Mission and Purpose:

The Political Science Program commits itself to the intellectual and personal development of its students. The Program seeks to:

1. Enable its students to acquire a broad understanding of the political world both at home and abroad, and to recognize the role of the individual in that world.
2. Educate students to knowledge and appreciation of political processes and institutions, development of political thought, and the nature of individual rights and governmental power.
3. Provide students with a basic knowledge of American government in light of both the sweep of its history and the immediacy of current events.

In addition the Program seeks to impart to its majors:

1. Knowledge of normative political ideas in Western culture and American experience.
2. Practical understanding of the application of empirical research methods to problems of political behavior.

Finally, the Program offers access to advice and guidance in seeking post-graduate education and training in law to students in all majors.

In sum, the Political Science Program of the Social Sciences Department seeks to prepare its graduates for employment and advanced study, and to stimulate students in anticipating their future roles as professionals, leaders, and citizens.

Goals and Objectives:

I. The political science curriculum will (a.) introduce students to political analysis through the study of structures and processes of government in a comparative perspective, and (b.) explore the origins, development, structure and operation of American government with emphasis on institutions, process and political actors.

II. The curriculum will also develop the ability of our students to (a.) explain the linkages of individuals and groups to the political process, (b.) the development, impact and evaluation of public policy, and (c.) to analyze current political issues facing the nation and the international system.

III. In addition, the curriculum will nurture the ability of our students to (a.) evaluate political decisions (b.) analyze normative theories, and (c.) interpret empirical research.

IV. Finally, the curriculum will include opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills in active learning environments, which may take the form of internships, independent research and academic competitions.
Assessment Plan

The Political Science Program Assessment Plan is not intended to restrict instructors in the creative use of any assessment tools they think appropriate to any goal or objective of any course they teach. The plan we outline here is intended to be inclusive of as many analytically distinct assessment tools currently in use with the Program.

Assessment Tools:
These include:
1. Objective exams and quizzes.
2. Short answer tests.
3. Essay tests, which vary in depth and scope,
4. Short, topical writing assignments,
5. Term papers.
6. Analytical writing assignments, such as briefs of court cases.
7. Oral presentations, role play, evaluations of class participation.
8. Research reports.
10. Scores in academic competitions.

Assessment Plan:

The Political Science faculty will meet annually to review data on student performance and evaluate program effectiveness. Specific attention will be given to the performance of program majors who express goals of attaining further graduate or professional training. Similar attention will be given to non-program majors who seek assistance in gaining admission to law school.

The X’s in the matrix on the next page indicate which tools, as numbered in the above list, are used to assess which sets of goals and objectives, as listed on the previous page.

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Rationale

Goals I and II on page 6 above are specific to our introductory courses, which typically hold as many as forty students per section. Tools 1 through 4 are especially amenable to these larger sections and to the goals of these courses. Goal III is designed to capture the aim of our required upper division courses, Political Theory and Social Research. Tools 1 and 2 may be used in these courses, but the objectives of these courses are perhaps more validly measured by tools 3 through 7. Goal IV takes in the entire broad range of our remaining courses including internships and independent studies. In these courses, instructors may select from the entire range of assessment tools, but will most likely choose from among tools 5 through 10.

A note on tool 10, scores in academic competitions: We do not use these scores to determine a student’s grade for credit in a course. These scores tend to be very subjective, and are assigned by individuals who are not on our faculty. These scores are useful, however, as a way of comparing the performance of our students with those earned by students from other schools in the same activity, and as a way of gauging individual improvement of performance over several competitions.

Evidence That Students Achieve Stated Learning Outcomes

1. **Goals I and II**

In academic year 2006-2007 we noticed that grade averages in all sections of Introduction to American Government (Political Science 1230), including my own, were 2.08. Not only were these grade averages unusually low, but we later learned that they were among the lowest in the University. In 2007-2008, I was able to hire a Supplemental Instruction Leader under the provisions of a grant program. Together the SI Leader and I updated and re-worked power point presentations and objective tests for my sections. (The SI leader also led small group study sessions and individual tutoring sessions, but these were only for students in my sections.) Since we were using a new textbook that lacked ancillary materials of any kind, my two colleagues, Professor Broussard and Professor Nikolai, who also teach American Government sections using the same book, undertook a similar effort. The overall gpa for these sections increased to 2.29 in 2007-2008 and to 2.4 in Fall 2008. The number of A’s earned in these classes also increased from one or two per forty-student section to six or seven over that same period. Failures, which numbered two or three per section in my classes, have dropped to zero in the current year.

2. **Goal III.**

Since Goal III deals with basic knowledge essential to the major, we believe that the increase in the number of majors we have witnessed over the past few years and the overall improvement of the quality of work in the courses required for the major are evidence of success. The number of majors has increased by about 25% over the past four years.
3. **Goal IV.**

To achieve this goal we must find evidence of success in one or more areas of active learning experience in the political science program. I can cite two such areas through direct observation: mediation and mock trial competitions.

Since February 2005 when we adopted this assessment plan, our students have done the following in mediation competition: 1.) achieved the highest team mediation score in the preliminary rounds of the 2005 National Intercollegiate Mediation Tournament in competition with thirty teams; 2.) won the 2006 national championship in mediation advocacy; 3.) won five All-American awards for individual achievement. Of the twenty or twenty-five schools from coast to coast who have participated in these tournaments, these accomplishments are among the most impressive at the national level. We also host an invitational tournament each year for about five or six other teams. In 2008 our students won their third straight championship.

Mock trial competition has proven to be more difficult, but the team has had many proud moments. It qualified to compete at the national championships in Richmond, Kentucky in 2005 where one of the students won an All-American award. Individual awards were also won at invitational and regional tournaments that year. In terms of competition skills, we’ve found that students who are entirely new to mock trial can improve performance markedly in the course of one season in our program. In Spring 2009, per ballot scores increased in one month (January-February) from an average of 82 points at a large invitational tournament to an average of 102 at the regional qualifying tournament. This is still somewhat short of what it usually takes to qualify for national competition and win at nationals—another ten points per ballot would accomplish that; but it represents significant learning through study and practice.

In 2007 the team won the Spirit of AMTA award at the Milwaukee Regional Tournament, an award given to the team that best exemplifies the values of honesty, civility and integrity. In 2008 the team finished second to Northwestern University for the same award becoming the only team (out of 550 nationwide) to win the award one year and finish second for it the next.

**What We Have Learned.**

It is extraordinarily difficult to plan at all, let alone measure achievement, under conditions of unstable budgets, uncertain staffing and minimal resources. In Spring, 2005 we looked forward to hiring an academic staff member who would teach the Judicial Process course every fall semester. We did that, and every fall since then Attorney Amy White has taught Judicial Process with great success. Now, due to budget cuts, Amy White will be gone. Meanwhile, lack of funds for textbooks has often thrown us into crisis mode as we adapt to the shortage of basic teaching materials, and lack of SUFAC funding for student travel has weakened our efforts to present active learning experiences for our students.

Still, we’ve muddled through adapting the resources we have to the tasks at hand. We are never happy when limited resources become an obstacle to achievement; but we never fail to accomplish something with what we have. As we continue to implement our assessment plan,
we are likely to find that the plan itself is an ally in our efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning for our students. In 2005 I was in doubt about the validity of using mock trial and mediation scores as a measure of achievement since those scores are awarded somewhat subjectively by judges who are not on our faculty. But the experience of this past year has taught me that sometimes the results we see in competitive scoring can only be explained by reference to the preparation the students have received in the classroom and through the experience of competition.

Similarly, in our Introduction to American Government class, we have chosen not to interpret low grades as a measure of the loftiness of our academic standards. We have decided instead to find out why grades are low and to try something to improve them. Again, the results can only be explained by our efforts to improve the manner in which we strive to achieve the goals of our program.

**Specific Changes Resulting From Assessment**

This may already have been fairly well covered in the “Evidence” section above. Nevertheless, it is useful to point out once again that we have met an array of challenges over the past few years and that our responses to those challenges have led to more successful outcomes.

For our introductory students, we will continue to update power-point presentations and other aspects of the classroom experience to fit them to our evaluation criteria. For our majors, we will continue to employ creative approaches to the development of reading and writing assignments that will challenge and motivate them. (One example of this not noted above is the use of a “mock Supreme Court” decision making exercise in which students form a “court” and decide an actual case pending before the US Supreme Court.)

Finally, we will continue to expand opportunities for active learning through academic competitions, internships and other experiences. We have reorganized our competition schedule for next fall so that all of our competitions will be completed in the fall semester. We will then attempt to place students in internship assignments, such as the PACCE program, in the spring semester.

Respectfully submitted,

John Rink
Political Science Program Coordinator