

## **UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES):**

### **Political Science**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Research on learning in college shows that learning is profoundly shaped by the goals, practices, cultures, and values of the academic disciplines<sup>1</sup>, particularly the disciplinary practices in students' majors. Therefore, if we are to understand the kinds of experiences that students find intellectually rigorous (and, thus, engaging), we need to examine challenge in the major. Understanding challenge in the major is important because at every stage of their college experience, students report that they want to be challenged, that they perform better in courses that are challenging, and that they value classes that stretch their thinking and ask them to demonstrate learning more than they value classes that ask little of them.<sup>2</sup> Although learning about where students experience challenge is important, asking students to describe challenging learning experiences in their majors requires some prior understanding of how those majors operate. The Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) designed the UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES) to accommodate these needs.

### **METHOD**

Qualitative methods are recommended when researchers are seeking to understand the complex learning experiences of students, as well as the meaning of those experiences<sup>3</sup>; therefore, we designed the UW ACES to be primarily an interview study.<sup>4</sup> Using a "citizen science" model, OEA asked departmental advisers if they would be willing to volunteer to interview seniors in their departments who came in to advising to apply for graduation. Advisers are knowledgeable about their academic programs, understand disciplinary practice in their departments, and are trusted by students in the major, so they have the best chance of gathering good information from seniors about their experiences in the major.

Sixty-six advisers from 32 undergraduate programs volunteered to participate. During the 2012-13 academic year, the volunteer advisers asked students if they would participate in brief (5-10 minute) interviews about challenge in the major. If the students agreed, advisers asked students to respond to four open-ended questions, entering students' responses directly into a Catalyst survey form that OEA researchers had designed for that purpose. The questions were as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Beecher & Trowler, 2001; Bransford et al., 2000; Beyer et al., 2007; Donald, 2002; Pace and Middendorf, 2004; Wineburg, 2001, 1991; Neumann et al., 2002; Shulman, 1988; Biglan, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Beyer, et al., 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Merriam, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> One participating department asked students to respond to the open-ended questions in writing.

1. What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.
2. What made the project/class/activity challenging?
3. What did you do or learn that enabled you to meet those challenges?
4. What do you think you learned by completing this project/class/activity?

In addition, advisers asked students in what course the challenging work took place and how many quarters they had until they graduated.

Researchers in OEA conducted training workshops in interviewing skills with all participating advisers, provided individual departments with customization if required, and monitored all resulting interviews, reporting back to advisers about the interviews they had conducted. By the end of the academic year, departmental advisers had interviewed 1,237 students.

Students' responses were analyzed using a constant comparison method, an inductive process designed to let themes emerge, rather than imposing assumed categories of response on students' comments.

## **STUDY LIMITATIONS**

If we interviewed students post-graduation, they would be likely to identify their capstone courses or their advanced senior-level courses as the ones asking for their most challenging work. However, because we wanted to attach the interview to a time when students would normally see their academic advisers, we interviewed students when they came into the advising office to apply for graduation, which often meant that they were two or three quarters away from graduation. Although this approach meant that we might not gather information about late-senior year courses, we felt that it would be interesting to departments to learn the kinds of challenges that lead to and prepare students for those more advanced experiences.

## **POLITICAL SCIENCE RESULTS**

The Political Science Department was one of the UW ACES' participating departments. Academic advisers in Political Science interviewed 117 students applying for graduation. This number represents about 28% of the Political Science seniors who graduated during the 2012-2013 school year.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge***

Most of the students (51%) interviewed had two quarters left before they graduated. About 26% had one quarter left; 20% had three quarters left; and 3% had four quarters to complete before graduation.

When asked which courses in the major had presented them with the greatest challenges, students listed a total of 50 courses in the major and four outside the major. Those four were HUM 498, JSIS A 465, JSIS 478D, and LSJ 425. In terms of the Political Science courses, nine (18%) were 200-level classes; 28 (56%) were 300-level courses; and 13 (26%) were 400-level courses. This spread suggests that

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<sup>5</sup> The number of undergraduate degree completions is based on the 2012-13 UW Profiles reports published by the UW Office of Planning and Budgeting.

students experience challenges across the entire political science curriculum. That so many more 300-level courses than 400-courses were mentioned likely speaks to where interviewees were in their academic programs—with 23% having a full academic year to complete.

The list of Political Science courses and the number of students who mentioned them (number given in parentheses if more than one student mentioned the course) were as follows:

POL S 201 (mentioned by 6 students)	POL S 249
POL S 202	POL S 270 (4)
POL S 203 (4)	POL S 273 (3)
POL S 212	POL S 299
POL S 246	
POL S 301 (2, with one identifying the class as Free Will: Nature vs. Nurture and the other as Theories of Liberalism)	POL S 334 (6)
POL S 306	POL S 335 (6, one student each specifying Poverty and Hunger in the Global Food System, History of Political Economy, and as taught by Stephen Hamberg)
POL S 307 (3)	
POL S 310	POL S 343
POL S 311	POL S 348
POL S 313	POL S 353 (4)
POL S 316	POL S 355
POL S 318	POL S 360 (5)
POL S 319	POL S 361 (4)
POL S 320 (2)	POL S 363
POL S 321 (3)	POL S 367 (2)
POL S 325 (2)	POL S 368 (7)
POL S 326 (2)	POL S 382 (2)
POL S 327 (3)	POL S 384 (2)
POL S 330 (2)	
POL S 403 (2, with one student identifying the class as special topics on NGOs)	POL S 448
POL S 405 (5, with one identifying the class as Institutional Failure and another as Violence and Counterviolence)	POL S 464
POL S 407 (6)	POL S 488 and 489
POL S 413	POL S 495 (2, with one identifying the class as Quebec Politics and the other as Societal Modernism and the Transformation of Democracy)
POL S 427 (2)	POL S 496
POL S 442	POL S 499 (2)
POL S 447 (2, with one identifying the class as International Political Economy of the Drug Trade and the other as Electoral Systems)	

In addition to mentioning specific courses, students sometimes spoke broadly of more than one course, as these six students did:

- “300 and 400 level courses, but it’s more about the teachers and not specific courses”
- “Mostly in GEOG courses”
- “All POL S classes were challenging, I don’t want to rank the classes. They all had their strengths and minuses.”
- “Multiple courses”
- “Intro courses, big lectures”
- “POL S theory courses (2)”

### **1. Students’ Greatest Challenges**

Students were asked: *“What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by “challenging” I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.”*

In speaking about their most challenging work, the 117 interviewees mentioned 147 challenges, and often they were linked. Two major themes and two minor themes emerged from students’ responses to this question.

**Specific courses.** A major category of response, given by 54 (46%) of the interviewees, was that a specific course or courses in the major had presented students with their greatest challenge. For example:

- *Nothing specific, but working with certain professors was challenging because they brought up tough subjects in their classes. So it's more certain classes, not specific assignments. For example, the Institutional Failure class [Pol Sci 405A] with Professor Thorpe, which was really good.*
- *International Human Rights class with Jamie Mayerfeld was challenging because all of the problems have really complicated solutions.*
- *360 or 361. Courts and Law. Race and law as well—reading a book, The Racial Contract [by C.W. Mills]. Thinking of a social contract as a racial one, and challenging notions of the constitution.*
- *Pol S 413 Contemporary Political Theory with Professor Di Stefano.*
- *I would say political economy, the politics of economics and how it has developed over time. The history is interesting. It was completely new.*

**A paper, the writing in a class or in the major.** The second major theme, also mentioned by 54 (46%) of the interviewees concerned writing. This group of students spoke about the challenge presented by a specific paper assigned in class, the writing required in a class in general, or the writing required in the major. Frequently, the papers students described as challenging required research. The following student quotations are examples of this category of response

- *I think it was research papers that required the completion of an original thesis.*

- *The final research paper connecting real life international conflict with the curriculum in the course.*
- *A couple of research papers. We had to apply what we learned in class and be able to use broad thinking to research—to think of every angle and have complete research and provide a good argument. These have been the most intense and valuable projects.*
- *Writing papers on dense material that forces critical thinking on subjects that I might not clearly understand but was forced to sift through, as if I was an expert on it. Having to analyze it.*
- *[The professor was a] tough grader. I expected tough grading so I had to write really really well.*
- *[In my] current class, I have to read a lot and write short summaries. Normal Political Science classes require lengthy papers. In this class it's not enough to just understand; you also have to make it clear and write concisely. It's a helpful skill.*
- *The 20 page paper about electoral systems, in a joint course with SIS. The challenging part was getting a topic, getting data, finding a thesis, then constructing 20 pages. I went through 5-6 topics, all shot down, before I got the one I could do. Doing that took a good week off my life.*
- *In international conflict class, I had to write a paper that explained the beginning of an international conflict, use two explanations, and use counterfactuals—use two arguments in one paper. I enjoyed that essay and learned a lot from it. It was a satisfying paper to write.*
- *In 407, a paper about nuclear conflict and the Cold War. I enjoyed it. It was the final paper and I had a lot of fun doing research on the strategic use of nuclear weapons, if it will happen, why, how, at what point is it justifiable.*

**A class assignment other than writing.** A minor theme in students' responses, provided by nine (8%) of the interviewees, was that they found a particular class assignment—other than a paper—significantly challenging. Four of those nine students described the congressional simulation in Pol Sci 353 as especially challenging. For example:

- *The US Congress class. Mock congress, working on a committee, learning what it was like working in congress.*
- *US Congress class by Wilkerson. He did a good job of making it active. The challenge was that the class was fully interactive. We were a mock senate so the quarter's project was to be a state senator and to represent your state.*

Three of the nine students mentioning assignments other than writing spoke about giving presentations, as these two examples illustrate:

- *Doing presentations in classes because I had to be prepared to present and answer questions. Also, the presentations are a combination of a lot of different things (writing, speaking, etc.), and that makes them challenging.*

- *I would say that the Pol S 405 class, where we've been doing presentations. I did one about the Rodney King riots. We are studying how violence against an individual can be interpreted as violence against a group. I think this is an interesting perspective to take.*

**Assigned readings.** Another minor theme, raised by seven (6%) of the interviewees, was the challenge of understanding, interpreting, and using assigned readings. In the words of two of those students:

- *Readings for many courses.*
- *Paperwork, because English is my second language. I understand the context and resources needed for paperwork, but I'm not very good at interpreting, making it in my own words. Pol S 201—I thought it would be easy because of the course number, but it was challenging—reading Socrates, Plato, and writing about human nature.*

**Other.** In addition to these major and minor themes, more than two students mentioned the following as significant challenges in their learning in the major:

- Group projects (5 students)
- Exams (5)
- Learning about and applying theory (3)
- Economics-heavy courses (2)
- The topic of the course (2)

## **2. What Made Those Activities/Classes Challenging?**

Next, students were asked to note what it was about the activity or the class they had described that made it especially challenging. Most of the Political Science students interviewed—76 (65%)—identified more than one aspect of the activity or class they had mentioned that made it challenging. Four strong themes emerged from students' responses, all of them related to the writing required in the major. In addition, six minor themes could be identified from students' responses

**The writing required.** The challenge mentioned most frequently was the writing that a course, a project, or the major required. Twenty-nine (25%) of the students interviewed identified writing or aspects of writing as what made the activity or course they had described particularly challenging. Although students' comments about the challenge of writing in the Political Science major were varied, some common threads ran through them. And, as noted previously, all three of the other strong themes that emerged from students' responses to this question were frequently related to the challenge of writing in the major. For example, students often spoke of the difficulty they had in understanding the reading upon which their writing was based, the challenge of integrating multiple perspectives into their writing, and the challenge of coming up with their own arguments for papers they were writing. Students also said that they were not fully prepared for the kinds of writing they had to complete in the major.

The following quotations clarify and illustrate this category of response:

- *In high school, I had to write and I thought I knew how to write. In high school, I earned 5's on all my AP exams. When I got to college, I learned I don't know how to write. It's different to write for a major.*

- *Short assignments from the readings. We had to come up with our own connections. It was short, but it was tough to put my ideas down in such a short space and to be concise.*
- *Writing assignments where we had to compare different authors and understand the differences in each one's argument [were what made it challenging].*
- *A paper I had to write comparing legal systems. I had to go through a lot of legal documents, a lot of interpretation, looking at case law. It wasn't super exciting and had difficult concepts to grapple with. I had to understand how the French legal system worked, which was hard, and had to compare similar cases in freedom and personal liberty and how the system changed as a result. Also, I had to consider demographic effects. Also, I compared the French system to other legal systems.*
- *A chunky research assignment, a 30-page paper. The goal was to apply all the theories and concepts from the course to a real world scenario through writing an economic policy plan for a specific country. It was all encompassing.*
- *My political theory classes and how to write papers. I remember the first political theory class, Pol S 201. I had a hard time with it but then got the hang of it and enjoyed it and then took more because I enjoyed it so much. [We were] reading things in a different way than for other classes and learning to write in a different way.*
- *The one that helped the most was human rights. It made me connect materials from my other Political Science classes together. The paper we did where we had to focus on an aspect of a human rights injustice allowed me to apply what I learned in class to real world issues that I had to learn about on my own.*

**Taking differing perspectives into account.** A second major theme that emerged from students' responses to what made their most challenging work in the major challenging concerned understanding and using a range of perspectives on a topic or issue. About 24% of the Political Science seniors who were interviewed noted this challenge. This group included students who said that including perspectives different from their own or from what they considered to be mainstream was challenging. This response is related to the previous challenge, in that the writing required in the major often asked students to include a range of perspectives. However, students also spoke of taking differing perspectives into account as a challenging aspect of their learning in class and in the thinking or reading they did outside class but related to it. The following quotations illustrate this category of response:

- *In a field like Political Science you are given so many different perspectives and so to formulate your own you have to understand what others are saying, and then you have to come up with synthesis on own.*
- *Coming from an Arab background, it was new to get exposed to a different perspective on that conflict that I wasn't aware of before.*
- *I had to think about different ways the law was used, to see both sides. It was not as black and white as I thought.*
- *We get established in how we view the world, [but we see it] through different lenses. Being exposed to many varied perspectives was good.*

- *[It was challenging because I had to] argue two viewpoints instead of picking a side. Having to balance. Looking at pros and cons of each viewpoint.*
- *Thinking about religion in an economic way [was challenging].*
- *Acknowledging that anything that Bush might have done was good, acknowledging that the other side was right in some ways [was challenging].*

**The amount and types of reading required.** The third most-frequently mentioned challenge, noted by 22% of the Political Science seniors interviewed for the UW ACES, centered on the course readings. Often, students spoke about having difficulty understanding the required reading on its own, and just as often students spoke about the challenge of understanding the reading well enough to write about it. In addition, students sometimes spoke about the type of reading assigned as being challenging. Some examples:

- *Reading things in a different way than for other classes and learning to write in a different way [was challenging].*
- *Material that they want you to analyze like a piece of the Constitution or a certain book [was challenging].*
- *The urban politics class, being able to grasp the readings in the class and relate concepts.*
- *[The most challenging aspect of the course was that] the readings were ideologically one-sided.*
- *We had pretty heavy readings: a lot of readings and most were dense readings.*
- *Challenging reading. We had to work with ideas from different writers like Foucault and Orwell.*
- *Learning to read case summaries and briefs of the justices' opinions [was challenging]. That's not something you encounter in most readings. It was very interesting and informative.*
- *The reading load or the sometimes the reading itself wasn't very clear. You have to kind of keep reading and thinking about the questions raised to find out the point.*
- *The reading was difficult. It was long but also it was a higher level of reading. These were new concepts to me as well.*
- *There was a lot of reading and writing. You had to do the reading before class. He would ask questions about it. He would know if you didn't read it. We had to read close to 50-60 pages for every class.*

**Coming up with and conveying their own questions and arguments for projects and papers.** The fourth strong theme in students' responses to what was challenging about their most challenging work in the major centered on students' having to come up with their own arguments. One out of five (21%) of the interviewees said that coming up with their own topics and arguments was the most challenging work they had done in the major. Often this challenge included researching those topics with little guidance. The following quotations serve as examples for this category of response.

- *We weren't given a clear topic. We had to research our own question and get it approved. The paper counted for 15% of the grade*

- *For a class I'm taking now. It's a seminar, so we are supposed to create a 15-page research paper based on a question we propose ourselves. This is the only class [I've taken] with a quarter-long project that wasn't given a prompt, so it will be 100% my own work. I'm not answering an instructor's question, but answering my own question.*
- *This makes me accountable. There are assignments to make, sure, on top of [this paper], but it boils down to me and my own initiative. And this is the biggest research paper I have done, which makes it challenging.*
- *Kind of the lack of guidelines [was challenging]. We could make our decisions based on whatever demographic or statistic spoke to us. Not every example or issue will be the same for each student. It was freeing in a way, but also challenging. When there are specific guidelines you are contained within the framework that the professor provided for you. [In this one] we had more freedom of thought, and that allowed us to create our own argument.*
- *The research projects and papers when beginning to take Political Science classes were most challenging. In high school, we were told where to find sources. At the UW, the UW libraries and world catalogue of resources meant that we had hundreds of thousands of writings on different topics, and you get to pick and choose which sources to use, which opinions draw from, how to customize and formulate your own opinion based on a given topic.*

**New to the topic or way of thinking.** In addition to these four major themes in students' responses to this question, students noted that being unfamiliar with the topic or way of thinking in the course or project caused it to be particularly challenging. About 15% of the interviewees noted this challenge. In the words of four of them:

- *[I had] next to no information or opinion on the topic going in.*
- *There are just things that I never would have thought about before.*
- *This was just something I never considered before. If you think about the construction of the legal state [and how] that can define identities, then you can see these riots as riots or as an insurrection against white hegemony. The racial power relationships created by the state is something I've never considered before.*
- *The subject matter didn't click. I enjoy political theory. I like American and comparative politics. But international relations was outside my comfort zone.*

**The theories, models, and concepts.** Fourteen percent of the students interviewed focused on content, noting that the theories, models, and concepts they were being asked to learn were challenging in themselves. Students who gave this response also often spoke of the challenging nature of the writing. The following four examples illustrate this category of response:

- *Vocabulary was the most challenging. There were terms and theories that were very complex, and the professor helped us work through them.*
- *These were new concepts, economics-based concepts—how the economy has shaped politics.*

- *The philosophical part of it was challenging—having to think without specific examples to relate to in that sense. It’s harder to work without specific examples like the EU or American politics, but theory is very imaginative. You had to create something from nothing. With the way it was taught, there was a lot of thinking.*

**Course content was unique in the discipline.** About 12% of the respondents said that the uniqueness of the course content was what made the course or project they described challenging. This response was related to the response students gave about being new to the topic. In this case, however, students felt that they knew what Political Science was but were surprised that it also included these aspects, which were often non-political entities, such as economics, ancient philosophy, or religion. In the words of three of those students:

- *We had to come up with a lot of non- or low-state involvement to solutions to problems, issues, etc. Usually Political Science is very much focused on state solutions to issues and problems. Looking at private entities solving problems or thinking about how states do not have to take a role at all [was challenging].*
- *It’s hard to interpret the thinking of older/ancient scholars/philosophers.*
- *The rationality of religion was interesting and one of the most different things I've studied.*

**Application of concepts to “the real world” or life.** Twelve percent of the students also noted that applying Political Science to the world outside academia was challenging. For example:

- *Looking at different constitutions and finding where violated specific human rights. We talked about Guantanamo Bay and violations and taking out the alien tort stature. We learned how constitutions will say something is a violation of human rights, but so many countries will violate them even though it's in their constitution.*
- *How you can take something like food and apply political economics to it—the application of a field and what you can do with it [is what made the course challenging].*
- *The class was not as theoretical as other Political Science classes are. You immediately can see how politics affects the average person.*

**The research process.** About 11% of the students said that the research process was what made their work challenging in the major. Many of these students said that it was difficult to find the best resources, and most of the students who gave this response were speaking of research for the writing they had to do in their Political Science courses. The comments of two students illustrate this category of response:

- *It was tough to not get set into one mindset or approach to research but to look at every aspect and apply various theories or explanations that we went over in class.*
- *[It was challenging] to look through sources because didn't know what were good and bad sources. Sometimes I used not as good ones and had to learn which were okay and which were really good.*

**The in-class engagement/interaction required.** Eleven percent of the respondents said that the requirement of class interaction and participation was what made their most challenging experience

(usually a class) challenging. Their sense of why this aspect of the major was challenging was varied. In the words of five of them:

- *Aside from second language issues, the discussion environment was challenging because [there is] no discussion environment in my home country. I am more used to lecturing.*
- *It felt like there was a lot of accountability in the sections, but I felt that I learned the most in that class. I put more effort in that class.*
- *Instead of reading out of a book, it made it more challenging. It was more hands-on learning, more so than in previous classes in the major. I could learn about legislative processes, but he wanted us to pass legislation, so you had to really know processes instead of simply memorizing them.*
- *In simulation, you're up against the other 100 kids in the class, potentially. You have to try to think how they would think and then react to that or avoid what you think they would react against. It's a live person that you were against, so couldn't predict their behavior.*
- *Another instructor challenged my way of thinking more than any professor anywhere. We were consistently challenged to think. She would ask questions and wouldn't allow students to remain mute—encouraging participation. She wouldn't let us off hook easily when we did answer, but she would continue to challenge and not just accept the answer [we gave]. She consistently challenged me to expand my way of thinking.*

**Other.** In addition to these responses more than one student identified the following areas of challenge:

- Style of instruction (7 students)
- Need to come to consensus and/or work with other students (5)
- Giving presentations (4)
- Difficulty with English/not a native English speaker (2)
- Applying concepts to hypothetical events (2)

### **3. What enabled or helped students meet those challenges?**

Most students noted more than one person or practice that helped them accomplish challenging work. Eight themes emerged from their answers to this question, five of them very strong, offered by 17-34% of all students interviewed. Three of those themes were somewhat weaker, each one offered by 9% of the interviewees.

**The instructors.** The most frequently given response to the question of what enabled or helped students meet the challenges they had described were the course instructors. Altogether, about 37% of the 117 seniors interviewed spoke of their instructors as having helped them. Nearly one in four of all the Political Science majors interviewed said that their professors had helped them, and about 15% said their TAs had helped them meet the challenges they described. In the words of five of those students:

- *The TAs have been helpful in getting small group discussions started in section and the professor bringing it all together [helped me meet the challenge].*

- *The lectures were fantastic. [I was] more engaged because of material and because of the contemporary nature of it, so it was easier to sit down and read. Lectures really helped me get through parts that were new and why it was so cool. I grew to love it.*
- *I spent a lot time at my professor's office hours. We talked about the paper. He knew that most students had not written a paper like that and he helped me expand my ideas. I went to office hours just to ask questions. I like longer discussions in general. He knew how to make me understand things differently. He explains things wells from the other perspective.*
- *I had to go talk to the TA a lot during office hours and try to have her help as far as she could. Emailing her and going to office hours [helped me meet the challenge].*
- *The TAs really help in sections. They go over the material and always tell us to ask them questions. Or they push us to discuss questions that they might have in mind but we didn't ask. In my current class, it doesn't have quiz sections. The professor knows that, so she sets time for small groups or tells us to talk to the person next us in class. She also opens up time for questions in lecture.*

**My efforts in the class.** A second strong theme that emerged from students' responses was that their work in the class helped them meet the challenges they had described. About 34% of the interviewees mentioned ways the class and their work in it helped them, including attending lectures, taking good notes, and completing readings and other assignments. Students' responses often focused heavily on careful and critical completion of the readings assigned. The following five quotations illustrate this category of response.

- *I learned that I had to buckle down, do all the readings and take lots of notes to make it sink in more.*
- *I met with my peers to talk about readings and put time into the course. I took the time to do close reading and critical analysis.*
- *I had to put in extra time into doing the readings, and I worked with a group. Usually, we don't study together for Political Science courses. Overall, a lot of us were feeling overwhelmed in figuring out how to apply what we learned, so we formed groups.*
- *Reading. No way could you BS way through subjects. It was clear whether you did the reading or not, so I put my best effort forward by showing up to class every day, preparing for class every day, showing up with something to say, reflecting on the material in my own time to make sure that I was up to par in class discussions, especially in that class. I felt I was expected to participate. It wasn't pressure, but felt like if didn't participate then I'd be letting her down. Reflecting on material means internalizing it and applying to my own life, so it's not just an abstract subject in a textbook.*
- *For the human rights class I learned that I need to be on top of the readings and that I need to come in with open mind. For the international relations class I managed to meet the challenge because the professor provided good guidance for the writing assignment.*

**Feedback and focus on the writing.** More than one in five (21%) of the interviewees spoke of actively working on writing and help they received from others to meet the challenges that writing assignments in the major presented. They spoke of getting feedback from professors and TAs on drafts, of practicing

and revising, of going to the Political Science writing center for help, and of focusing on learning how to make good arguments in the discipline. For example:

- *The professor made himself available and gave us feedback. He allowed us to send him rough drafts of the paper up to a week before the paper was due and then gave us feedback on the paper.*
- *I learned that narrowing down your question makes it easier to realize what data you need and when you realize what data you need, it makes the research process easier. I submitted my research proposal and it was too broad. I was asked by the instructor to narrow it down, so [it was] trial and error.*
- *I had an awesome TA, and I used the writing center a bit, too. I learned how to read closely and really look at what the authors were saying and then be able to explain that in my own writing.*
- *Feedback from professor and TA and Political Science writing center. And grandma.*
- *After focusing on Political Science, I began refining my writing and research styles. What enabled me to meet the challenges of tackling the research project was experiencing it and doing it over and over again. The first time on WorldCat was daunting. I learned to tailor searches to what I wanted. It was a continual process. It takes practice to be a good researcher. Repetition and consistency were keys to improving research and writing skills.*

**Working with and listening to peers.** A fourth strong theme that emerged from the students' responses was that working with peers helped them meet the challenges they described. About 19% of the interviewees mentioned peers as helping them accomplish difficult tasks. The following quotations illustrate this category of response:

- *[This was] one of the only courses where I spent more time with a group of classmates. That's also why there is more accountability because we would study together and also meet with TAs together.*
- *[What helped me meet the challenge was] the committee work that was part of the simulation and the availability of group meeting times—communication with peers.*
- *I studied with people with different views to fully understand both sides (or more). I was able to understand more after talking with them, and I became more open-minded about the topic or issue.*
- *Working in groups helped. Some of us didn't feel as confident on our own, so that gave a boost [that helped us] develop our own opinions. The TA would give us a handbook that helped us analyze the text and how to be more concise when writing our opinions.*
- *What helped me was talking it out with other classmates. Once you can make it into a conversation, you start to see the ideas in the text.*
- *[What helped me was the] concept of getting to know classmates. You hear about that a lot—that you should get to know other students because you're going to be here with them for four years. But you don't do it because it's usually not necessary for coursework and taking tests. But this class tested that kind of idea—that you should*

*know everyone on that level because you don't want to step on toes. You had to get to know everyone and what they do in order to work with them.*

**Doing my own research or reading materials beyond what was assigned.** A number of students—17%—noted that the research they did on their own helped them meet the challenges they described, as these comments illustrate.

- *I researched a lot on my own on human rights in general and how it affected me because I'm Middle Eastern. I know how women have to wear veils and can't go out or get fair educations, and jobs. I did my own research about where I'm from. That opened up doors to doing more readings.*
- *Outside readings. I asked the professor for additional recommended readings that were not on the syllabus.*
- *Memorized like crazy, and I looked up a lot of additional sources not required for class that helped me retain information.*
- *I did extra work because it interested me. I educated myself on the subjects. That helped me with my school work more.*

**Learning to analyze/read sources critically.** A less prominent theme than those previously discussed—found in 9% of the responses of the Political Science seniors who interviewed with advisers—was learning to read critically. Three students' responses illustrate this category:

- *I learned how to read political theory and to take the most important aspects of it out of readings.*
- *I learned to break up the theories and take different parts of them and compare them to other writers of the period.*
- *I learned how to read and analyze material more carefully, to get a better grasp on the author's conclusion.*

**Research skills.** Nine percent of the students interviewed said that their research skills had helped them complete the challenging assignments they described. In the words of three of those students:

- *I learned research skills—a lot about research and interpretation of research, looking at other research and sources. I spent more time devoted to this than in other classes, and it helped me so much in the rest of my courses.*
- *I learned how to use the law library and reference materials, and the reference librarians were helpful. I learned how to organize a bigger paper and how to process and organize my thoughts.*
- *Learning where to go for the right information and how to find it, like the librarians. They are excellent. I only learned about them in the last couple of quarters, and they have been completely helpful. They are so underutilized. There should be a class on how to use librarians, database learning, how to use search engines, those hidden skills that people somehow magically have.*

**Exposure to others' perspectives.** Exposure to a wide range of perspectives on an issue can be challenging for students, as this student describes:

*I thought could do okay with concepts on my own but it was difficult when had to work with opposing concepts in one assignment. I'm a returning student after a 16-year absence, so I had to spend a lot of time relearning how to write papers.*

However, 9% of the majors who were interviewed also spoke about the ways that exposure to others' perspectives enabled them to complete challenging tasks in the major. As three of those students put it:

- *It helped to have materials that are presented in class and how academics thought books were worth reading, even if they didn't agree with them. Exposure to lots of different perspectives [helped me meet the challenges].*
- *I discussed a draft of it with the professor prior to the presentations to get feedback. I felt that my presentations were getting better because he provided feedback. You could also learn from other presentations and people's perspectives, others' interpretations of the readings.*
- *I did a lot of outside readings that weren't required---looking for readings that reflected a different perspective.*

**Other.** In addition to these themes identifying what helped or enabled students to meet the challenges they had described in their most challenging assignments and classes, more than one student reported the following as helpful:

- The course content (7 students)
- Applying what I learned in this class to cases (5)
- Focusing on learning the concepts (4)
- Knowing what to include and what to leave out in a paper (4)
- Applying what I learned in class to my own experience or life (3)
- Working hard (3)
- Exposure to different disciplines or fields (2)
- Creative thinking (2)

#### **4. What did students learn by completing this project/class/activity?**

Finally, we asked students what they believed they had learned by completing the challenge they had described. In response to this question, more than 60% of the Political Science seniors listed a number of "lessons learned," as this student's response illustrates:

*I learned a ton about the scope and breadth of what this degree can do for me. I learned about the disparities among the populations in the world. [I also learned about] long-term economic policies.*

Two major themes and a number of minor themes emerged from the responses of the 117 students who answered this question.

**Gained or expanded knowledge.** About 39% of the students interviewed said that what they had learned from the challenge they had undertaken concerned content. In speaking about knowledge gains, students spoke very specifically, such as "*I learned about Syria*" and more broadly, such as "*The course broadened my view of how Political Science and the economy are related.*" Several of these

students said that they had learned about the link between politics and economics. The following quotations illustrate this category of response:

- *I learned that people who make policy have to think about all surrounding issues and how to look at a situation from different angles (costs and benefits).*
- *I learned a lot about the material—the intricacies of the legal system, precedent, decisions that judges use for rulings.*
- *The big thing I took away was that cities are where most people live. Political discussion is usually around federal or state level discussions. But the reality of everyday life is impacted by what the municipality is doing.*
- *It enhanced my organizational skills, and I learned a lot about history of Ireland and its constitutional system and how to structure a research paper.*
- *I learned that politics is not always fair. It goes back to early U.S. history—the Civil War and reconstruction. A lot of African-Americans were intimidated not to vote, and that's still an issue now. It gave me a lot of understanding about what's going on now. We need to understand the past before we can understand the present.*
- *I had to apply political theories to certain labor unions and see how the theories worked in that setting.... I learned that how the political process works in a small group is different from large scale. [In a small group] you have to approach things differently, more personally, to get things done.*
- *I gained an understanding of the political process, which is important for a Political Science major since that's the area that you do study. I gained an understanding of where other people come from. I can bring that to my interaction with the outside world because not everyone has the same point of view.*

**How to think critically and analytically.** The second major theme that emerged from students' responses to this question concerned changes in students' thinking. About 27% of the students who identified things they had learned by completing a challenging project or class said that they had learned to think critically. In the words of five of those students:

- *I learned how to think critically, one of the most important things I got out of college. I learned to never take an opinion at face value; to understand motivations and reasoning and why people believe what they believe; and then look at it from my own perspective. Does this make sense for me? If not, do I understand where [my beliefs and ideas] came from? I learned to look through the lenses of other individuals and perspectives to learn my own.*  
*I learned how to critique things differently, to think analytically. It also taught me to not take things, such as NGOs, at face value. They work with governments and receive funding from governments.*
- *I learned how to think critically and see other points of view, to look at things from a different perspective.*
- *I learned to question what we read and not just take it as a final fact. I gained more confidence to question.*

- *I learned that what you see in the media doesn't reflect what is actually happening in the world. You have to do your own research.*

**How to write better.** About 11% of the interviewees spoke about learning to improve their writing skills, when we asked them what they had learned from the challenging experiences they had described. In the words of three of these students:

- *I learned how to write a lot better, learned a lot about legal systems around the world, a significant amount of French history, and shortcomings of US legal system.*
- *Aside from historical information, I improved my writing a lot--my ability to write in a professional manner. I now use that writing sample for applications. Because had to argue two opposing viewpoints to look at one event, I learned the honesty of not having a straw man that I was originally going to destroy in order to support what I believed. I learned I had to look at both views honestly.*
- *I learned that when it comes to writing, no one is born a good writer, so you have to devote time to it. I devote a lot of time to it. Practice makes it perfect.*
- *In high school had to write and thought know how to write. In high school, I earned all AP 5's. When I got to college, I learned that I don't know how to write. It's different to write for a major.*

**How to do research.** About 9% of the seniors interviewed noted that they had learned research skills as a result of the challenging work they had described. As two of them said:

- *I learned a) that it is important to study something before taking a position and b) how to research a project and present results.*
- *I learned about the constitutional court in Korea, also how to do research and use LexisNexis*

**How to read challenging texts.** Nine percent of those interviewed also noted that they had learned to read challenging texts in completing the assignments and classes that presented them with their most challenging work. The following examples illustrate this category of response:

- *It gave me just a better understanding of how to understand and read theories.*
- *I learned that you really have to pay attention to what you read. You fully have to digest it and grasp concepts.*

**How to apply Political Science theories and concepts to the world or to real-life experiences.** About 8% of those interviewed spoke of learning to link what they had learned in their courses to the world and to their own experiences. For example:

- *I learned how to better make connections between my personal life, my daily consumption of media sources, and across classes. It is nice to see how things are connected and how they influence each other.*
- *I learned how to apply theory to history.*

**The value to learning of peers and collaboration.** Eight percent of the interviewees also noted that they had learned the importance of peers and collaboration with others to their learning. As two of them said:

- *I learned communication skills with others who are in conflict with your interests, learned to cooperate with multiple groups. [You are] trying to help everyone reach their goals while trying to reach your own goals.*
- *[Working with peers] forces you to think on the spot and see if you did the material. It shows how your brain operates compared to other people's. "Oh, I didn't think of it that way. There are different answers from the ones I came up with!"*

**Other.** In addition to these themes, several other ideas were presented by more than one student. These students noted that they had learned the following from completing the challenges they described:

- What they believe about the world and how to articulate that (8 students)
- There are more things to consider in Political Science than I originally expected (7)
- Self-confidence (6)
- How to make an argument (5)
- How to communicate better orally (5)
- To go to office hours and seek out professors and TAs (5).
- How corrupt/unjust the world is (4).
- To take diversity into account in my thinking (4)
- Persistence and self-motivation (4)

### ***A Single Student's Responses to All Four Questions***

**Courses where greatest challenges occurred:** Pol S/Com 321, Pol S 343, Pol S 496, and Pol S 442.

**Q1. What was the most challenging work you did?** *The hardest courses were learning about the political systems of other countries, learning about different lives than ones we're accustomed to here. Writing papers for those classes and analyses were challenging. You have to think outside the box, literally. In my sophomore year, I struggled because I was not sure how to apply what I knew, to connect that to another political system. It was like learning everything new again. In classes in my junior year, I learned more concrete things and could apply what I learned earlier. There was more comparative analysis in my junior year. That allowed to see why had to learn the history of other countries—so I could compare them to ourselves. In my sophomore year, I asked "Why do I take these classes? I'm not going to go to the Middle East." In my junior year, I learned that learning about others helps us do more analyses and understand other people more. The international media classes I took were helpful because of framing. It makes sense now that I have to learn about those things so I can do analysis once I have gotten past understanding the facts.*

**Q2. Why was it challenging?** *At first, it seemed like it didn't apply to life, so I felt no relation to it, no personal investment. As much as I wanted to learn about world, other countries were only small part of the world, and my interest wasn't there. I didn't understand my own personal tie to it. But that changed. Sometimes it's hard to remove oneself from inside the box to outside. Even to critically examine the American political system was difficult because it was the only system I knew. I can thinking in multiple dimensions now, in more ways than meets eye. I can think around it and come back to it. It is different than it was then. I can't just forget about it now.*

**Q3. What helped you meet that challenge?** *Write a lot. Even though having to do so much writing is frustrating, I learned to write concisely, to get my thoughts into clear statements. I learned process of writing down what is in my mind first, then editing and taking out what's not important. That solidifies what I'm thinking. I come back to it and verify, "Yes, that is what I'm thinking." Teachers in Political Science make you write papers, and that allows you to think and to learn what your impression actually is. You realize, "Oh yeah, that makes sense" when you come back to it.*

**Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge?** *I had an internship at a defender law firm in my sophomore year with [a professor] supervising it. It was the first time I worked one on one with a faculty member. He made me read books. I had to write long paper. It was the first independent big paper I did by myself. Working independently allowed me to write in a different way. Generally books read across classes are good, too. I write down favorite sentences then put them into my own words. I took a SE Asia class last year, and that was a good course. I learned how to write about other countries. Politics in China was good too. I had to write papers there, too. In high school I had to write and thought I knew how to write. In high school, I earned all AP 5's. When I got to college, I learned that I don't know how to write. It's different to write for a major.*

## SUMMARY

Political Science majors often focused on challenges presented by writing in the discipline. They also spoke about the challenge of learning about and including multiple perspectives in their thinking, in understanding the reading assigned for courses, and in completing research, but these three challenges were often also associated with the challenges posed by written work.

For the most part, students gave faculty and TAs credit for their learning, noting that their instructors prepared them to meet those challenges in a number of ways, including by giving students feedback on drafts and spending time during office hours discussing ideas with them. Students also spoke of courses that were structured to help with challenges—classes with effective lectures, clarifying readings, well-guided discussions, and helpful assignments. In addition, students also gave themselves credit for meeting the challenges they described, noting that they had done the work necessary to meet those challenges.

In speaking of what they learned by meeting those challenges, students' responses centered on the knowledge they had acquired and on the critical thinking abilities they developed. They also spoke about improvement in writing, learning more about research, and learning to value collaboration and work with peers.

The UW ACES results for Political Science show that the place where learning comes together for students in the major is in the writing they are required to do. The writing assignments ask them to understand deeply the reading assigned in class, to include a variety of perspectives, to think critically about those perspectives, and, often, to include research. The results suggest that the more help that students are given in understanding what counts for good writing and thinking in the discipline, the better they will meet the intellectual challenges the major presents.

Finally, we noted many times when the responses of Political Science majors indicated that students had "enjoyed" the challenges they described. Many students spoke of challenges as "really interesting," of difficult work as "challenging and engaging" or "challenging and enlightening," and of themselves as "excited" about the difficult project they described. These responses underscore research on student learning that shows that when an assignment is challenging for students and when faculty and TAs help students meet those challenges, students become more engaged in the course material than they are

when tasks are easy. The responses of the Political Science majors in the UW ACES suggest that students not only learn a great deal in the face of challenge, but that they value that learning, as well.

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