Program Level Assessment Report for 2012-2013

PROGRAM NAME, DEGREE NAME: M.A. Program in International and Comparative Politics

COLLEGE in which PROGRAM is housed: CoLA

REPORT PREPARED by: Laura Luehrmann, Graduate Program Director

A. ACTIONS TAKEN TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING

What actions did you take in 2012-2013, based on previous assessment findings, to improve student learning in your program? (Refer back to plans indicated in “Response to Assessment Findings” in 2011-2012 Assessment Report.)

We have continued the alignment of our courses in the program core (PLS 7030, PLS 7200 and PLS 7300) since the semester transition, in order to present a more seamless progression of coursework that adequately represents the most recent research in the field. Significant changes in PLS 7300, now the “Theories of Comparative Politics” course, reflect the change from what used to be a thematic seminar. Program faculty have also developed an “in-house” statistics course, PLS 7010, to develop greater continuity in our methodological training of all students.

The program director spent considerable time on outreach during this past assessment period, submitting a wholly redesigned webpage in line with the new CoLA webpage, updating the WSU ICP Alum page on Facebook (a page that is not limited to alums of the program and has shown potential for recruitment), and launching a new presence on Twitter (@WrightState_ICP). This outreach enhances the program’s ability to connect with current, future and past students, and helps us promote greater awareness of our M.A. program.

Our orientation program continues to grow in depth and breadth, and a major theme of this program has become strategies to move from courses to thesis more efficiently. We believe that this programming, which has been a consistent focus of the ICP program, is beginning to bear fruit, as we had some of our largest graduating classes ever in 2012-2013.

B. STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSED AND EXAMINED

Which Program Level Student Learning Outcomes did you assess and examine during 2012-2013? List the Program Level Student Learning Outcomes using the format of “Graduates will be able to _______________________.

This year, our efforts were focused on 2 of the learning outcomes of our program:

“Students will have a solid understanding of the knowledge of their chosen specialty within international relations or comparative politics, with an understanding of the literature that has been developed around their topic of inquiry and the methodologies used to examine it;”

“Students will have effective communication skills, both oral and written.”

C. METHODS FOR COLLECTING DATA

Which students were included in the assessment? (For example, all seniors completing Course X in Spring 2013, all graduating seniors, etc.)

For the exit interviews, students graduating between June 30, 2012 and July 1, 2013 were targeted; for the alumni surveys, students who graduated between 2009 and 2012 were included.

D. ASSESSMENT MEASURES

- What key assessments/assignments/student work did you examine to directly assess the Program Level Student Learning Outcomes listed above?

- What, if any, indirect assessments (e.g. exit survey, alumni survey, focus groups, etc.) did you use to indirectly assess the Program Level Student Learning Outcomes listed above?

The program director conducted a review of all theses and projects completed during the assessment period as
examples of key student work to directly assess the learning outcomes above, especially the “solid understanding” and “understanding of the literature” measures.

For indirect assessments, the program director conducted exit interviews with students who graduated during the assessment period and also distributed an alumni survey of grads since 2009.

E. SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS
What did you find from your assessments? What did your data reveal about how well students are achieving the Program Level Student Learning Outcomes that you listed above?

The director notes significant improvement in the structure, content and theoretical approaches applied in ICP theses and projects. For the past two years, faculty in two of the core seminars have been promoting the practice of writing academic literature reviews, and the quality of the literature reviews within theses and projects is improving. Students have also been more active in presenting their research findings at conferences, including the International Studies Association-Midwest Annual Conference, as well as the Wright State Celebration of Research, Scholarship and Creative Activities, which we take as a measure of not only “solid understanding of their chosen specialty” but also “effective communication skills, both oral and written.”

Findings from the exit interviews and alum survey highlight high levels of satisfaction with skills developed in the program, especially noting research and writing skills as well as critical thinking. When students were asked what aspects of the program they valued the most, they highlighted the core seminars, opportunities to present at conferences, and the emphasis on thesis writing. Suggested improvements that were highlighted within the alum survey included the desire for more core seminars that were limited to graduate students only – suggesting that we seek interdisciplinary opportunities with other departments to offer more grad-only courses even across multiple fields, a special class dedicated to seminar writing, and more emphasis on security studies as a field. Some concerns raised are beyond the scope of the program, i.e. difficulties raising children while in graduate school, supporting a spouse, etc. Other concerns, including difficulties narrowing a thesis topic and the challenges of writing in isolation, will be taken under advisement for possible program responses. A number of students also expressed either the value of having pursued internships or other “real life” experiences during the course of their graduate program, or expressed the desire to have done so, along with concerns about whether or not they were truly prepared to enter a competitive job market in this field (a concern especially raised by students who want to stay within the Dayton region).

F. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS
How were results shared? With whom were they discussed?

These results will be discussed at the ICP Program Committee meeting of all Political Science Faculty contributing to the ICP Program, in February 2014.

G. ACTIONS PLANNED TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING
Based on what you learned from your assessment of the Program Level Student Learning Outcomes, what actions do the faculty in your program plan to take to improve student learning in your program/area? Describe the steps faculty have taken/will take to use information from the assessments for improvement of student performance and the program. List additional faculty meetings or discussions and planned or actual changes to curriculum, teaching methods, approaches, or services that are in response to the assessment findings.

Based on these findings, we plan to pursue the following actions:

- Continue to strongly encourage students to begin the program fall semester with a workable thesis topic already in mind so that students can use the core seminars to begin working on their research design and literature review and transition from classes to writing with greater ease;
- Strongly encourage (and possibly require) all first year students to submit an abstract to and present at the WSU Annual Celebration of Research and Scholarly Activities each spring, as well as continuing to encourage and financially support student presentations at academic conferences;
• Further develop the “thesis writing workshop” that takes place each spring semester to highlight some of the best practices of students who have completed in a timely manner and provide suggested work strategies to help limit the challenges of writers’ isolation, including working with CTL to connect thesis writers to the “writing bootcamp” programs for faculty and graduate students;
• Continue a focus on career development, including the promotion of internships as early as possible within the program (during Fall 2013, two of our current graduate students received paid internships from the Defense Institute for Security and Management, DISAM), as well as closer partnering with WSU’s Office of Career Services.

H. SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS (recommended)
Please attach minutes of program faculty meeting where discussion of results and action planning occurred and any other relevant documents.