ACE 10 Question

“What can the department be doing better to train our students in the skills needed to be good political scientists?”

We have determined that the ability to do research and all of the skills that entails, including
• understanding the substantive literature and relevant issues
• understanding appropriate theory to be able to come up with a viable research question and hypothesis
• the ability to use appropriate research sources and methods to test the hypothesis
• the ability to make a coherent argument and support it with evidence by analyzing the data and interpreting the results
• drawing proper conclusions
• organizing the paper effectively and writing clearly.

Our capstone course, POLS 400 Democracy and Citizenship, is a senior-level seminar taken at the end of students’ political science course work. By this time, our curriculum should have given our majors these skills. If our ACE 10 assessment reveals any gaps in students’ training in any of these skills, the department needs to rethink its curriculum.

Method of Analysis

Student work is analyzed by both the course instructor and the Undergraduate Committee. Two sections of POLS 400 are taught each semester. The instructor of one of the sections picks a sample of four research papers by randomly drawing the sample or by choosing a sample that reflects the range of papers in the course. In either case, the instructor indicates how the sample compares to the population of papers in the class. Aside from grading the papers for the course, the instructor uses the Assessment Form to assess each paper in the sample. One open-ended question asks, “Does this student’s performance suggest any changes that should be made in our undergraduate program?” The question has proven to be especially useful because we are able to get important suggestions from instructors that reflect the papers from all students, not just the sample. The Undergraduate Committee independently assesses each of the papers in the sample (each member of the committee assesses one paper). We therefore have two assessments of each paper. The chair of the Undergraduate Committee collates the results and calls a meeting of the Undergraduate Committee. The Committee discusses the results, highlighting any issues that need to be addressed, and brings its report to the faculty. If any major changes are deemed to be essential for the program, the committee submits a proposal to the full faculty, who discuss and vote on the proposed change.

Assessment Form and Example

Even though the full ACE 10 assessment won’t take place until Fall 2014, the preliminary results revealed such clear needed action that we decided to make curriculum changes immediately rather than wait for the full assessment. The one skill our students especially struggled with was collecting and analyzing relevant data as well as some basic research design issues (such as being able to write good hypotheses). The Political Science faculty discussed in spring 2014 the need to require a research methods course. We intermittently offered POLS 286, our Introduction to Political Analysis, but did not require our majors to take the course. In Fall 2014, the faculty voted to require POLS 286. We also voted to continue requiring a political theory course because of the importance of teaching our students logic and how to make a good argument. We have offered a political theory course every semester for many years. We will now offer our political analysis course every semester as well.