

Office of General Education

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PSC 101 Spring 2021 Learning Outcomes Assessment Report

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| Date of report: | June 16, 2021 |
| Course: | PSC 101 United States Politics and Government |
| Materials used, n: | 80 final exams, 66 final essays |
| Date/semester of assessment: | Spring 21 |
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**Purpose and Justification**

The purpose of this assessment is to identify and qualify strengths and challenges in students’ accomplishment of General Education learning outcomes in PSC 10100 through analysis of student exams and writing assignments. Exam questions were mapped to Gen Ed learning outcomes and an analysis of student answers was performed. Three writing assignment asked students to analyze texts, make arguments and support their argument with relevant, credible evidence. Papers and tests were used to assess students’ knowledge of all five specific outcomes: fundamental concepts in political science, major themes in U.S. history, how indigenous populations and slavery have shaped the United States, the three branches of federal government and class and racial injustice.

**Course Overview**

PSC 10100 satisfies the US Experience in its Diversity requirement of the CUNY Pathways Common Core.

Course description: This course provides an overview of US politics and government, including 1) the founding of the Republic, the U.S. Constitution and Federalism, 2) political participation, elections and campaigns, political parties, money and politics, interest groups, and 3) federal institutions and their interactions. We will also examine long-term themes in US politics, such as racial injustice, economic inequality, the role of the federal government in the economy, and immigration. To understand our present moment, we will look at political polarization, cultural backlash, and the alienation of a large percentage of Americans from US government. I hope that by the end of this course, you will have gained a broader and deeper understanding of U.S. politics and government and that you will have a better understanding of your own political values.

Students wrote three papers for this course. The first paper (two pages) examined Voting Rights and Voter Suppression, the second (three pages) was an analysis of the rise of authoritarian populism in the United States, and the third (five pages) asked whether money supplied by the very wealthy and corporations to candidates and elected officials poses a threat to democracy. Students were also required to take two multiple-choice tests, each containing 25 questions, and to complete ten definitions of fundamental concepts in U.S. politics. This assessment report is based on papers and tests.

One hundred students took PSC 10100 in spring 2021. In fall 2020, 240 students registered for the course. A large class size in the fall and a smaller class size in the spring is the normal pattern for PSC 10100. Nonetheless, the numbers of students registered for PSC 10100 in the spring was lower than usual. The Pandemic has had a big impact on PSC 10100. In the fall and spring, many students failed the course. For example, in Spring 2021, 27% of the class failed. This is due to the large numbers of students who fail to hand in the assignments. I attribute this to the Pandemic and the difficulty students have staying engaged in large online courses.

**Assessment Findings**

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|  | **Gen Ed Learning Outcome** | **Brief description of findings** |
| Writing skills | Thesis is stated clearly  Credible, relevant evidence is provided in support of the thesis  Appropriate language that conveys meaning is used and it is grammatically correct | This assessment is based on 66 5-page papers on the topic of Money and Politics. This was the third paper students wrote for PSC 10100 Spring 2021 and it was due in early May.  **Thirty-four students did not hand in their final paper.**  Forty-seven out of 66 students (**70%) were able to clearly state their thesis** in the first paragraph of their papers. This included all students in the following categories: exceeded expectations, above average and average. Nineteen students who fell into the below average category were not able to clearly state their thesis. It should be noted that students were reminded to respond to the prompts in the first paragraph of their paper several times before the paper was due. Additionally, I penalized students on their first and second papers if they did not respond to prompts in the first paragraph of their paper. **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**  The first question students were required to answer was 1) How is big money channeled into politics? This question required students to present what they had learned about campaign finance reform, political action committees, super pacs and independent expenditure groups, interest groups and lobbying. In short, the different ways that money is used to influence elections and public policy. Students were required to read at least four of the sources provided by the instructor and were allowed to use sources found by themselves. About half of the students were able to provide credible, relevant evidence that supported their theses, but the depth and detail of their knowledge did vary. Thirty-four students **(52%) provided evidence that exceeded expectations or was ranked above average or average**. Thirty-two students were only able to provide a minimal amount of evidence, and many of them were confused about important conceptual distinctions. Their knowledge of the course material was below average.  Thirty-four students **(52%) exceeded expectations, were above average or average in their use of appropriate language that conveys meaning and is grammatically correct**. Thirty-two students demonstrated numerous problems: 1) frequently used commas when they should have used periods (punctuation), 2) capitalization, 3) failure to provide context for and integrate quotes properly 4) lack of correct vocabulary, 5) failure to produce strong lead sentences, and 6) problems with coherence and meaning. **In general, about half of the students who wrote papers had trouble expressing themselves.** |
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| Critical Thinking skills | Issue/problem and/or student’s position is clearly stated  Evidence from appropriate sources is analyzed and/or synthesized  Logical conclusions are developed based on evidence | The second question asked students to identify key democratic principles and to determine whether big money in politics poses a threat to democracy. Eighteen students exceeded expectations, and the seven students who were above average were able to state the problem clearly. Additionally, students who ranked average (7) were able to meet this goal. The thirty-four students **(52%) who failed to meet this critical thinking standard**, often asserted that big money is a threat to democracy but could not identify why it is a threat. Frequently, students would include phrases that I had used in class, such as “economic inequality leads to political inequality” or “one person, one vote.” However, they did not explain what they meant by these phrases. These students had a difficult time conceptualizing democracy. Many of them are not able to write five sentences about what democracy is and why it is valuable. I will create a more extensive unit on democracy for the fall.  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Students were required to use at least four sources provided by the instructor. They were allowed to use additional sources, and those who exceeded expectations or were above average typically had six or more. Those who fell into the category of exceeding expectations (18) or above average (7), were able to take a step back from the evidence they provided, analyze it, and explain its significance. Those students who fell into the average category (7) were able to analyze evidence but not at the level as students who exceeded expectations or were above average. Finally, 34students **(52%) were below average, and most of them were not able to analyze and synthesize evidence from appropriate sources**. They were able to compile evidence and use a variety of sources but stepping back and analyzing the information they provided was more difficult for these students. This information was synthesized in the sense that it was combined to explain how money is channeled into politics. Students used one article to explain campaign finance law and a different source to explain “dark money.” However, they were not always able to clearly draw logical conclusions from the evidence they provided.  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  **Twenty-seven** students exceeded expectations or were above average in meeting this goal. **Seven** average students also met this goal. The remaining thirty-four students – **52% - (below average) had a harder time meeting this standard.** One major problem was missing steps in the argument. Students presented good evidence but did not know how to build a good argument using it. |
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| Information Literacy skills | Students are able to Interact with sources  Students acknowledge sources and cite; Understand what plagiarism is; no plagiarism | Students were required to use four sources that the instructor provided and were allowed to add sources they identified. Students who exceeded expectations (18) and those who ranked above average (7) used four to six sources. Average students (7) and below average students (34) used three to four. A common problem for below average students was the inability to contextualize and integrate quotes.  Sources and citations were emphasized in this course and 62 students **(94%) were able to use in text citations and provide a works cited page**. Plagiarism was only a problem in one case. |
| USED Outcomes | Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and methods of political science  Evaluate how indigenous populations, slavery, or immigration have shaped the development of the United States  Identify and differentiate among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government and analyze their influence on the development of U.S. democracy  Analyze and discuss common institutions or patterns of life in contemporary U.S. society and how they influence, or are influenced by, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, belief, or other forms of social differentiation. | To answer this question, grades students received on the multiple-choice section of the midterm and final were examined. Both tests presented students with 25 questions that asked students about fundamental concepts in political science. Students were given three attempts to take these tests.  Political Science concepts discussed in class included: The role of slavery in the development of the United States, the displacement of Indigenous people from their land, the Constitution, Federalism, Civil Rights, Voting Rights, Political Parties, Elections, Campaign Finance Law, Interest Groups and Lobbies, the Congress, the Presidency and the Federal Judiciary. Eighty-one students took the final test and 80 students received grades in the range of 80-100. This means that 80 students can be ranked as exceeded expectations (59), above average (3) or average (18) One student failed. The other 19 students did not take the final. Out of the 88 students who took the midterm test, 71 students exceeded expectations (80%). Three students were above average, 8 were average and 4 were below average. **These results suggest that a large majority of students do have a good grasp of fundamental political science concepts.**  It would be difficult to analyze how students did on individual questions. However, given the overwhelmingly high grades that students received on their midterm and final test, I conclude that **a majority of students did learn that the United States was built on the labor of African slaves and the land of indigenous peoples**. Unfortunately, I did a poor job covering immigration last term.  A significant part of the course is devoted to this topic. Students learn about the powers of each branch and the ability of each branch to check the other two branches. Many questions on the final asked about the constitutional powers and functions of the three branches and how they have developed over time. Given that a majority of students did very well on their midterm and final, I conclude that **a majority of students exceeded expectations or were above average on this outcome.**  PSC 10100 covered racial injustice extensively. One of the assignments was to write a paper on Voting Rights and Voter Suppression. Twenty-nine students exceeded expectations, fourteen students were ranked above average, twenty-two were average, ten students were below average and twenty-five did not hand in a paper. This data suggests that **a majority of students (65) did average or above.** Additionally, racism was discussed as one of the main components of Authoritarian Populism (Trumpism). Students also wrote a paper on this topic. They were introduced to cultural backlash theory and most students described it correctly in their Authoritarian Populism papers. Fifteen students exceeded expectations, ten were above average, 21 were average and 27 students were below average. Twenty-five students did not hand in the Authoritarian Populism paper. |

**Summary**

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| *Briefly summarize overall findings by identifying* ***strengths*** *in students’ accomplishment of learning outcomes/specific benchmarks.*  Writing/Critical Thinking/Information Literacy: Over the course of three papers, students did improve in some of these areas. As discussed earlier, more students were able to state their thesis clearly. Sources and citations were strongly emphasized in this course, and by the end of the semester, a majority of the students who turned in work were able to use and cite sources.  USED specific outcomes: An examination of papers and the midterm and final tests demonstrates that a majority of students (from those that ranked average to those that ranked exceeds expectations) have fulfilled the USED specific outcomes. |
| *Briefly summarize overall findings by identifying* ***challenges*** *in students’ accomplishment of learning outcomes/specific benchmarks.*  Writing/Critical Thinking/Information Literacy: A majority of students, including students who are ranked average, need to improve their writing skills. Only those students who exceeded expectations write well and demonstrate the critical thinking skills that are necessary to analyzing a text and building an argument.  USED specific outcomes: I cannot think of specific challenges students had regarding the specific outcomes. |
| *How useful are the text and other resources assigned to this course?*  It is hard for me to imagine a U.S. Politics and Government class without a central textbook. In an introductory course, students need a common source to support lectures provided by the instructor. Nonetheless, something must be done to reduce the cost of the textbook. The biggest problem with the text is that not all students purchase it. This really puts them at a disadvantage on tests and other assignments. This course also uses podcasts and articles to supplement the text and broaden the resources available to students. |
| **Conclusions** / “Closing-the-loop” plans to improve student learning/success |
| *Based on your assessment of student learning, how well aligned are the activities and assignments in PSC 101 with the general education learning outcomes?*  I think the assignments in PSC 101 are well aligned with the general education learning incomes. The best way to develop informational literacy, critical thinking and writing skills is to write papers, even short ones. The students in PSC 10100 wrote three papers and received detailed feedback on all three. This personal feedback can have a big impact on students. I always tell students if I think they have writing problems and encourage them to develop a strategy for becoming better writers. I also give students about four to six asynchronous assignments based on podcasts and supplementary reading. For example, this past semester students were given asynchronous assignments on a 1619 project podcast, Thurgood Marshall’s Bicentennial speech, FDR’s speech to the Commonwealth Club, an article on African American voting patterns, and a podcast on Gerrymandering. In the future I will add an asynchronous assignment on Immigration. Students are required to take a five-question quiz after they complete the assignment. |
| *Based on your assessment of student learning, do you plan to implement or recommend at instructional level changes to improve student learning? Specify topics and pedagogical changes, if applicable.*  This is a challenging course to teach. It is hard for students to remain motivated in large courses, especially online. One of the challenges of online learning is lack of community among students. Next semester, I plan on having frequent, quick breakout sessions in which I give the students a question to debate. While this will take time away from presenting course material, I believe it may forge bonds among students and encourage them to maintain their involvement in the class. I will also send emails to students who have failed to hand in assignments or completed tests. This can be time-consuming but I think it is necessary. I will explain to students on the first day that during the pandemic, many students failed to complete assignments and that they should not become part of this trend. How I change the course will depend on how many students register for it. I do think that anyone who teaches this course needs to think about different ways to maintain student involvement. Even when we go back to in-person classes, an emphasis on staying in touch with individuals who are failing to turn in their work remains important as is student community. There should be a strong emphasis on immigration, politics and policy in this course. |
| *Provide suggestions, if any, to be done on a departmental or institutional level to support student learning/success in this course.*  The department or instructor needs to identify a more affordable textbook. I plan on taking the course offered by CCNY on using publicly available course materials. However, it will take a lot of work to shift this course to publicly available course materials. |