281 in the Spring 2017 semester met the assessed learning objective ("Demonstrate effective . . . written communication in political science"). Moreover, with regard to the iterated essay assignments, they ultimately did so at the "proficient" and "exemplary" levels of achievement. She also remarked, however, on several issues raised by the data. Most of these issues centered on what the instructor calls "The Challenge of Iterated Assignments." She writes:

> The Rubric Statistics Reports generated for each essay evince two patterns in the iterated essay assignments. First, there are issues raised by the improvement in performance between the first and the second drafts. Second, there is a concern arising from the significant drop-off in the number of essay submissions from the first to the second iterations.

> The overall rubric performance on the first essay went from an average of 14/24 on the first draft to 18.37/24 on the second. For round two, overall scores rose from 17.94/24 on the first draft to 21.87/24 on the second one. Improvement from the first to the second iteration is expected. Yet, how can one know whether the scores on the initial draft represent "good faith efforts" when the temptation exists to turn in intentionally subpar papers in anticipation of a guaranteed second chance, especially when the second chance comes with helpful pointers for improving the paper?

> Since I began teaching a writing intensive version of "Introduction to International Relations," I have enacted a number of different policies aimed to address this issue. The syllabus specifies, for example, that students whose first drafts score below a specified threshold must consult one of the course Teaching Assistants about their assignment before they are permitted to submit a second draft. (In previous semesters, the syllabus

steered students to the Writing Center for advice, but the reported quality of the Writing Center tutors was so inconsistent, that for Spring 2017, I changed the policy.) The rationale for the policy is both to offer needed assistance to those students who really can use it and to "shame" the capable students who knew they were turning in drivel.

For the Spring 2017 semester, it was clear after the first essays were submitted in round one that this policy was inadequate. A small subset of students submitted first drafts that were woefully incomplete, either brief in the extreme, missing a conclusion, and/or employing less than the minimum required sources. A mid-semester policy adjustment was obviously needed. The revised policy stipulated that to be eligible for a second draft opportunity, original drafts must be at least 3.5 pages long (with 12 point font and one-inch margins), must include the standard components of an essay (introduction, body, and conclusion), and must at least employ the minimum required sources. The first draft scores went up from 14/24 in round one to 17.94/24 in the second.

While it is impossible to know how much the revised policy contributed to the overall improvement in first draft scores, certainly the policy had some positive impact. And the policy's impact most certainly extended to the quality of the second draft submissions as well. With solid efforts to work with, the Teaching Assistants and I could offer more targeted and, therefore, presumably more helpful comments. As a result, the average overall score on the revised drafts for the second essay assignment was 21.87/24 (91%). Going forward, the mid-course policy adjustment regarding first drafts will be incorporated into the course syllabus.

The second concern raised this past semester about iterated writing assignments is the marked decline in the number of submissions from the first to the second drafts (from 36 to 22 on the first assignment and 31 to 19 on the second). In each case, 12 students elected not to revise their original drafts. This is understandable for the students who score highly on their first attempts, but these students are few. On the first assignment, for example, one student scored 23/24 and this was the highest score assigned by a 3-point margin. So, the question remains, how can more students be encouraged to revise their essays?

When I introduced iterated essay assignments to "Intro IR," the scores on initial and revised drafts were averaged to yield a final assignment score. Under this policy, relatively few students chose to revise their essays. I changed the policy so that the recorded assignment score was the one received on the last draft submitted. This more generous policy led to an increase in second draft submissions, but there remains a number of poor and mediocre essays that go unrevised. Mandating second draft submissions would certainly increase the quantity of essays, but such a policy would not address the quality of these essays. Students could just upload the same essay or upload one that corrected only the most superficial of writing glitches. (In point of fact, a number of submitted "revisions" do merely address the writing mistakes that are demonstrably corrected on the initial draft.) I have yet to come up with a way to convince some students that it's worth the effort to engage the revision process.

Oral Communication: Direct Measures

The oral presentation assigned to students in POLI 350 (The Policy-Making Process) covered the highlights of a series of research reports students wrote about a contemporary policy issue debate. Students were told that the purpose was to teach their classmates about the issue, covering the problem, policy options, and the current political climate. Since students had been allowed to choose whether to complete the research individually or in teams of up to three, some presentations were delivered individually and others in groups (all students, however, were required to speak). The instructor rated six attributes of individual speaking skills as well as four attributes of the presentation's content and execution (all listed in table 1). Individual speaking was scored as proficient, competent, or novice. Content and execution elements were scored as superior, good, adequate, minimally acceptable, or poor. The two rubrics, included in the appendix, define each of these levels of achievement. The rubrics were provided to students in advance of the presentation. The instructor also supplied students with a two-page handout of helpful hints for effective speaking and slides.
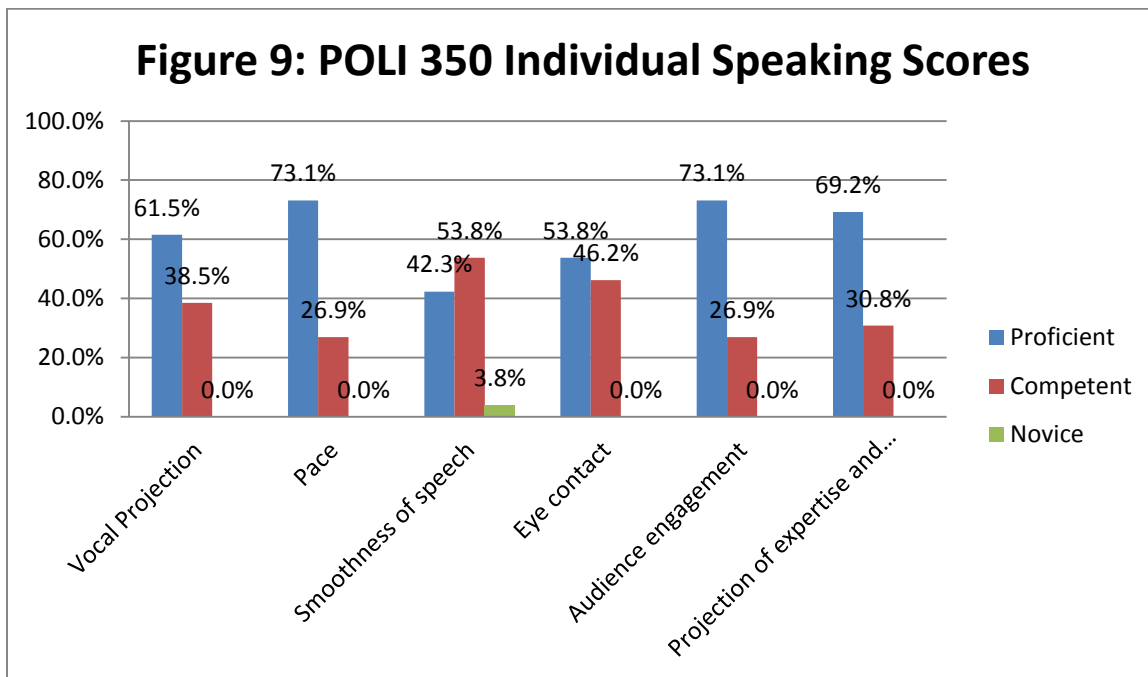

Figure 9: POLI 350 Individual Speaking Scores

Figure 9 presents score distributions on individual speaking attributes for 26 of the 27 students who gave presentations.[1] It reveals a very capable class. In only one instance did any student score at the novice level (for smoothness of speech, which indicated the extent to which speech was interrupted by "ahs," "ums," and other such words). With the exception of smoothness of speech, where the modal category was "competent," the modal student achieved at the "proficient" level. Students demonstrated the highest level of achievement (with nearly three-quarters of students deemed proficient in both categories) for pace and audience engagement.

---

[1] Blackboard's rubric report mysteriously excluded one student. It is unclear which student was excluded.

Substantively, using rubric definitions, the typical POLI 350 student demonstrated the following achievement in oral communication:

- Vocal Projection ("Proficient"): Consistently appropriate for room and audience size. Voice can be easily heard, while volume is not overwhelming or unnatural.
- Pace ("Proficient"): Consistently natural and moderate, easy for listener to follow.
- Smoothness of speech ("Competent"): Words mostly flow easily, and speaker largely sounds comfortable. Speech is periodically interrupted by "ah-um words," unnatural pauses, or stumbles over words.
- Eye contact ("Proficient"): Maintains eye contact with (all different members of) the audience throughout presentation, inviting them into the presentation without seeming unnatural or uncomfortable. Speaker rarely or never looks at projection screen, and consults notes subtly, if at all.
- Audience engagement ("Proficient"): Natural gestures and other body language, vocal expressiveness, variation in tone, and facial expressions help attract and hold attention of audience, and signal that speaker is comfortable, engaged, and happy to be there. In group presentations, these characteristics of body language, facial expression, and engagement apply also when others are speaking.
- Projection of expertise and professionalism ("Proficient"): During main presentation and Q&A, speaker sounds and appears authoritative, confident, knowledgeable, well-prepared, and in command of material.

Overall, POLI 350 students show a high level of comfort and success with public speaking. Almost without exception, they are achieving the department's learning goals in this area, even if room remains for some to blossom from "competent" into "proficient" speakers.

Figure 10: POLI 350 Oral Communication Content Scores
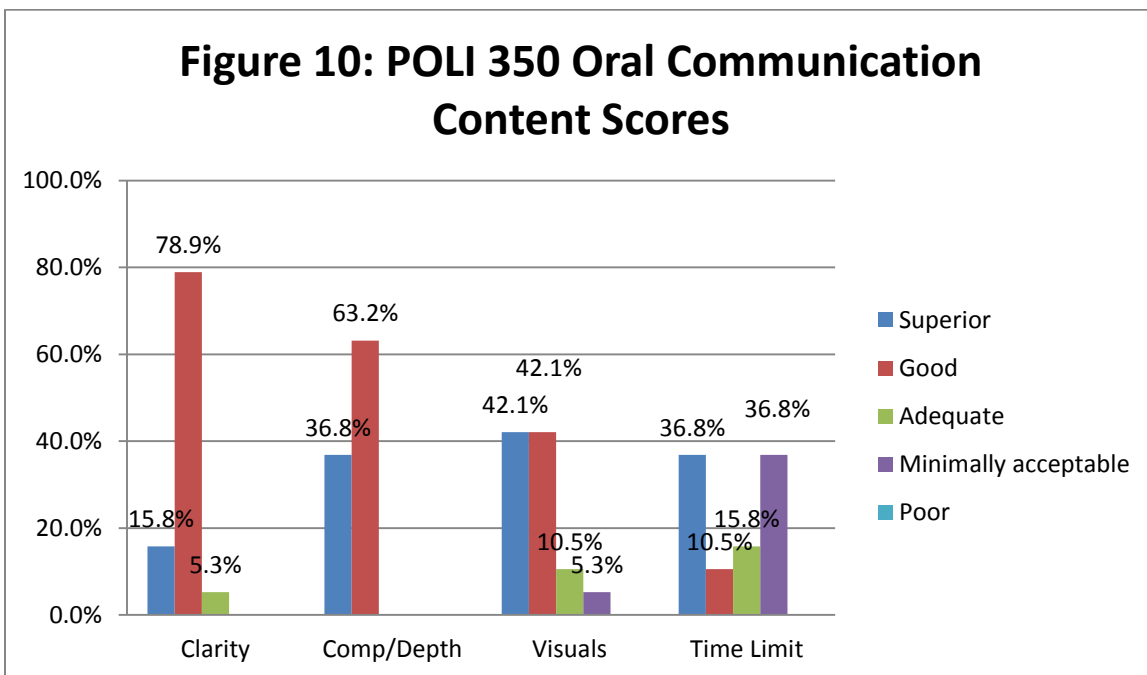
Score distributions from the content rubric are summarized in figure 10. Since some students gave presentations in teams, 19 presentations were available for content evaluation.

These scores also reveal mostly high levels of achievement in oral communication. The overwhelming majority of presentations achieved at the "good" or "superior" level with respect to the clarity of the message, comprehensiveness and depth, and neatness and visual appeal.

There was one notable exception to this pattern of proficiency: adherence to presentation time limits. Over a third of presentations achieved only at the "minimally acceptable" level of proficiency, tying the share of presentations achieving at the "superior" level. According to the instructor, in all but perhaps one case, the problem with the time limit was that the presentation ran overly long rather than overly short. The instructor did try to help students keep time with warning signs at two different benchmarks.

Applying rubric definitions to modal achievement levels in each category, typical achievement in content-related aspects of oral communication had these substantive characteristics:

- Clarity ("Good"): Presentation begins with a clear statement about its purpose. It proceeds in a generally logical and orderly way, or in one consistent with a statement of what the presentation will cover, to fulfill that purpose. Mostly, terms are defined and background provided to the extent appropriate for audience. Presentation implicitly synthesizes (and/or attempts to explicitly synthesize) information into a small number of clear generalizations about problems, policies, and politics associated with the issue. Visual elements of slides may contribute to the clarity and/or memorability of the presentation.
- Comprehensiveness and Depth ("Good"): Addresses characteristics of the problem, policy options, and current political climate, including some rich and concrete detail. Some classmates are likely to gain new information or insight.
- Neatness and Visual Appeal (Bimodal):
  - ("Superior"): Slides are polished and attractive. Slides use a color scheme that is consistent, easy to view, and pleasing to the eye. Appropriate, quality graphics enhance at least some slides. With no more than very few and minor exceptions, slides also: use space in a way that is well-balanced and neither too crowded nor too sparse; are entirely readable; use consistent font and bulleting schemes; do not contain full sentences or large chunks of bulleted text; do not contain typos or grammatical errors.
  - ("Good"): Slides are mostly polished and attractive. Slides use a color scheme that is consistent, easy to view, and not overly bland or discordant. Appropriate graphics enhance at least some slides. Slides also mostly: use space in a way that is well-balanced and neither too crowded nor too sparse; are entirely readable; use consistent font and bulleting schemes; do not contain full sentences or large chunks of bulleted text; do not contain typos or grammatical errors.
- Adherence to time limit (Bimodal):
  - ("Superior"): Presentation was comfortably completed within the time limits, with no apparent need for adjustment in terms of pace or amount of information.
  - ("Minimally acceptable"): Presentation was somewhat shorter or longer than prescribed length, or would have been without disruptive intervention by time keeper. Time limits may have obviously and negatively affected presenters' composure.

These findings point to opportunities for growth. According to the instructor, they motivate a search for ways to help subsequent cohorts improve their skill at timing their presentations. Additionally, the small share of students achieving below the "good" level on neatness and visual appeal is somewhat disappointing and probably could be remedied with greater student effort on developing and proofreading slides, especially in light of the rubric. Results overall, however, speak favorably about students' achievement of POLI's oral communication SLO.

Critical Analysis: Direct Measures

Evidence from POLI 200

POLI 200 (Introduction to Political Science) assessed students' ability to critically and analytically "examine, evaluate, and construct arguments about political affairs and/or solutions to political problems" through an applied assignment: a letter to the student's elected representative advocating specific policy or legislation. In the letter (among other things unrelated to the critical analysis SLO), students were expected to identify positive, negative and overall effects of the policy or legislation. The instructor's rubric scored each letter with respect to a) how clearly it identified the likely effects, b) the extent to which the identified effects were logical, and c) success in supporting its arguments about the effects with evidence from at least three reliable sources. Students could earn up to one point in the clarity category and up to two points each in the logic and evidence categories.

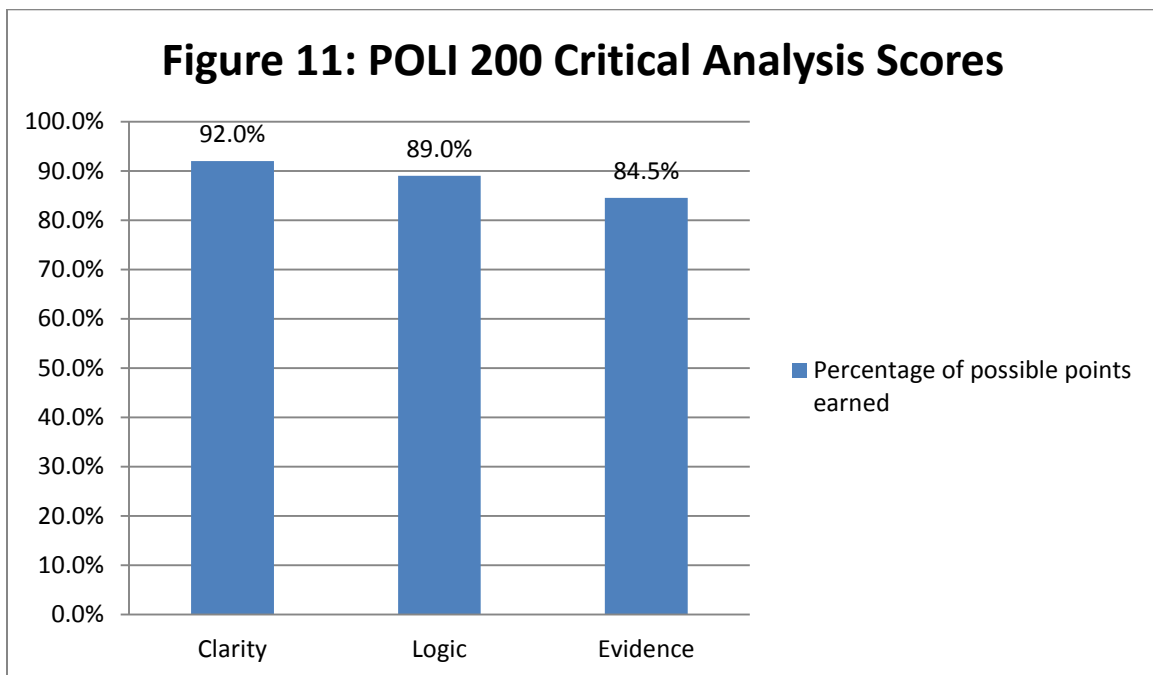Figure 11: POLI 200 Critical Analysis Scores

Figure 11 presents the percentages of possible points earned by POLI 200 students in the critical analysis categories. These are calculated as the mean score (0.92 for clarity, 1.78 for logic and 1.69 for evidence) divided by the total number of possible points. According to the course's instructor, the 92% of the maximum points earned for clear identification of effects was

equivalent to a letter grade of A, which UMBC defines as "superior" achievement. The 89% and 84.5% of the maximum points earned for the quality of the argument's logic and evidence, respectively, were equivalent to a letter grade of B and thus indicated "good" achievement. Overall, the instructor concludes that the students demonstrated "good performance" in critical thinking in this assignment. He suspects that students benefitted from the assignment's detailed instructions and their previous practice with the grading rubric during a peer review exercise.

Evidence from POLI 471

POLI 471, Globalization and Transitional Justice, assessed the department's critical analysis SLO using the first and last of a series of weekly essays in which students applied materials in assigned readings to answer an analytical question posed by the instructor. Students completed the essays prior to discussing those readings in class. The relevant categories rated by the instructor were:
- Thesis: how clearly it answered the question and demonstrated how each reading would be used in the answer;
- Structure: how clearly and logically organized the essay was, especially in relation to the thesis;
- Application of readings: the extent to which the essay discussed, explicitly referenced, and highlighted the main argument and relevance of each reading.

The instructor's rubric rated learning outcomes in each of these categories as "below expectations," "proficient," or "exemplary." It also assigned a range of points to each rating. The rubric, which defines each of these levels of achievement, is included in the appendix.

Figure 12 shows score distributions among these categories for the first weekly essay, while figure 13 shows score distributions among these categories for the last weekly essay. Thirteen students were enrolled in the course.

Figure 12: POLI 471 First Essay Score Distributions

Figure 13: POLI 471 Last Essay Score Distributions
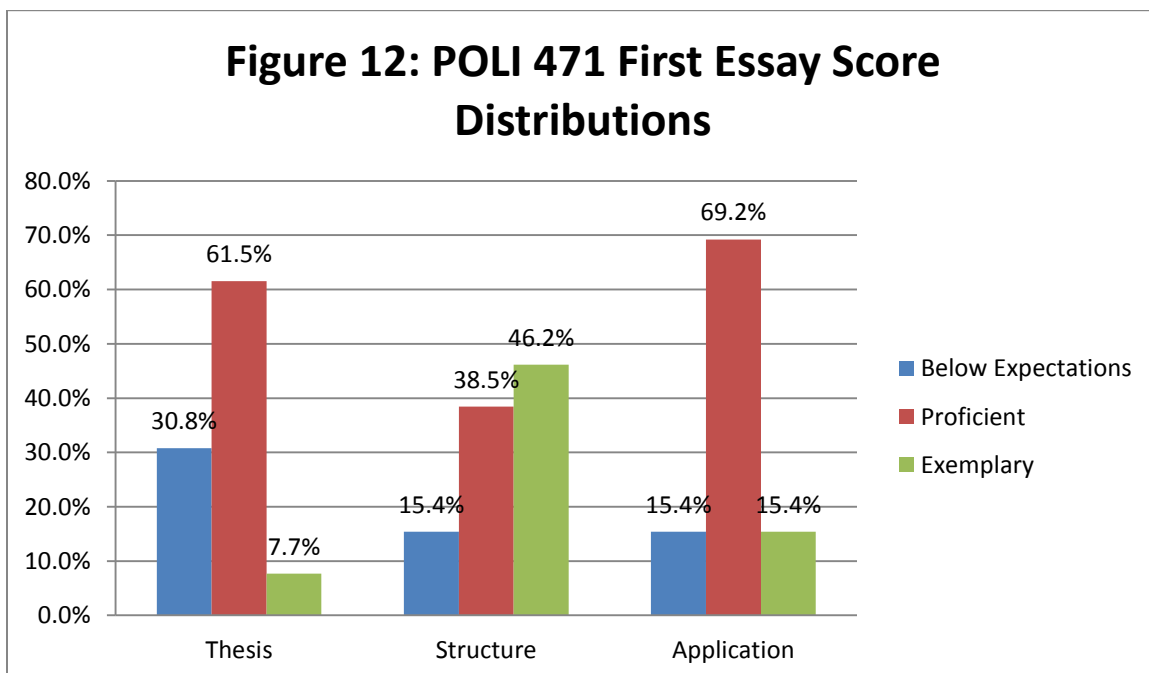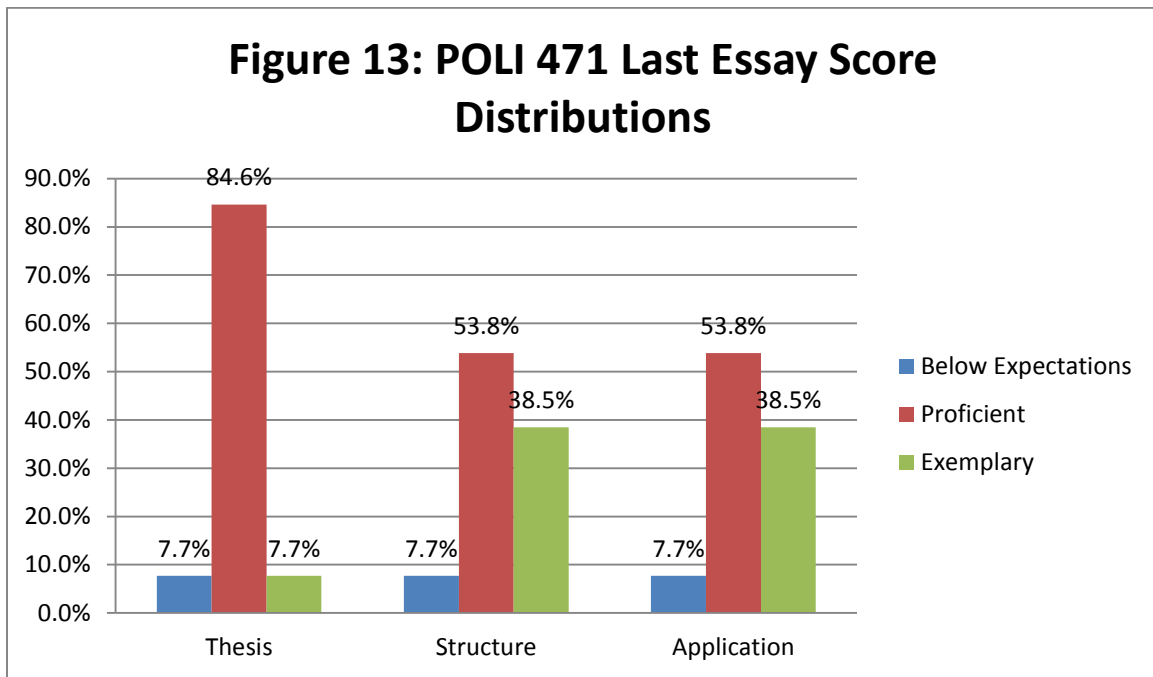
On each essay and in every category, a large majority of students met or exceeded expectations. Students' weakest performance was in articulating their argument in their first essay, where the instructor rated nearly a third of the class's thesis statements as failing "to clearly answer the question or demonstrate how each reading will be used to provide evidence for this answer." They performed considerably better at applying course readings to answer the question (15% "below expectations" and 15% "exemplary") and especially at logically organizing their argument (15% "below expectations" and 46% "exemplary").

Students' performance improved noticeably over the semester. On the last essay, all students demonstrated "proficient" or "exemplary" achievement in all three categories, with the exception of one student who did not appear to have attempted the assignment at all. Articulation of a thesis remained the weakest performance area for students, as only one student achieved an "exemplary" rating. Nearly 40% of the class, however, demonstrated exemplary performance in structuring an argument and application of course readings. Further evidence of student improvement comes from a comparison of mean points earned on each essay by students rated as "proficient." In assessing students' application of readings, the instructor assigned an unusually large range of points (scores >=1 and <5 on the 0-5 point scale) to the proficient category. The mean points earned from students rated as "proficient" in their application of readings increased from 3.2 to 3.9 between the first and last essays.

Substantively, applying rubric definitions to the modal score of "proficient" for each category on the last essay means that the typical POLI 471 student essay:
- Either clearly answers the question or demonstrates how each reading will be used to provide evidence for this answer, but not both;
- Inconsistently follows 'roadmap' laid out in thesis statement to answer the question in a clear and logical fashion;

- Includes and explicitly references all but one reading, highlighting the main argument and relevance to the weekly question for each.

Students in POLI 471, by and large, appear to be meeting learning objectives with respect to critical analysis. The question arises, however, whether more should be expected to exhibit "exemplary" achievement. One feature of this assignment that differentiates it from others assessed here, perhaps making it more challenging, is that students completed it prior to discussing the material in class. On the other hand, it appears that many students could fairly easily ascend from meeting to exceeding expectations with application of some additional effort and care, such as by ensuring that they have indeed referenced all class readings.

Evidence from POLI 488

POLI 488, Politics and International Relations of South Asia, assessed the critical analysis SLO using data from the first and third of its three 1,300-word analytical essays. The essays are "hybrid" assignments in which students use both in-class materials and external sources that they find themselves to answer a question posed by the instructor. The instructor's syllabus includes detailed instructions and advice regarding how to approach the assignment, structure and format the essay, and achieve effectiveness in other aspects of writing. The syllabus also specifies the criteria on which essays are scored, four of which are relevant to measuring how well students "Examine, evaluate, and construct arguments about political affairs and/or solutions to political problems in ways that demonstrate analytical and critical thinking." These criteria are:
- How clear your thesis (main argument) is;
- How effectively you develop and support your thesis through logic and evidence;
- The quality of your sources.

The instructor's rubric (attached in the appendix) defines a standard for each of these criteria. It did not define levels of achievement but rather assigned points up to a maximum in each assessed category. Figure 14 shows the mean percentage of possible points earned in each category for the first and third of these essay assignments.

Figure 14: POLI 488 Critical Analysis Rubric Scores
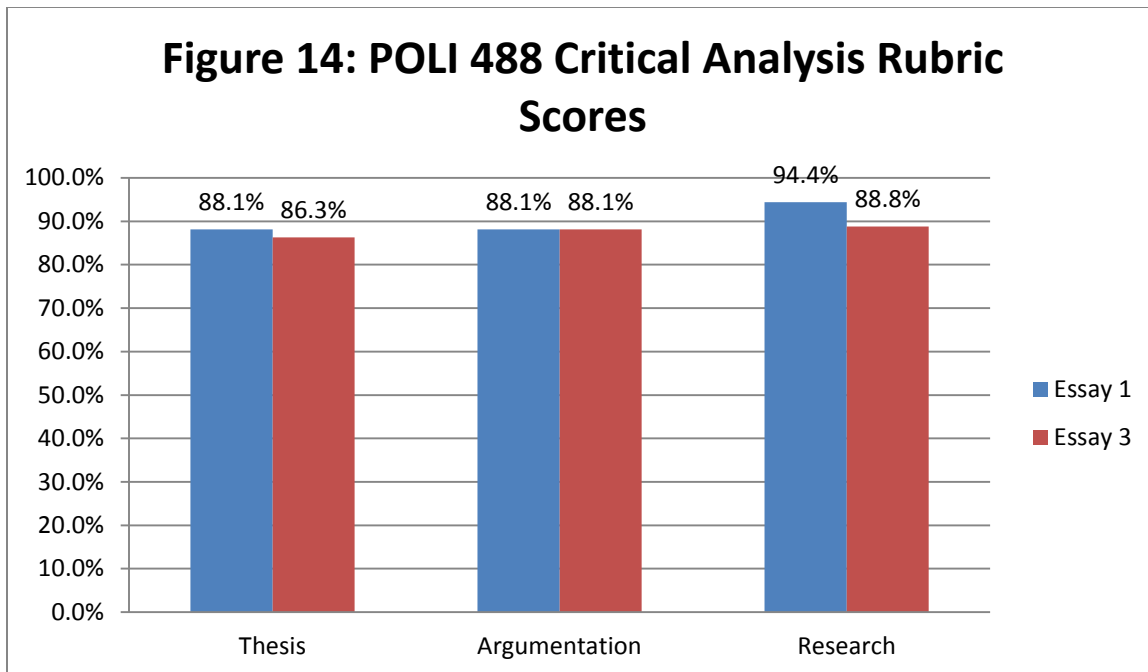
In contrast to the pattern observed for other classes, student scores in POLI 488 moved little between the first and third essays; mean scores in fact declined on two of the three measures. Neither the instructor nor the assessment coordinator expresses concern, however. With only eight students (out of nine enrolled) completing both essays, one student's drop-off in performance disproportionately drives the falling means. At the individual level, students in all categories were equally or nearly as likely to increase as to decrease their scores. The instructor, who disclosed that this was his first time employing a quantitative (as opposed to qualitative) rubric in this course, also noted in hindsight some features of his rubric and grading approach that may have obscured the degree of improvement he perceived in his students' essays. One was the phrasing of some criteria as having only yes/no values, which in some cases put him in a position of having to award more points in a given category than he might have otherwise liked to give. Second, the instructor conceded that he graded somewhat too generously on the first essay, not leaving much room for improvement and perhaps making students a bit complacent. The instructor also observed that room for improvement may have been limited by the unusually strong prior academic records of several students.

That issue aside, in absolute terms POLI 488 students demonstrated very strong analytical and critical thinking skills. Behind the high means in percentage of maximum points earned is a relatively consistent pattern of solid individual achievement. Using data from the third essay, for example, the percentages of students achieving at least 90% of maximum points were 37.5, 50, and 75 for quality of thesis, argument, and sources, respectively. In only three instances did a student earn fewer than 80% of maximum points on any critical analysis measure.

Indirect Measures of Student Learning

Students' reports about their own learning on official course evaluations may offer some indirect evidence that learning has indeed occurred. An obvious limitation of the learning items on

UMBC's course evaluation instrument, however, is that they cannot tell us what students believe they have learned. Still more importantly given the nature of the SLOs being assessed in this report is that none of the four items in the "Learning" battery of UMBC's student course evaluation explicitly pertain to skills students believe they have acquired or improved as a result of the course. Meanwhile, three of the four items appear to tap students' perceptions that they have been intellectually stimulated and have gained content knowledge. This leaves only one item, students' extent of agreement with the statement, "I have learned something which I consider valuable," that may incorporate perceptions of skills-related learning.

Mean scores for this item and the overall learning battery are summarized in table 3. Results are clear and consistent across all classes. Since these ratings are means of responses on a 1-5 scale, they indicate students' clear agreement – often strong agreement – that they have learned something valuable.

Table 3: Self-Reported Student Learning on Official Course Evaluations

Class	Instructor Mean for "I have learned something which I consider valuable"	Overall Instructor Mean for the learning battery
POLI 423, F16	4.30	4.30
POLI 350, F17	4.85	4.69
POLI 200, F17	4.64	4.55
POLI 448, SP17	4.50	4.40
POLI 471, F17	4.67	4.79
POLI 281, SP17	4.00	3.90
POLI 488, SP18	4.67	4.67

WHAT PRELIMINARY SUGGESTIONS (IF ANY) IS THE ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE (COORDINATOR) MAKING TO THE DEPARTMENT?

The assessment coordinator's suggestions pertain to some ways in which these direct measures and associated analysis are consistent or inconsistent with another indirect measure of student

learning: POLI faculty perceptions about the typical student's writing. These were shared in an ad-hoc teaching "brown bag" discussion held in November 2016, as this assessment cycle was getting underway. That session was attended by nearly every full-time faculty member in the Department of Political Science, and all attendees spoke during the session. There, faculty members shared their chief concerns with student writing, offered diagnoses of the sources of poor outcomes, and discussed some of the solutions they have tried or thought about employing. While that session focused on written communication, in practice it also covered important aspects of what the faculty often require students to do to demonstrate their analytical and critical thinking: construct clear, logical arguments.

A fair degree of consensus on perceptions of student achievement emerged. Faculty members shared perceptions of wide variation in the writing skills of their students, such that their classes encompassed truly impressive writers as well as those showing little mastery of third-grade grammar. Faculty also voiced widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of the *typical* student's writing.

Faculty members named different issues as their top concern in the area of student writing, although there were several areas of overlap. Problems articulated in round-robin responses included:
- widespread and repeated grammatical errors;
- clarity of communication, including:
  - professor-student disagreement on what is being conveyed by communication
  - professors' need to frequently ask "what do you mean?"
  - imprecise word choice;
- difficulty constructing arguments (identifying a clear thesis statement and then progressing logically through a chain of reasoning and supporting evidence);
- reluctance and difficulty with writing at a conceptual, as opposed to a concrete, level;
- establishment of a tone that is appropriate for a given audience and genre of communication.

These impressions may be inconsistent with conclusions of much of the data analysis in this report, which indicates that the typical student performs reasonably well at written communication, including written communication that challenges students to articulate an argument.

Given that, the assessment coordinator suggests that the department hold a follow-up discussion to consider how these different conclusions should be reconciled. There are several possibilities, including but not limited to:
- The impressions are not accurate;
- The impressions are based on different types of assessments than the type examined in this report;
- The data in this report do not come from a representative sample of students or classes (100 and 300-level classes, in particular, are not represented in writing assessments);
- Instructors evaluate student achievement more generously when scoring it for grading purposes (all rubrics used here were also used in grading), relative to the objective standards they have in mind when initially defining achievement; in other words, when

scoring individual students on a rubric that they know will be shared with the students and will contribute to students' assignment grades, instructors relax their standards about what counts as "good," "proficient," or some other level of achievement.

During that discussion, some of these explanations could be evaluated by inviting faculty members whose classes were not formally assessed to share data they may have, or by inviting faculty members whose classes were assessed to comment on any ways in which performance on these assignments differs from performance on any other writing assignments they may have required. While the assessment coordinator does not endorse committing faculty members to any uniform rubric or definitions of achievement levels, she does believe it would be worthwhile for faculty members to share amongst themselves their concrete expectations for student achievement in writing and critical analysis and also their ideas on what appropriate benchmarks might be for distributions of student achievement levels.

Participants in the 2016 writing discussion also shared hunches regarding the causes of substandard writing outcomes. These include:
- insufficient reading, not just in class but over a lifetime;
- a "culture of last-minuteness" in which students put little time into preparing written communications and leave themselves little time to proofread and revise their work;
- the ease with which students are distracted by small things from applying the kind of focused attention to a task that is required to read and write well (which may be related to the increasing prominence of short, instantaneous electronic communication);
- students' lack of interest in the kinds of prompts faculty members ask them to write about;
- students' failure to understand the value of spending time and effort on quality writing;
- poor self-esteem: students have convinced themselves they will never be good writers;
- inadequate preparation for our standards during prior schooling.

The data presented in this report may shed some light – but only a little – on the factors driving student outcomes. POLI 200 students' strong performance on that class's applied assignment, for example (if we assume that such mock political advocacy work may interest the typical student more than answering a professor's question about course readings), may be consistent with the hunch that students write better in response to prompts that interest them. The observation that written communication improves substantially when students take advantage of opportunities to revise is also somewhat informative. Even then, as the instructors giving such opportunities indicated, it is unknown whether improvement occurred because first drafts were affected by the "culture of last-minuteness" or insufficient preparation was countered by instructor feedback – or something else.

If faculty members want to understand the relative importance of these and other factors in affecting student writing, the assessment coordinator recommends that her colleagues consider following the lead of the POLI 423 instructor involved in this assessment cycle, who at the end of the semester surveyed his students about their experiences writing his term paper. The survey was an anonymous one, submitted to administrative staff. The survey included nine brief, largely multiple-choice questions about how early students began working on the assignment, how many hours they committed to the assignment, how many times they read their full paper prior to

submission, and which resources they consulted for help. It also included space for open-ended comments.

The instructor provided a detailed report to the assessment committee and also concluded the following based on survey results:

Student responses confirm many, but not all, of my pre-existing assumptions. First, there's quite a bit of variation in how early (or late) students start on assignments. Frankly, I was surprised that such a high share started early on the assignment at different stages. Almost half (6 of 14) began the preliminary abstract/ bibliography/ abstract section more than two weeks before it was due, and exactly half (7 of 14) said they started on the draft at least two weeks and perhaps as much as a month before

that was due. Because I cannot pair anonymous survey responses with final grades, I cannot confirm whether students who got late starts performed worse but I strongly suspect that to be the case.

Second, students do not physically venture into the library. This pattern may be a commentary on the Shady Grove campus' limited shelf holdings, but probably also reflects the ease of obtaining resources online. Despite my strong urging that students walk the stacks at least in Shady Grove, or better yet the libraries either on UMBC's main campus or UMCP (or both), few did. They conduct their research from their laptops.

On the upside, a majority of the respondents (9 of 14) indicated that they sought some help with either the writing or editing of their papers. This was an encouraging and, to me, surprising finding. Overall, of the 13 legible answer for "hours spent," students indicated that they spent an average of 45 hours working on the papers, with total hours ranging from a low of 20 hours to a high of 100 hours.

In their open-ended comments at the end of the survey, students indicated that the assignment was "hard" and "a struggle" and "difficult because it was my first time" writing a paper of this length. They said the instructions and guidance was generally clear. Among complaints, one student felt the deadlines were too late in the term; another said s/he might have benefitted from a more detailed session on how to structure the paper; a third said s/he struggled to find relevant research materials to source the paper.

The departmental writing discussion and the information presented in this report reinforce each other in revealing that POLI faculty members invest a great deal of time and energy into helping their students communicate effectively in writing. This work includes providing detailed, concrete guidelines and rubrics for assignments, developing instructional handouts and exercises on different aspects of student writing, and devoting classroom face time to writing instruction,

as well as commenting on drafts, allowing revision, and providing individualized mentorship. Both in the discussion and in this report, however, faculty members sometimes question how much this effort is "worth it" in terms of its contribution to student learning. Many faculty members in the departmental discussion of student writing expressed frustration that most students – including many who could obviously benefit – were not taking advantage of these resources. Surveying students or perhaps holding focus groups with them may help evaluate and explain such concerns. At minimum, given the faculty time at stake, this issue may also be worth more focused discussion than the department has given it to date: How can we encourage our students to use more extensively the resources and opportunities we offer them?

One further issue that the instructors contributing data to this report call attention to is student persistence through a course, especially courses that involve lengthy research papers. Some faculty members at the departmental writing discussion remarked that they perceived better performance from students on shorter assignments. Some faculty have also shared that they have shifted over their careers away from term papers and toward shorter, more frequent assignments. The two instructors assigning term papers designed them to be completed incrementally, yet multiple students still failed to complete all stages. This was also the case in the department's research methods class, which was assessed in 2016 for the previous cycle. This issue may have much to do with larger cultural trends in communication. With that in mind, faculty might productively share ideas on questions like whether and how professors should adapt to or resist these trends in their assignments and other aspects of their pedagogy.

Given the energy and care they have long committed to teaching and discussing the kinds of skills assessed in this report, POLI faculty are likely to embrace the challenge of training better communicators, thinkers, and analysts. Already, the preliminary writing discussion and other interactions associated with the production of this report have increased the sharing of experiences, resources, and best practices in these areas among the faculty. Such issues as raised in this report are not new and probably do not have "silver bullet" solutions, especially ones that can be implemented by the time the department's "closing-the-loop" report is due in spring 2019. On the other hand, this report offers some encouraging and perhaps surprising evidence of student achievement in communication and critical analysis: while not all of their work may be "exemplary" as we'd wish, most of our students are meeting or exceeding faculty expectations.