

Final Report of Politics Department ITL 2017-2019 academic years

Title: Reimagining the Politics Senior Program

Contact: Susanne Beechey, beechesn@whitman.edu

Report:

Our project engaged the first two goals of ITL grants: “to enhance the quality, while also expanding the range and accessibility, of learning experiences offered to Whitman students” and “to provide faculty and staff with resources to develop improvements in student learning”. Our project focused on the politics senior program, the only element of the Politics major required of all Politics and ES-Politics majors.

Did recipients complete what they set out to complete?

Yes, and there is more work to be done. We engaged the feedback from our external review and student evaluations of our senior program through sustained and inclusive conversations with all members of the department (not on leave of absence). We considered a number of different models for the first year program, and decided on key changes to our senior program which were piloted during the 2018-2019 academic year. While the full department conversations extended across 2017-2018 academic year, the heart of this work was a full day retreat in January 2018 which engaged the following questions:

1. **Opening discussion:** What are three things you appreciate/value/want to retain about our current senior program (Pol 490/497) and what are three problems you think need to be addressed?
2. **Should every student write a thesis?** If so, what do we mean by this? If not, what else might a Senior Assessment in the Major (SAM) look like?
3. What should be the **relationship between senior seminar and SAM/thesis?** What are the implications for the form and content of each?
4. Do we need to make **changes to the curriculum** to better prepare students for our expectations for senior seminar and/or SAM? If so what might this look like? (Previously discussed ideas include: Jr Seminar, methods course, foundations course, adjusting content of 300 level courses.)
5. Do we need to make **changes to how we organize/staff the senior program?** When and how should changes be made to the Pol 490 syllabus?
6. **Agenda setting for the spring meetings.** Where do we go from here? What conclusions have we drawn? What action items have we identified? What debates remain?

The faculty teaching the senior program (Pol 490 and 497/498) in 2018-2019 implemented the changes we agreed upon on a trial basis. The department will continue to review these annually.

What are the products of their efforts in terms of content, format, and public dissemination?

The most important though least tangible product of this project is a shared vision for the senior program. This vision is made tangible in the following products:

- 1) New senior seminar syllabus structure focused on the theme: Knowledge, Power, Politics.
 - Specific readings will change each year with new faculty teams but the theme will provide greater coherence and focus, which students had critiqued previously.
 - The thesis prep work previously woven into the syllabus has been removed to independent study work with the thesis first reader.
- 2) A new sequence of the senior program which introduces thesis writing earlier in the senior year.
 - We now launch the senior program with a junior meeting during Spring Reading Day in order to explain the senior program and give students a foundation from which to begin thinking about their senior thesis over the summer. This also standardizes advising in the department and ensures all rising seniors have equal access to information about the senior program.
 - First readers are assigned early in the fall semester via a detailed questionnaire which focuses on thesis questions, research approaches and previous preparation for the student's thesis work, rather than mere advisor preferences, which produces a more substantively focused and equitable adviser assignment process.
 - The thesis prep work previously woven into the syllabus has been removed to independent study work with the thesis first reader which begins in Fall and continues into Spring. This allows students to dive into their thesis work earlier and to tailor their fall work to their topic and approach rather than follow a one-size-fits-none approach. It also produces greater clarity and focus in the senior seminar.
 - We removed the full thesis proposal in the fall semester, replacing it with an update on thesis progress and December meeting with both first and second readers to clarify the project for completion during the spring semester.

Do any of these have potential long-term positive effects on the curriculum or academic program more generally?

We believe this will produce greater cohesion and clarity in the senior seminar, and allow students to more efficiently allocate their thesis research time to reflect the demands of their individual project. These will be long term effects for all Politics and ES-Politics majors.

How many students were directly involved or indirectly impacted by the grant?

27 politics seniors in 2018-2019, 30 politics seniors in 2019-2020, and around this number in each forthcoming year.

Did the project enhance the quality of learning experiences offered to students?

Yes, in the Politics senior seminar and thesis experiences as referenced above.

What evidence do you have that demonstrates impact on student learning (if applicable)?

After years of student evaluations which complained about the confusing structure of the Politics Senior Seminar, under the new syllabus the course received notably higher student evaluation scores. Students noted:

- “I really appreciated the continuity in content -- whether it was how the ideas of one half complemented or challenged the ideas of another half -- from one half to another that my seminar section picked up on, with encouragement from the professors.”
- “Super well thought-out... Has contributed significantly to my thesis work.”
- “It was interesting to have a course taught by a pair of professors. It gave less of an impression that one person had all the authority in the room, especially when the two professors teaching disagreed with each other. It was also nice to have more of the discussion directed by the student discussion leaders and student participants. It made me actually feel like an adult who was prepared to take on a leadership role after I graduate. I also thought that the themes of collectivity and knowledge production were thought-provoking not only in this course but also for writing my thesis.”
- “I liked beginning the thesis process early in the semester because you actually have more time to think about what you want to do and because you get feedback from your first reader earlier on, as well. I, also, appreciated the thesis consultation at the end of the semester. It helped me re-frame the work that remains on my thesis.”

Students also offered suggestions for clarifying expectations for the revised thesis abstract assignment at the end of the fall semester.

What were the limitations or failings of this project, and how, in retrospect, might they have been better addressed or remedied?

This project allowed us to come to a common vision for the senior program, but we will need to continue to make changes on an incremental basis. Some questions remain, including: can we find a way to have a single submission deadline for standard and honors thesis students, should we further distinguish between expectations for honors and politics thesis writers, should we incorporate forms other than a standard thesis to the SAM, and how might we best respect accessibility accommodations in the thesis process?

