

REPORT on UNK GENERAL STUDIES ASSESSMENT PILOT
Social Science Category

Joan M. Blauwkamp – PSCI 110 – Spring 2014

At Daren Snider's request, I ran a pilot test of the social science assessment instrument in my two Spring 2014 sections of PSCI 110: Introduction to American Politics.

The students were given the assignment instructions provided below. The grading scale was out of 20 points, with 4 points allocated for each learning objective (see the assessment rubric). The essay assignment counted for 20% of the course grade.

86 essays were submitted. The median score was 4 for each objective except OBJ5, in which the median score was 0. (The full table of scores is at the end of this document.)

Discussion: The students clearly were capable of describing the selected concepts (OBJ2). They could explain why the concepts were important for understanding the behavior of political actors, such as members of Congress, presidents, political parties, or voters (OBJ3), and they could explain how the concepts were important for evaluating public-policy decisions and outcomes (OBJ4).

Moreover, they saw the value of including Political Science in a General Studies program (OBJ1); they did not think that these concepts were things that only Political Science majors needed to understand.

However, they did not understand how to discuss Political Science research on these concepts (OBJ5). Most students did not even mention the word "research" in their essays; instead, they concluded by reiterating that citizens needed to know about these concepts because they affect our lives and how we are governed. It seems to me that the problem might be with the fifth learning objective itself. It might be asking too much of one introductory-level course in any discipline to teach the students the basic concepts AND how research on those concepts is conducted. There are only so many weeks in the semester.

PSCI 110: Introduction to American Politics

Essay Instructions

Deadline: Start of class on Friday, April 11

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

At the conclusion of their Social Science course, students should be able to:

- 1) Articulate the relevance of the Social Science course to their general education.
- 2) Describe basic concepts and methods used in a social science discipline.
- 3) Demonstrate how basic concepts and methods from a social science discipline explain individual or group behavior.
- 4) Evaluate the connection between social science research and social or political policy.
- 5) Apply concepts and methods from a social science discipline to social science research.

The purpose of this assignment is to evaluate whether or not these learning objectives have been met. The basics of this assignment are common to all the General Studies Social Science courses taught at UNK.

BASIC ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS:

Write a short essay (500-750 words) in which you answer the following question: Why is it important for a generally-educated person to understand Political Science?

Contents of the essay:

- Begin with an introductory paragraph in which you briefly state your answer.
- In the body of your essay, develop and support your answer by focusing on a specific concept that you learned in this course (see list below):
 - Describe the concept – in your own words;
 - Demonstrate how it explains individual or group behavior (provide relevant evidence and cite your source/s);
 - Evaluate the implications of the concept for public policy – In other words, explain how/why the concept matters for what government does (give a specific example).
- Conclude your essay by summarizing how or why Political Science research on this concept benefits citizens in general.

CONCEPTS: Choose ONE of the following concepts as the focus of your essay:

- Federalism
- Checks and balances
- Constitutional right to privacy
- *De facto* discrimination
- Descriptive representation
- Ideological polarization in Congress
- Presidential power to persuade

SOURCES:

The primary source for your essay should be our course textbook. Use and cite the Barbour & Wright text for your definition of the concept, but you **MUST** write the explanation entirely in your own words – no quotations. The purpose is to demonstrate your own understanding of the concept and its relevance.

Additional supporting evidence or the illustrative example also may come from the Barbour & Wright text or from other credible sources, e.g., websites that we looked at in class. Links to those websites are available on Blackboard in the Resources section.

Be sure only to use information from credible sources: government documents, scholarly articles or books, news articles, and/or documents from non-profit policy research organizations. Wikipedia is not a credible source; neither is About.com or other such sites.

Cite all your sources (including the textbook) with embedded notes in the text of your essay and a References section at the end of your paper (use the heading **References**).

INSTRUCTIONS ON FORMAT AND WRITING:

Your essay must be 500 to 750 words, not including the References section. (Use the word count feature in Word to check.)

Write your paper in standard academic-essay format: an introduction, body, and conclusion. More specific instructions on the required contents of the essay are provided in the Basic Assignment Instructions section on page 1.

Give your paper an appropriate descriptive title that cues the reader to what your essay is about. Don't title it Essay or Essay #1.

Your paper must be typed in 10- to 12-point font and double-spaced. Use one-inch margins on all sides of the page; these margins allow plenty of room for comments without wasting paper.

The first page should include a heading with your name and the course and section numbers. A title page is unnecessary – conserve paper.

Proofread carefully and correct all errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage before you submit your paper for a grade.

Tips on the use of political terminology – Names of institutions and organizations should be capitalized. Capitalize Democrat and Republican, when you mean people with those party affiliations. Use US as the adjective when you are referring to the country or the federal government; you may use American to refer to a citizen of the US or to the public in general.

ASSESSMENT RUBRIC:

Learning Objective #1: Students can articulate the relevance of the Social Science course to their general education.				
Does not meet criteria (0)	Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Proficient (3)	Advanced (4)
Cannot articulate why the social science discipline is relevant.	<i>Limited</i> articulation of why the social science discipline is relevant.	Articulates <i>in general</i> why the social science discipline is relevant.	Articulates in <i>satisfactory detail</i> why the social science discipline is relevant.	Demonstrates a <i>thorough</i> understanding of the social science discipline and its relevance.
Learning Objective #2: Students can describe basic concepts/methods used in a social science discipline.				
Does not meet criteria (0)	Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Proficient (3)	Advanced (4)
Cannot describe a concept/method from the discipline.	Demonstrates a <i>limited</i> understanding of the selected concept/method.	Demonstrates a <i>basic</i> understanding of the selected concept/method.	Demonstrates a <i>satisfactory</i> understanding of the selected concept/method.	Demonstrates a <i>thorough</i> understanding of the selected concept/method.
Learning Objective #3: Students can demonstrate how basic concepts/methods from a social science discipline explain individual or group behavior.				
Does not meet criteria (0)	Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Proficient (3)	Advanced (4)
Cannot demonstrate how the selected concept/method explains behavior.	Provides a <i>limited</i> demonstration of how the selected concept/method explains behavior.	Provides a <i>basic</i> demonstration of how the selected concept/method explains behavior.	Provides a <i>satisfactory</i> demonstration of how the selected concept/method explains behavior.	Provides a <i>thorough</i> demonstration of how the selected concept/method explains behavior.
Learning Objective #4: Students can evaluate the connection between social science research and social or political policy.				
Does not meet criteria (0)	Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Proficient (3)	Advanced (4)
Does not evaluate the implications of the concept/method for public policy.	Provides a <i>limited</i> evaluation of the implications of the concept/method for public policy.	Provides a <i>basic</i> evaluation of the implications of the concept/method for public policy.	<i>Satisfactorily</i> evaluates the implications of the concept/method for public policy.	<i>Thoroughly</i> evaluates the implications of the concept/method for public policy.
Learning Objective #5: Students can apply concepts and methods from a social science discipline to social science research.				
Does not meet criteria (0)	Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Proficient (3)	Advanced (4)
Does not discuss research.	Demonstrates a <i>limited</i> understanding of the selected research.	Demonstrates a <i>basic</i> understanding of the selected research.	Demonstrates a <i>satisfactory</i> understanding of the selected research.	Demonstrates a <i>thorough</i> understanding of the selected research.

SCORES FOR EACH STUDENT/ESSAY:

OBJ1	OBJ2	OBJ3	OBJ4	OBJ5	TOTAL
4	4	4	3	0	15
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	0	16
3	3	4	3	0	13
4	2	3	2	0	11
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	3	4	4	0	15
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	2	3	17
4	3	4	3	2	16
4	3	4	4	0	15
4	3	4	4	0	15
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	3	4	3	0	14
4	3	3	4	0	14
4	4	4	3	0	15
4	3	4	3	2	16
4	2	2	2	0	10
4	4	3	4	0	15
4	4	4	4	3	19
4	4	4	3	0	15
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	3	4	4	0	15
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	3	4	4	0	15
4	3	3	3	1	14
1	3	3	2	0	9
4	4	4	3	3	18
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	3	0	15
1	2	3	3	0	9
4	3	4	3	3	17
4	4	4	4	2	18
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	3	0	15
4	4	4	4	1	17
4	3	4	3	1	15

4	4	4	4	2	18
4	4	4	3	0	15
4	4	4	2	0	14
4	4	4	2	0	14
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	1	17
4	4	4	3	0	15
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	3	4	3	0	14
4	2	1	1	0	8
4	4	4	3	0	15
4	0	0	0	0	4
4	4	4	4	2	18
4	4	3	3	0	14
4	3	4	3	0	14
4	2	3	3	0	12
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	3	19
4	4	3	3	0	14
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	3	4	3	1	15
3	4	4	3	0	14
4	4	3	4	3	18
4	4	3	4	0	15
4	3	4	4	0	15
4	3	3	4	0	14
4	3	4	3	2	16
4	4	3	4	0	15
4	3	4	3	0	14
4	3	4	4	0	15
4	4	4	3	0	15
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	3	3	3	0	13
4	4	4	4	0	16
4	4	3	4	0	15
4	4	4	4	0	16

4	3	3	3	0	13
4	3	4	3	1	15
4	3	4	3	0	14
4	4	4	4	2	18
4	4	4	3	3	18
4	4	3	4	2	17
4	4	4	4	0	15

The bottom row (in bold below table) indicates the median score for each column.