To: Buzz Fozouni, Chair, Department of Government
   Otis Scott, Dean, School of Social Science and Interdisciplinary Studies

From: Government Department Student Assessment Committee (David Andersen, Jim Cox, Andrew Hertzoff); contact: David Andersen, david.andersen@csus.edu, 278-7095

Re: 2008-2009 Department Assessment

Date: June 8, 2009

1. Assessment Goals

The Government Department Assessment Committee goals for the 2008-2009 academic year were to 1) develop our own skills in assessment in order to create a more sustainable process, and 2) to begin a conversation and plan for future assessment activities, including next year’s program review. In the Spring semester David Andersen attended assessment workshops at both CSUS and Hollywood. In addition, the assessment committee carried out a number of conversations regarding assessment goals and methods. Initial insights from these activities are incorporated into this report. The 2008-2009 assessment report focuses on our writing assessment and outlines future plans.

2. Writing Assessment

The ability to write clearly, develop a thesis, apply and compare theory, and provide empirical evidence for claims is an essential part of what the Government Department expects from a qualified graduate of our program. Nearly all upper-division Government courses require at least one writing assignment. These assignments include the critical analysis of a single text, a comparative analysis of multiple texts, and original research. This assessment examines the areas that Government majors do well, have improved since the previous assessment, and continue to need improvement.

2a. Assessment Methods

This assessment report focuses on the Government Department’s writing goals which are: 1) information acquisition, 2) conceptual thinking, 3) analysis of relationships and theories, 4) application of evidence, and 5) presentation of ideas.

The Assessment Committee selected a sample of papers from three core upper-division courses (GOVT 111--Political Theory, GOVT 130--International Relations, and GOVT 170--Public Policy). This created a set of fifteen papers. The papers covered a range of sub-disciplines: political theory, international relations and American government. The papers also constituted a variety of writing and research styles: in-depth analysis of a single text (GOVT 111), analysis of multiple texts in a literature review format (GOVT 130) and research on a specific policy issue using multiple sources and empirical evidence (GOVT 170). Student names were removed to ensure anonymity. The committee met to read and discuss each of the papers in order to ensure a similar standard
for evaluating papers. We then evaluated the papers according to the above five criteria, using a four-point scale (1=lowest, 4=highest). In each category each paper was judged as either 1) inadequate, 2) needing work/showing promise, 3) meeting requirements/showing competency, or 4) excellent work.

2b. Assessment Results

Below are the rubric scores for the 2008-2009 paper samples. The outcomes are reflective of last year’s scores (with one minor exception), which should be expected, as there was no specific intervention that was carried out between last year’s sample and this year’s sample.

1. Information Acquisition (3.10 out of 4.0)

Information acquisition measures how well a student uses the information needed to address the paper topic. Depending on the course, information may come from assigned readings, class lectures and discussion, student research from the library, or other sources. The assessment committee continues to see students that are capable of obtaining the information that is needed to address the assigned paper topics. For assignments in which the students must draw from assigned readings they demonstrate the ability to reference the breadth of the sources. Papers that require original research generally show a strong variety of sources. We continue to see less reliance on Google searches and more use on the tools provided by the University’s library.

2. Conceptual Thinking (3.12 out of 4.0)

In previous writing assessments the categories of Conceptual Thinking and Analysis of Relationships and Theories was combined. This year we have separated them into two separate categories. Conceptual thinking requires the student to be able to recognize, breakdown, and apply complex concepts and ideas. A paper would receive a score of excellent on conceptual thinking if the student’s work provided a deep understanding of concepts by using meaningful examples or explaining how the concept fits into broader historical and political contexts. In this year’s sample, students were able to show proficiency in conceptual thinking. Students are capable of demonstrating how their ideas fit into broader historical and political context and provide meaningful explanations for why that is so.

3. Analysis of Relationships and Theories (2.88 out of 4.0)

The next step in the learning process is understanding how concepts and ideas relate to one another in the form of theories. This category measures the level to which a student understands relevant theories and underlying assumptions. As in previous assessments comparative theoretical analysis is the area that our students struggle the most. This is not surprising, as this is one of the most difficulty
aspects of the discipline. However, it should be noted that the papers written with the assigned purpose of doing theoretical analysis (GOVT 130 and 111) scored higher than those that were not. As a faculty, the Government Department continues to put a strong emphasis on theory.

4. Application of Evidence (3.12 out of 4.0)

The category Application of Evidence measures whether a student is able to recognize and provide appropriate evidence to support his or her theoretical claims and arguments. Students continue to show aptitude with the use of evidence. This is especially true with original research, such as the papers written for GOVT 170, which had a higher score in this regard. This score is lower than last year’s score, but because of the small sample size it is impossible to conjecture whether this truly reflects a decrease in student capabilities or is simply a random outcome that is the result of a small sample size (see Note on Methodology below).

5. Presentation of Ideas (3.07 out of 4.0)

The presentation of ideas affects all other categories. Student papers should have a clear thesis, be organized, and not have distracting grammatical errors. As in past years, we see a large variance in the ability of our students to write clearly and coherently present their ideas. The faculty continues to work with students to improve in this area.

2c. Areas where students are doing well

Overall Government majors demonstrate the ability to successfully engage the subject matter and assignments presented to them. Their genuine interest in the subject matter is demonstrated in both their writing and their in-class participation. As in previous assessments we continue to see strengths in their information acquisition and application of evidence. In this year’s assessment we also found that they are strong in conceptual thinking when it is separately evaluated from theoretical analysis.

2d. Areas where students need improvement

While there is room for improvement in all areas, where Government majors continue to need improvement is in the analysis of relationships and theories. In this assessment we found our students to be best able to perform this task when it was an explicit part of the assignment. They faltered when they had to demonstrate this ability in the context of a broader written assignment. This is an important finding as it allows us, as a faculty, to think about how to better integrate theoretical analysis into our students’ overall repertoire of skills, particularly when that is not an explicit part of the assignment.
2e. A Note on Methodology

Not every written assignment covered the five goals to the same extent. This year the assessment committee has tried to be more aware of the specific goals the professor has for each of his or her written assignments. In addition, the courses from which the written assignments were drawn from would be taken at different points in the students’ academic career. Therefore, the assessment committee also recognizes that courses that are generally taken earlier will not demonstrate as advanced skills as courses taken later. However, it should be noted that the Government Department does not require a specific course sequence, except that Government 170 is to be taken during a student’s final semester.* As a result we are unable to control for credits taken in our analysis of papers written for either Government 130 or Government 111.

There are a number of additional methodological problems associated with assessment that should be stated explicitly. First, there are far too many unknown variables behind a student’s work that fall outside the ability of any professor to control. What percentage of the assigned reading did the student read? How many hours are dedicated to each assignment? Did the student miss the class in which the professor gave explicit instructions regarding written assignments? What was the student’s high school and/or community college GPA and how prepared was he or she for upper division college work? Second, student performance is also hindered by the institutional constraints placed on the instructor. Class size and load directly affects the breadth and depth of student writing that can be reasonably assigned. As a result of increasing class sizes, the amount of dedicated writing time that a student receives across his or her university studies decreases and thus affects his or her overall level of writing skills by graduation. Third, the sample size is too small to be generalizable from academic year to academic year. The sample we use gives us a general sense of our student’s ability but variations in any year’s scores could easily be attributable to random error. The number of hours it would take to apply a rubric to a large enough sample size to compare scores takes too much time for an already overworked faculty. Because no additional treatment with a control group has been applied between samples, increasing the sample size would provide us with little additional insight. In addition, grades are highly correlated with each paper’s rubric scores; therefore, a larger sample of papers simply becomes redundant.

What should be clear is that success in our degree program is a combination of self-regulatory behavior on our students’ part and the learning environment that we provide them. In fact, one of the key goals for our students upon graduation is that they are independent thinkers that can pose difficult questions and possess the analytical tools to answer them. As a faculty we provide the assignments, encouragement and advice for developing these skills, but they are only ultimately acquired through dedicated practice by the student. This writing assessment should be considered with those caveats in mind. We believe that this exercise has value and that what is presented here gives us a better

* This is for Government majors only. Government majors with an International Affairs concentration do not take Government 170.
understanding of the types of skills our students are being given the opportunity to acquire. As a faculty, we remain dedicated to improving the methods that we use to provide these opportunities.

3. Summary and Conclusions

3a. Anticipated Program Changes and Planned Assessment Activities

In 2009-2010 the Government Department will be carrying out its program review. The new format for program review incorporates assessment into it. Therefore, we are in the process of developing a set of program changes that will correspond with the upcoming program review.

At the beginning of the Fall 2009 semester, the Government Department will hold a retreat to discuss and update (if needed) learning outcome goals and to plan for the upcoming program review. At this retreat the assessment committee will discuss with the Government faculty the measurement tools that will be used for the program review and future assessments and what data will be collected.

The second major task, to be completed in Fall 2009, is to curriculum map the major. As social scientists we wholeheartedly disagree with the idea, as expressed by one assessment trainer, that it is better to measure poorly than to not measure at all. Instead we believe that the first step to a strong curriculum is to determine how our required and elective course work is designed to achieve our broader program goals. Once this curriculum map is in place we hope to be in a better position to assess the specifics of our academic program.

By incorporating assessment into our program review we hope to be able to create a sustainable and fruitful assessment process within the department.
## Grading Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Inadequate</th>
<th>Needs Work/Shows Promise</th>
<th>Meet requirements/ Shows Competency</th>
<th>Excellent Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information Acquisition</td>
<td>Student uses the information needed to address paper topic. Information may come from assigned readings, class lectures and discussion, student research from the library, or other sources.</td>
<td>Information does not address the topic. Student leaves out obvious sources of information available from the library or from class.</td>
<td>Student has some useful information but not enough to adequately address the paper topic. Student relies on information from only a few sources or from the same types of sources.</td>
<td>Student uses enough information available to address paper topic. Student brings in relevant material from class and uses information available in the library as required. Varied sources were used.</td>
<td>Student uses a wide variety of sources to address the question. The student uses all available information from this and other classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Thinking</td>
<td>Part of a liberal arts education is moving from learning facts to thinking more abstractly. Students should be able to recognize, breakdown, and apply complex concepts and ideas.</td>
<td>The student’s work does not demonstrate a clear understanding of concepts needed to address paper topic. Key concepts are left out of the paper altogether.</td>
<td>Student attempts to explain important concepts, but they are not fully developed. Evidence of an underdeveloped concept includes misstating ideas or leaving out key components of those ideas.</td>
<td>The student’s work demonstrates a basic understanding of concepts needed to address their paper topic. The student describes the relevant concept completely and clearly.</td>
<td>The student’s work provides a deep understanding of concepts by using meaningful examples or explaining how the concept fits into broader historical and political contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of Relationships and Theories</td>
<td>The next step in the learning process is understanding how concepts and ideas relate to one another in the form of theories. Student understands relevant theories and underlying assumptions.</td>
<td>Student demonstrated little understanding of how key concepts relate to one another. For example, student may apply the wrong theory to a particular case.</td>
<td>Student conveys an incomplete explanation of relevant theories. For example, underlying assumptions are not identified.</td>
<td>Student fully explains relevant theories. This entails explaining how key concepts fit together.</td>
<td>Student demonstrates an exceptional understanding of relevant theories. For example, the student may provide evidence or an example we did not discuss in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Evidence</td>
<td>Student is able to recognize and provide appropriate evidence to support theoretical claims and arguments.</td>
<td>Little evidence exists to back up student’s claims or argument. Evidence is used poorly or is irrelevant to the argument.</td>
<td>Student uses some evidence, but it is insufficient or inappropriate. Main points of the paper are poorly supported.</td>
<td>Student provides sufficient and appropriate evidence to back up their argument.</td>
<td>Student provides compelling evidence to back up argument. Student also considers conflicting evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of Ideas</td>
<td>The presentation of ideas affects all other</td>
<td>Paper provides no thesis or argument. The paper has too little structure and too much writing</td>
<td>Student’s paper has a thesis, adequate</td>
<td>Paper has a clear thesis, is well organized and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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| categories. Student papers should have a clear thesis, be organized, and not have distracting grammatical errors. | argument is so poorly organized or contains so many writing errors that it is hard to follow. | errors. However these writing problems do not completely obscure the student’s points. | organization, and few writing errors. The student’s argument is not obscured by writing problems. | crisply written. Student’s points or arguments are clear. |