

Department of Political Science
Report on Assessment Activities
2001-02 academic year

Alumni Survey

We adopted a new assessment plan in the 2000-01 academic year, and we undertook one component of the plan--an alum survey that is conducted through a departmental newsletter to alumni every five years-- in that year.

Results

We identified a problem that we had not foreseen. The survey, which was included with a departmental newsletter sent to all alums who could be located, generated responses from alums who had graduated one year before to those who had graduated two decades before. Thus, they had very different undergraduate experiences, so it was difficult to identify suggestions for improvement that were relevant to the department today. The next time we undertake this survey we have decided to either a) survey only those who graduated within the previous five years, or b) survey all alums but to pull out for analysis only those who graduated within the previous five years. Either method should give us more applicable and helpful suggestions for improvement.

Capstone Research Paper

The other major component of our assessment plan is assessment of the research papers produced in a capstone course required of majors. The course did not yet exist at the time we adopted our new assessment plan in 2000-01. We created the course and offered it for the first time in the fall semester of 2001-02. Although students cannot be required to take it until those students who entered UNL in fall 2001 are seniors, a significant number of students each semester did take it, so we can begin to assess their research papers now.

How Conducted?

Our plan stipulates that we will assess the papers of 15-20% of the students in this course each semester. We evaluated a larger percentage last year, assessing the papers of four of the eleven students in the course in the fall semester and four of the eighteen students in the course in the spring semester. We had the instructors require students to hand in two copies of their paper. The instructors graded one copy of each student's paper for the course grade. Then we randomly selected some, from among the other copy of each student's paper, for the assessment. Once we had selected papers for the assessment, we had the instructors fill out one assessment form, and then we had each member of the Undergraduate Committee read and evaluate one of the papers. We tried to match the expertise of the members of the Undergraduate Committee with the topics of the papers, so members would be better able to evaluate the papers. Thus, the members of the Undergraduate Committee read a "clean" copy of the papers and also were unaware of the evaluation by the instructors.

Criterion for rating the students' research papers includes:

- Understanding substantive literature and relevant issues
- Understanding of appropriate theory
- Ability to use appropriate research sources and methods
- Ability to make a coherent argument and support it with evidence
- Ability to organize effectively
- Ability to write clearly

Results

The instructors and the committee members had similar evaluations, although the instructors tended to be somewhat more positive, evaluating more criteria as “excellent” and fewer as “poor.” But even the committee members evaluated most papers as “good” or “excellent.” They considered five of the eight papers to be “good” or “excellent” for almost all of the criteria. At the other extreme, they found two papers to be “poor” on two criteria each.

Despite the generally positive evaluations overall, there were some negative patterns. In responses to the open-ended questions, committee members concluded that some papers lacked sufficient organization or focus. After an adequate beginning, these papers seemed to meander or drift away from the topic. These comments were manifested in the committee members' evaluations of students' ability to make a coherent argument and support it with evidence. This was the criterion with the lowest evaluations; three papers were deemed “poor” and four were deemed just “satisfactory” on this criterion. This stood out as the major shortcoming. Yet it would be premature to conclude on the basis of this handful of students in one year of assessment that this is a broad problem among our majors. And, it should be noted, only three of the eight students were evaluated by the committee members as “poor” on this criterion. And only one was evaluated by the instructors as “poor” on this criterion. Nonetheless, the evaluations on this criterion bear watching in the next couple years.

Conclusions and Future Plans

The Undergraduate Committee did decide, on the basis of this assessment, to survey the departmental faculty about the length and type of papers assigned in courses students take prior to the capstone course, and also about the nature and extent of feedback provided on these papers. It is possible that the length and type of papers and the nature and extent of feedback contribute to students' shortcomings in making a sustained and coherent argument by the time they reach the capstone course.

The Undergraduate Committee distributed the results of this assessment—the tabulations of the evaluations for each criterion by both the committee members and the instructors, and also the conclusions drawn by the committee and included in this report--to the department. The department is scheduling a meeting in October to discuss the results and to address the forthcoming survey about the papers assigned and the feedback provided.