

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

**Assessment Report**  
*June 30, 2020*

**WHAT WAS ASSESSED?**

The Department of Political Science assessed the following program-level student learning outcome (SLO) for this biennial cycle:

*Describe and apply basic political science information, concepts, and theories.*

The department's assessment plan defines this goal and its relationship to UMBC's Functional Competencies (FCs) as follows:

“Basic political science information, concepts, and theories” pertain to the principles, institutions, processes, and policies of American government. They also pertain to the principles, institutions, processes, and policies involved with the exercise of political power in one or more of the following realms: the governance of foreign countries, relations among nation-states, and the ideals of diverse political philosophers. This SLO aligns with UMBC functional competencies in that, with respect to political information, it arms students with the knowledge to “[e]valuate information sources and content in terms of accuracy, authority, bias, and relevance” (FC 5). Additionally, successful application of political science information, concepts and theories entails use of information (FC 5) and reasoning (FC 3) for purposes of argumentation and/or explanation of political phenomena.

**HOW WERE DATA COLLECTED? WHICH DIRECT MEASURES WERE USED?**

Consistent with its master assessment plan, the department directly measured this student learning outcome with scoring distributions on select final exam questions from two lower-level classes. The particular courses from which data were drawn are staples of the Political Science curriculum: POLI 100 (Introduction to American Government) and POLI 210 (Political Theory). POLI 100 is required of all political science majors and also counts toward the Social Science General Education Program requirement. POLI 210 is one of several options POLI majors may choose from to fulfill the requirement of taking four 200-level courses; it also can be used toward the Arts and Humanities General Education Program requirement. Data were collected from both courses in the fall 2019 semester. Both courses were taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty members on the main campus in face-to-face mode. As is typical in the department's lower-level classes, instructors of both courses used essay questions to assess students' learning.

Students completed POLI 100's final exam in the classroom using blue books. The particular essay question used for assessment concerned elections. Specifically, the prompt asked students to explain what happened in the 2018 midterm election on the basis of their knowledge of party identification, retrospective voting, and other key concepts. In order to allow for assessment of a

representative sample of course content, the POLI 100 instructor also provided scoring data from two take-home essays assigned earlier in the semester. The first assessed students' knowledge of the U.S. Constitution by tasking them with comparing a fictional constitution to the U.S. Constitution. The second asked students to discuss various forms of political participation and to propose a method for encouraging participation, given what they had learned about political behavior and psychology. Ninety-six students across three sections (one of which was a small "Y" section) completed these three assessments.

POLI 210's final exam covered the second half of the course and was completed by students at home, on their computers, during a specific 24-hour window. This report drew data from rubrics applied to one of the exam's essay questions, one pertaining to political philosophers' ideas about economic justice. The question presented students with a report on a poll of Americans' attitudes about the fairness of the economy and tasked them with discussing how four core political theorists "would describe, explain, or diagnose this problem, issue, or debate." The theorists were John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and two of following three: John Locke, Karl Marx, and Adam Smith.

Also following the department's master plan, this report further presents an indirect measure of student learning for both classes: Student perceptions of learning as reported on SEEQ 4-question "Learning" battery.

### **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?**

The major finding is that students in the sampled classes perform very well when it comes to describing and applying basic political science information, concepts, and theories. This is especially the case (perhaps unsurprisingly) when students are doing so outside of a compressed, in-class exam class setting and have ready access to the readings and notes that would assist them in conveying and using this information. While this is the first time the department has examined this SLO in its official assessment reports, some comparison with a prior semester's performance is possible since an instructor of another lower-level class who provided data for assessment of last cycle's SLO also included with that submission data on this cycle's SLO. This section presents direct and indirect measures of student learning from POLI 100 and POLI 210, followed by data from the prior comparison class.

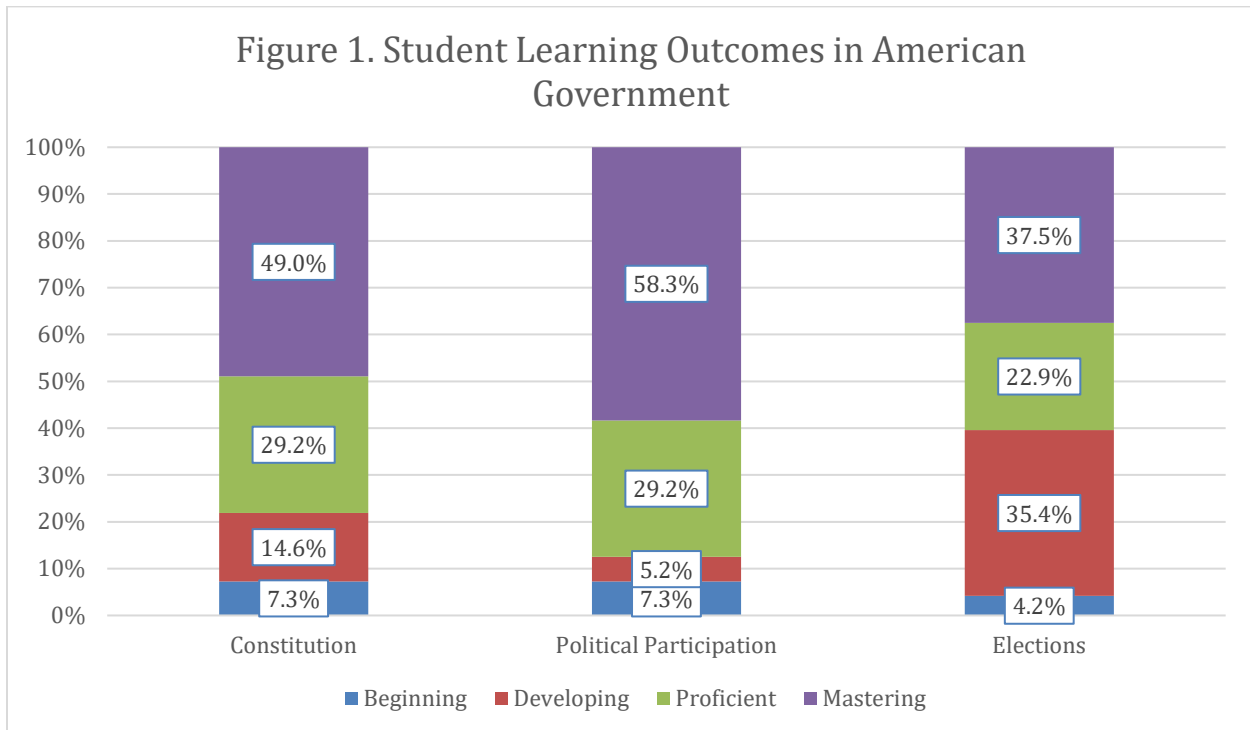
#### *Evidence from POLI 100*

In POLI 100, the category from the instructor's essay scoring rubrics corresponding to this cycle's assessed SLO is called "effective use of course content." The instructor scored students' command and successful application of course concepts on a four-point scale as defined below:

1. Beginning
2. Developing
3. Proficient
4. Mastering

Were “effective use of course content” the only criterion in determining students’ grades, the instructor reports that he would have considered the overwhelming majority of students rated as “developing” as worthy of the “C” grade required for the course to count toward the political science major. Students thus should be considered as having achieved that student learning outcome if their work is rated as “developing” or higher.

Figure 1 contains the scoring distributions.



As suggested by the data, most fall 2019 POLI 100 students left the course having demonstrated that they could accurately describe and apply basic information, concepts, and theories pertaining to American government. Overall, 93-96 percent of students, across the three assessments, achieved this learning outcome. Still more encouragingly, 78 percent of students did so at the “proficient” or “mastering” level with respect to the U.S. Constitution, 87 percent of students did so at the “proficient” or “mastering” level with respect to political participation, and 60 percent of students did so at the “proficient” or “mastering” level with respect to elections. In all cases, the share of students achieving at the highest (“mastering”) level substantially outnumbered the share achieving at the second-highest (“proficient”) level. They also consistently outnumbered the share achieving at the “developing” level, though the margin varies by format.

It is likely that assessment format plays some role in variation of scoring distributions across topics. Student performance was noticeably weaker on the question about elections, which was completed during an in-class, closed-book final exam, than on the other two questions, which came from take-home essay assignments. Most notably, the percentage of students scored as “developing” increased greatly, to just over a third of the class, while the percentage of students scored as “mastering” dropped. Still, the figure also presents the good news that the percentage of students demonstrating only “beginning” knowledge also dropped between the easier take-

home essays and the more challenging final exam, and that the modal score for students on the in-class final exam continued to be the highest level of achievement.

Consistent with these direct measures, fall 2019 POLI 100 students positively appraised their own learning in the class. Table 1 presents average scores on the SEEQ learning battery from the 60 students who completed the questionnaire. Considering that each question was answered along a five-point scale in which “1” equaled “strongly disagree” and “5” equaled “strongly agree,” these average scores indicate students’ clear agreement with all four statements about their learning.

**Table 1. American Government Students’ Perception of Learning**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>
I have found the course intellectually challenging and stimulating.	4.25
I have learned something which I consider valuable.	4.50
My interest in the subject has increased as a consequence of this course.	4.25
I have learned and understood the subject materials of this course.	4.25

*Evidence from POLI 210*

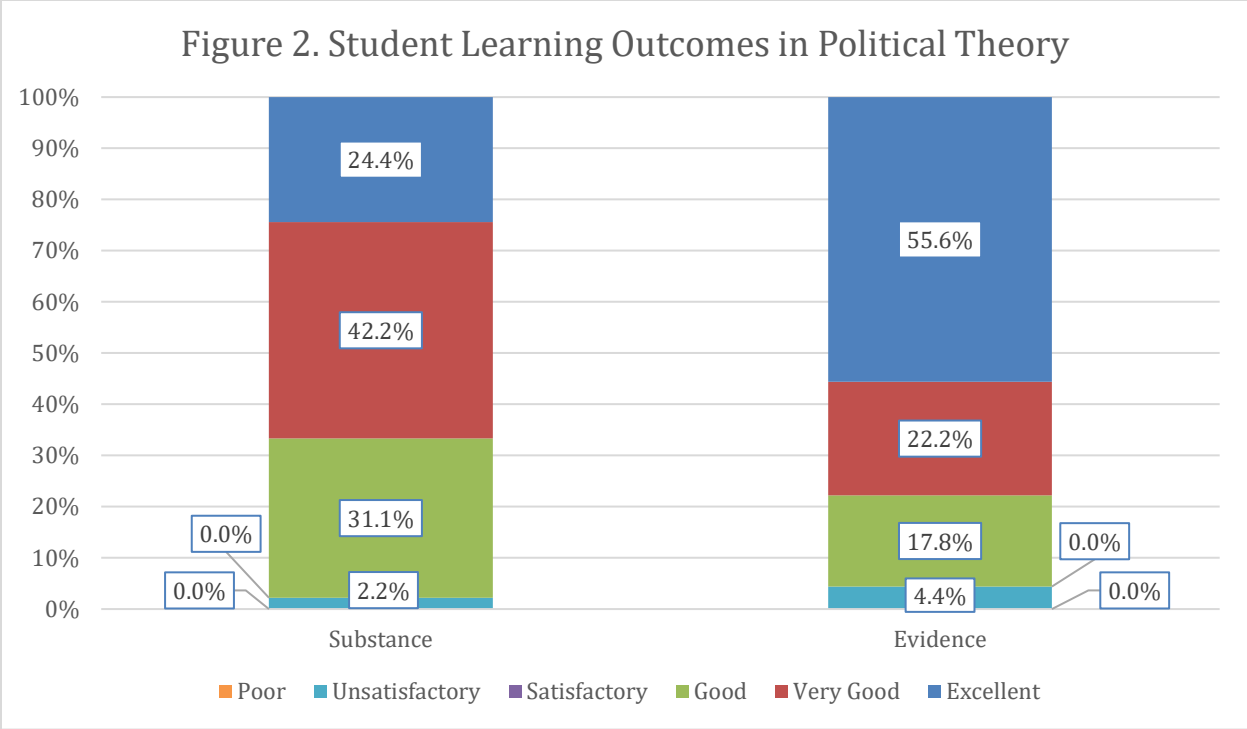
Categories on the POLI 210 final exam scoring rubric tapping this cycle’s SLO were “substance” and “evidence.” The instructor defined them as follows:

Substance: Provides a complete answer that includes the major relevant details from the source, the assigned readings, and lecture information.

Evidence: Includes the most relevant points from the assigned readings to support the main arguments being made; direct quotations and paraphrases from the readings are accurately cited (page or paragraph number).

Essays could attain one of six levels of achievement on each of these measures: “excellent,” “very good,” “good,” “satisfactory,” “unsatisfactory,” or “poor,” the latter of which signaled an answer so deficient as to merit zero credit. Forty-five students submitted this final exam essay.

Figure 2 summarizes scoring distributions.



Most POLI 210 students in fall 2019 demonstrated proficiency at describing and applying core political theories, at least as they pertain to economic fairness. About two-thirds of students achieved at the “excellent” or “very good” levels regarding the substance of the course content included in their essays, while over three-quarters of students achieved at the “excellent” or “very good” level in how they used (accurate) details from the writings of the theorists in support of an argument. Just 2 and 4 percent of students, on substance and evidence, respectively, scored at the “unsatisfactory” level, while no students scored at the “poor” level. Neither did any students fall into the mediocre “satisfactory” category. In sum, nearly all students could describe and apply core political theories.

POLI 210 students’ assessments of their own learning may be limited in their usefulness since only 13 of the 49 students enrolled (26.5 percent) completed the official course evaluation. They are nonetheless presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Political Theory Students’ Perception of Learning**

Item	Mean Score
I have found the course intellectually challenging and stimulating.	3.62
I have learned something which I consider valuable.	3.54
My interest in the subject has increased as a consequence of this course.	3.00
I have learned and understood the subject materials of this course.	3.50

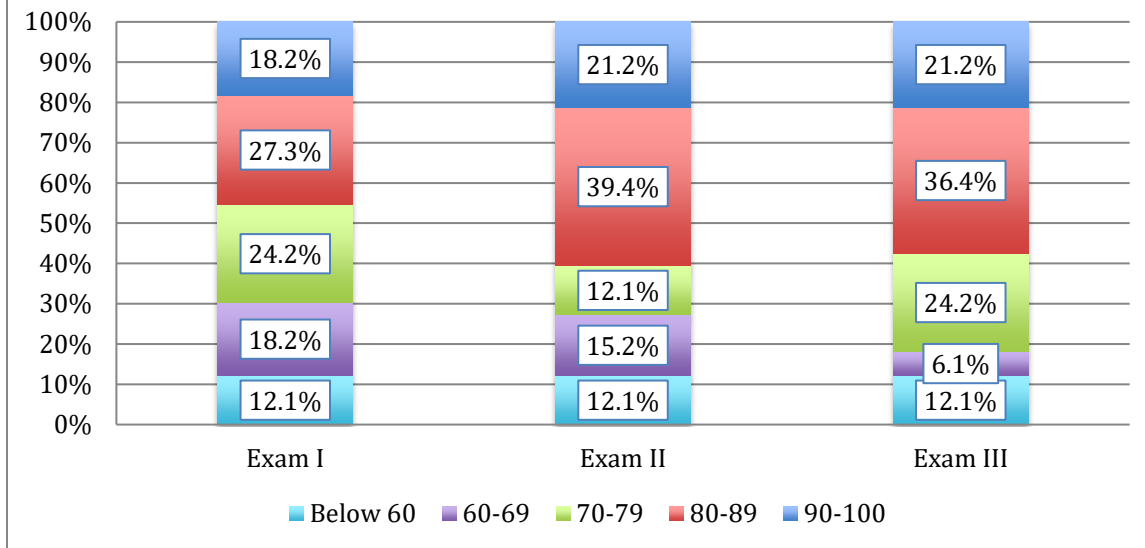
### *Comparison with prior assessment data*

An imprecise but still useful comparison to prior assessment findings is enabled by excess data and analysis submitted by one course instructor for the department's last assessment cycle. While that cycle had examined the department's written and oral communication SLO, one of the courses assessed in that cycle included this cycle's focal SLO among its major objectives, and the instructor of that course fortuitously addressed that objective in her submission to the assessment coordinator. That course is also a lower-level GEP political science class taught by a tenured or tenure-track faculty member in face-to-face mode on the main campus: POLI 281, the writing-intensive version of Introduction to International Relations. The course was offered in the spring 2017 semester.

POLI 281 assessed mastery of substantive course content – that is, information, concepts, and theories – via three in-class exams and three take-home essays. POLI 281's in-class format is arguably a more challenging one for students than the take-home format used in three of the four assessments examined in POLI 100 and POLI 210. On the other hand, POLI 281's exam questions did not include applied components as POLI 100 and POLI 210's exams did, which means that they examined learning on a more basic level of Bloom's taxonomy. POLI 281's take-home essays, however, did push students to apply course concepts. Each essay was assigned after an exam and covered the same body of course content as the exam, such that the instructor considered exams to be preparation for writing the essays.

Figure 3 summarizes the test performance of the 33 students who took the course's three exams. The instructor reported data in the form of the number of possible points earned on a 0-100 scale, a figure that corresponded to student exam grades. While grades are not typically considered direct measures of student learning, in this case, the exam assigned points based on students' mastery of substantive content rather than other learning outcomes. The exam consisted of short-answer and "identification" questions, the latter of which prompted students to write a prescribed number of correct statements about a concept, theory, person, or event. The instructor deemed students earning at least 70 percent of potential points to have demonstrated "satisfactory" mastery of content.

Figure 3. Student Learning Outcomes in International Relations – Exam Format



On the first exam, about 70 percent of students met the “satisfactory” threshold of scores of 70 and above. Forty-six percent of students received scores of 80 or above (which in terms of grading translated into “A” and “B” level performances). On the second exam, score distributions were slightly higher, with 73 percent of exam-takers earning scores that demonstrated satisfactory content knowledge and 61 percent receiving scores of 80 and above. Another 73 percent of students demonstrated satisfactory content knowledge on the third exam, while 55 percent received scores in the “A” and “B” ranges. A consistent 4/33 (12 percent) demonstrated such poor command of course concepts that they failed the exams, while the numbers scoring between 60 and 69 (“D” grade level or “Below Minimum Expectations”) shrank from 18 percent to 6 percent on the last two exams. Across all three exams, an average of 71.7 percent of students demonstrated a satisfactory ability to describe information, concepts, and theories relevant to international relations.

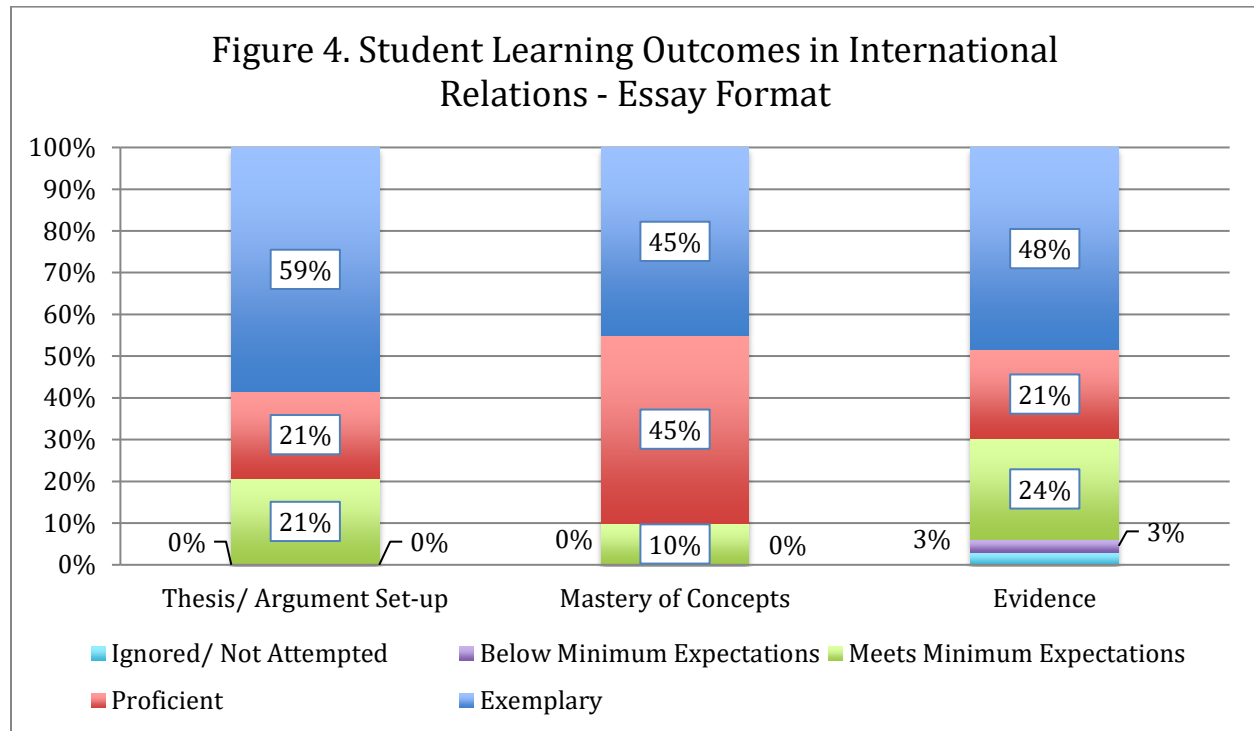
Three categories of the POLI 281 essay rubrics corresponded to the department’s “describe and apply” SLO. The instructor defined them as:

Thesis/argument set-up ([how well students] articulate a thesis in response to a content-driven prompt and set up an argument in defense of it);

Mastery of concepts ([extent to which students] integrate into their essays concepts, ideas, and theories gleaned from the course that can advance their arguments);

Evidence (how readily and effectively students wield both information and the arguments of prominent scholars whose work is featured in the course in support of the arguments they choose to make).

The instructor specified five levels of achievement: “Exemplary,” “Proficient,” “Meets Minimum Expectations,” “Below Expectations,” and “Ignored/ Not attempted.” Figure 4 presents rubric scoring distributions for the third essay only. This essay covered the final one-third of the semester and on it – unlike with the first two essays, but more like the essay exams from which data were collected in this cycle – students did not have the opportunity to revise essays for a higher grade.



In take-home essay format, POLI 281 students demonstrated still higher levels of course content mastery. One hundred percent of the 29 students submitting the exam essay met or exceeded the instructor’s minimum expectations on both thesis/ argument set-up and mastery of concepts; 93 percent met or exceeded minimum expectations in the evidence category. Eighty percent received “exemplary” or “proficient” scores for thesis and argument set-up, while 90 percent and 69 percent, respectively, attained this level of performance on mastery of concepts and evidence.

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

The assessment coordinator is not making suggestions to the department at this time. The overwhelming majority of students about whom data were collected achieved this cycle’s SLO: They could describe and apply political science information, concepts, and theories. Further, the modal student on each assessment did this at the highest or else the second-highest of the 4-6 achievement levels defined by each instructor. This is true in the current cycle as well as the prior one.



Perhaps it is unsurprising that students performed so well considering that they had access to their books and notes for many of the course assessments used in this report. Still, arguably, students might be hard-pressed to demonstrate a high level of mastery of course content without having made some sincere effort to understand it by reading, attending class, taking notes, and engaging intellectually in other ways. This is especially when their job is to apply rather than just describe the material and to do so in open-ended format, as was the case with every take-home essay covered by this report. Further, the lower percentages of students achieving the learning outcome (and/or achieving that outcome at the highest levels) are still large in absolute terms when students must prove their learning on tightly timed, in-class exams without access to course materials.