Summary of Written Communication PLO
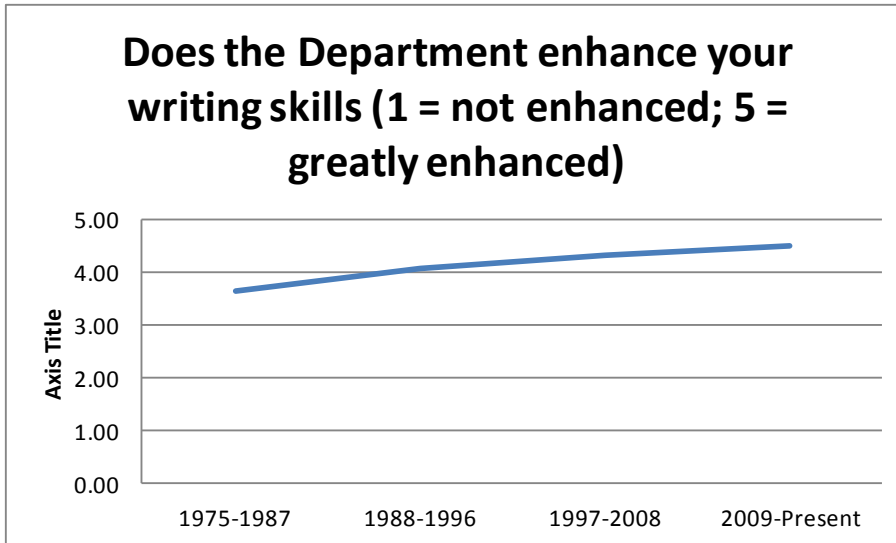Department of Political Science
2011-12

1. Assessment Method.

We used two assessment methods for written communications in the 2011-12 academic year. First, Dr. Covington applied a written communication value rubric designed by the AACU to evaluate nine papers from his POL 131: *Modern Political Theory* course. The Department then read and assessed four of these papers. Our intercoder reliability was quite high (80 percent). The value rubric had five categories: Context of & Purpose for Writing, Content Development, Genre and Disciplinary Conventions, Sources & Evidence, and Control of Syntax & Mechanics. Our goal was that students would average three or higher out of a four-point scale. The second assessment method was a survey of graduating seniors.

2. Findings.

The outcome of our assessment shows that students came close, but ultimately did not reach, our 3.0 goal: Context of & Purpose for Writing (2.9 mean), Content Development (2.6 mean), Genre and Disciplinary Conventions (2.8 mean), Sources & Evidence (2.8 mean), and Control of Syntax & Mechanics (2.8 mean). The Department then discussed the meaning of these results. First, we asked whether our expectations are too high and whether the rubric was an appropriate way to assess writing. In retrospect, setting an average of three on a four-point scale seems quite ambitious and rather arbitrary. Nevertheless, these results give us baseline data to compare future writers. Second, we discussed the relative weakness of content development. We all agree that students have difficulty developing their thoughts and supporting their work with logical or empirical evidence. Third, some members of the Department noted that the papers we read seemed of higher quality than papers we received in our own courses. Because we have just completed this assessment, we are still in the beginning stages of discussing these results and agreeing upon changes we should make in response. Nevertheless, we are beginning to share "best practices" that we could emulate in our courses.

Finally, we asked the graduating senior class of 2012 and alumni whether the Department enhanced their writing ability (on a scale from 1 = "not enhanced at all" to 5 = "greatly enhanced"). The graduating seniors gave us a 4.58 mean rating out of a possible 5 points. We are gratified to see that seniors rated us so high. Moreover, when you compare this to the 4.15 mean rating seniors gave the Department in 2007, it suggests that we are moving in the right direction.

Does the Department enhance your writing skills (1 = not enhanced; 5 = greatly enhanced)

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5.00
4.00
3.00   Axis Title
2.00
1.00
0.00
        1975-1987    1988-1996    1997-2008    2009-Present
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3. Effectiveness of our current assessment methods. We are satisfied with our current assessment methods and will continue both strategies.

4. Potential changes as the result of our assessment. We have made several changes in response to our assessment. These include:

- **Changes to the content of POL 40:** *Empirical Political Research*. Dr. Knecht has completely revamped POL 40. This course had traditional focused on quantitative methods; now, it includes sections on writing literature reviews, writing research papers, internal and external validity, experimental methods, and content analysis. In addition, students work in teams to conduct original research.
- **Require POL 40 early in major.** We have made POL 40 a requirement for most upper-division courses and now require students to take the course early in their academic careers. The goal is that students understand how to conduct research so we do not have to rehash the basics in upper division courses.
- **Modified research paper prompts.** Past assessment work has led us to modify our research paper prompts to be more explicit about expectations.
- **Increased resources.** As mentioned earlier, the Department is increasingly using the library as a valuable resource. Savannah Kelly, the departmental librarian, guest lectures in many of our courses and has helped us develop LibGuides, a one-stop site for research resources.
- **Guidelines.** The writing guidelines discussed earlier also feature suggestions on how to conduct meaningful research.