Introduction

The Department of Government is in a transition period with its assessment plans. In previous assessments, we focused on critical thinking learning goals and applying a writing rubric to student papers from upper division Government courses. We found that the rubric was difficult to apply because the writing samples were drawn from different courses and were seeking to evaluate different skills. For example, some papers asked students to analyze texts assigned in class while others asked students to formulate their own questions and find their own sources. We also had limited data about how far each student had progressed through the major, so we were evaluating both juniors who might be taking their first Government course along with students who were graduating seniors.

Although we found these assessments helpful in thinking about our major, we realized that we needed to rethink our assessment strategy. As part of our program review, the Department of Government conducted a focused inquiry of our major courses. We conducted a survey of faculty asking them to categorize their courses as basic, intermediate, advanced or graduate and what type of writing and reading they assigned. We found that our courses rely on increasingly difficult reading and writing assignments as students progress through the major—assuming that they take basic and intermediate courses before embarking on advanced courses. The results of the focused inquiry were helpful in getting us to think how we could rework our assessment plan over the next few years to better evaluate student learning. We decided to split the learning goals into three parts and choose writing assignments that fit those particular goals.

The Department of Government’s five learning goals are as follows:

1.) Information Acquisition - 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.

2.) Conceptual Thinking - 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

3.) Analysis of Relationships and Theories - The next step in the learning process is understanding how concepts and ideas relate to one another in the form of theories. Students should understand relevant theories and underlying assumptions.

4.) Application of Evidence – Students should be able to recognize and provide appropriate evidence to support theoretical claims and arguments.
5.) Presentation of Ideas - The presentation of ideas affects all other categories. Student papers should have a clear thesis, be organized, and not have distracting grammatical errors.

We have developed a three-year plan to assess these goals in a way that better matches skills to course content and writing assignments. We decided to break down these goals into three parts. The first part has to do with acquiring information (Goal 1) and is related to the Baccalaureate learning goal of information literacy. The second goal is Application of Evidence (Goal 4) and the third goals are Conceptual Thinking and Analysis of Relationships (Goals 2 and 3) and Theories. We consider Presentation of Ideas (Goal 5) to be necessary to achieve both Goal 4 and Goals 2 and 3 and so it will be considered with them.

The current assessment (2010-11) examined Information Acquisition. In the 2011-12 assessment, we plan to collect papers from students that ask students to apply evidence and make an argument. These papers will come from both our research methods course (Govt 100) and other courses where students are making evidence-based arguments. In the 2012-13 assessment, we plan to examine how well students can explain important concepts in political science and understand how these concepts relate to one another. We have decided to divide this assessment by subfield. This will allow faculty in each subfield to assess courses in that subfield.

Assessment of Information Acquisition

This year’s assessment is focused on Information Acquisition because we found this goal to be difficult to evaluate in previous assessments. Because faculty require students to use such different sources, it was difficult to compare different types of assignments. We also wanted to make this goal more consistent with the Baccalaureate learning goal of information literacy. Specifically, how well do students obtain information from outside of class to answer questions relevant to their courses? This requires students to use both Internet and non-internet sources, to be able to assess the quality of their sources, and to properly cite those sources. To assess this goal, we examined papers where the assignment required students to find sources from outside the course.

One of the purposes of this year’s focus on information literacy was to update our rubric and refocus our goal on the use of outside sources. In beginning this assessment, we noted that it had been over ten years since we wrote our original rubric. Obviously, how students access information has changed a great deal in the past ten years. We noted that our current students have never known a time where information wasn’t readily accessible to them. This has created both potential and challenges. It means students can more easily incorporate a wide variety of sources, but also they tend to rely on poor sources and plagiarism has become more of a problem. We realized that the current rubric needed to be updated.

The first step in this process was to survey faculty about the use of outside sources in their class. We asked faculty if they assigned papers that required outside sources, whether they gave them
any help in finding those sources and what policies they had regarding citation of the sources. We found that many faculty require students to do research outside of class. Some faculty gave advice in their paper prompt or during lecture about finding information. We also found that faculty had many different citation policies. Some faculty required a particular citation style, but there were many different styles used. Other faculty told their students to use any citation style, but to be consistent in its use. With this information we decided to examine two broad questions: 1.) what sources are students using in their papers?, and 2.) how are students citing those sources? These open-ended questions are intentionally used to help us develop a better rubric for this goal.

To answer these questions, the Government Department assessment committee surveyed 26 papers from six upper-division courses (Government 130 (5 papers), 145 (4 papers), 148 (5 papers), 165 (1 paper), 170 (10 papers) and 180 (1 paper)) to determine the quality and types of sources that were being used in assigned research papers. These papers came from a combination of advanced, intermediate, required and elective courses. Different courses had different requirements regarding both the types of sources to be used and the type of citation method. For example, papers from Government 130 required students to write a literature review from readings assigned from an edited reader and then conduct an independent case study analysis using their own sources. Despite the differences in requirements, our results provide us a better understanding of where our students are succeeding and where we can help them improve.

**Citation Styles**

Seventy-seven percent of the papers in the sample used either Chicago style parenthetical or Chicago style footnote citations (46.2 percent for parenthetical and 30.8 percent for footnotes). MLA-style parenthetical citations were used in 15.4 percent and Endnotes were used in 7.7 percent of the papers. Part of this outcome is due to at least two of the courses, Government 130 and Government 148, requiring the students to use Chicago style parenthetical citations. In Government 170, in which students could choose between footnote or parenthetical citations, 70 percent of papers chose a footnote or endnote citation method.

A major area of concern in our results is the number of papers that were unable to consistently use an appropriate citation method throughout their paper.¹ While 57.7 percent were able to do so, a full 42.3 percent were not. Some of the mistakes were minor, but they were deviations from the correct citation style nonetheless. Students who used footnotes or endnotes consistently used the correct format 50 percent of the time and students who used parenthetical citations used

¹ This does not mean that all citations within the paper were incorrectly done. Citations in these papers were not *consistently* correct. For example, citations may change styles or leave out key elements of the style at different points within the paper.
the correct format 62.5 percent of the time. Both Government 130 and Government 148 provided students with handouts on how to correctly do citations. Of the ten papers sampled for those classes, 60 percent correctly cited their sources consistently throughout the paper.

Overall our results show that while a majority of our students are able to correctly cite their sources in a research paper, there is still a substantial number that are unable to do so consistently. The number of papers in our sample is too small to make any conclusions as to whether one style of citation is more likely to be used correctly than the other. However, even in two classes that gave students handouts and explicitly discussed correct citation methods in class (Government 130 and 148), incorrect citation methods were used in 40 percent of the sampled papers.

Sources Used

Students did use a variety of sources in their papers and averaged 13 sources per paper. Table 1 breaks down the percentage of papers that used each type of source.

Table 1: Types of Sources Used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Source</th>
<th>Percentage of Papers that Used Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Assigned Reader</td>
<td>23.1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Reviewed Journal Article</td>
<td>57.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Published in Academic Press</td>
<td>26.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Published in Popular Press</td>
<td>19.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US or State Government Published Documents</td>
<td>34.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO or Think Tank Produced Documents</td>
<td>50.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper or News Magazine Articles</td>
<td>50.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Content Not Available in Print Form</td>
<td>34.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Lecture Notes</td>
<td>3.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergovernmental Organization Documents</td>
<td>0.0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most commonly used sources used by our students are peer reviewed journal articles (used in 57.7 percent of papers) followed by NGO or Think Tank produced documents and newspaper
or news magazine articles (50.0 percent). In general, sources from these categories are considered highly acceptable in most political science research. As we found in past assessments, many of our students are relying on high-quality sources for their research papers.

However, there are some important points of concern. First, some quality sources are being ignored and students are relying on some easily accessible but poor quality sources. Fewer than half of the papers used a published book and only 26.9 percent used a book published by an academic press. The types of sources that students are using are those that are typically available online. Sources from Websites in which the content does not have an equivalent print form were used in 34.6 percent of the sampled papers. This is in and of itself not a problem as more and more valuable content is available via digital sources. However, sources that were coded under this category tended to be from Websites put up by amateur hobbyists. Second, we also noted that many students often rely on secondary sources when the primary one is available. For example, they might cite a research paper described in a newspaper or weblog instead of accessing that research directly. Finally, although students are incorporating high-quality sources, the choice of those sources seems a little arbitrary. Instead of finding research or arguments that directly confront one another, students randomly include sources that fit their argument. This suggests that not all students are systematically locating sources, but including them as they come up in their searches.

Sadly, we should no longer assume that a student enrolled in one of our upper division courses will have previously used the library for research purposes. The problem that we are continually seeing is that the way in which students find sources is determined more by Google’s logarithms than a systematic and thoughtful research strategy.² With each successive generation of students having a fundamentally different relationship with information, it is important that we as a faculty update our teaching strategies to take these changes into account. When libraries were highly controlled and contained depositories of information it was easier for a student to assume that the sources they were using were acceptable. It is clear that we can no longer make those assumptions.

**Information Acquisition and Grading Rubric**

Another outcome from this process was that we gained a better understanding of the usefulness of our current rubric as it relates to our departmental goal of information acquisition. The rubric ² For example, a Google search on “School Vouchers,” a common research topic in Government 170, leads to the following collection of sites in this order: Wikipedia, a pro-voucher organization, an anti-voucher organization, an amateur Website called balancedpolitics, a Time magazine article, another amateur Website, a pro-voucher USA Today article, an anti-voucher organization, another amateur Website, and another anti-voucher Website. None of the top hits would be considered a high quality source.
we have used in the past was developed roughly ten years earlier and our goal for this study was to see how it held up against this current sample of papers.

Information acquisition in this rubric is described as:

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.

Inadequate performance on this measure is defined as:

Information does not address the topic. Student leaves out obvious sources of information available in the library or from class.

Needs Work/Shows Promise is defined as:

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.

Meet Requirements/Shows Competency is defined as:

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.

Excellent work is defined as:

Student uses a wide variety of sources to address the question. The student uses all available information from this and other classes.

However, when applying this rubric to the set of papers we found that only “Needs Work/Shows Promise” and “Meet Requirements/Shows Competency” were of use. 38.5 percent of our sample was coded as needs work/shows promise while 61.5 percent were coded as Meet Requirements/Show Competency. None of the papers in our sample were deemed to be inadequate or excellent. Part of the problem is the wording of the rubric. For example, for inadequate one of the criteria is “Information does not address the topic.” This is almost impossible for a student to achieve. While students may use terrible sources, they generally at least address the topic. On the other hand, the second criteria for inadequate is that the “student leaves out obvious sources of information available in the library or from class.” This criteria is too broad in the other direction and does not adequately define what is meant by leaving out obvious sources of information. What exactly would be considered an obvious source of information for an independent research project? The category “Needs Work/Shows Promise” does a better job at capturing these nuances. The same criticism can be used when evaluating
our measure of “Excellent” and “Meets Requirements/Shows Competency”. We address these issues in the next section.

The results from the rubric roughly mirror the results of whether students correctly cite—around 60 percent do it at an acceptable level and 40 percent are inadequate. Therefore, it is possible that our evaluation of this aspect of student writing may only need a dichotomous variable: either you cite and use sources correctly or you don’t.

**Actions we plan to take**

We found that our students generally do a good job of incorporating quality sources into their research paper, but too often rely on lower quality sources. Our students, therefore, need help in developing more systematic information gathering skills. We also found that some of our students were not properly citing their sources. We plan to address these issues with the following actions.

1.) We plan to talk to our faculty about agreeing on a common citation requirement for the students. We can see how students might be frustrated if they were required to write three papers in a semester with each having a different citation style required. This is somewhat a reflection of our discipline where citation styles differ somewhat between books and journals and across subfields. We plan to discuss with the faculty whether it is feasible to have common citation style and have a guide put up on our website.

2.) We will have a discussion among faculty about strategies used to help students research their papers and also to consider whether we should have students in one of our required courses attend a presentation from a librarian on research strategies.

3.) We will rewrite the Information Acquisition portion of our writing rubric to refocus the goal on outside research in political science. We also plan to reword the different categories to better reflect the variance we are seeing in the research papers and present an initial draft to the faculty for discussion. Before changing our rubric we want to discuss these issues with our entire faculty. However, our initial effort is the following:

*Goal:* Student is able to use information from the library and other outside sources to address a topic in political science. The student’s research should incorporate high quality sources that reflect the different perspectives that exist on the issue.

*Inadequate* – Student uses too few sources and/or relies too much on low-quality or secondary sources. The main support for the student’s argument is based on low-quality sources.

*Needs Work/Shows Promise* – Student uses some high quality sources, but the research does not consistently reflect the best sources available and/or too much of the paper’s main arguments are based on low quality sources.
Meet Requirements/Shows Competency – Student uses mostly high quality sources and the main parts of the argument are built on those sources.

Excellent Work – All sources are high quality sources and are successfully used to develop his or her argument.

A quick application of these proposed changes with our sample of papers shows better variance in our outcomes with some Meet Requirements papers moving into the Excellent Work category and some of those coded as Needs Work/Shows Promise moving to the inadequate category.

Conclusion

The 2010-2011 assessment identified a specific area of concern with the Government faculty that we also believed could have some actionable solutions. We also have developed a solid foundation for future assessments that, we believe, will enhance our department’s efforts to provide our students with the highest quality education available.