Texas A&M University

Core Curriculum

Initial Request for a Course Addition to the Fall 2014 Core Curriculum

Foundational Component Area: Government/Political Science

In the box below, describe how this course meets the Foundational Component Area description for Government/Political Science. Courses in this category focus on the consideration of the Constitution of United States and the constitution of the states, with special emphasis on that of Texas. Courses involve the analysis of governmental institutions, political behavior, civic engagement, and their political and philosophical foundations.

The proposed course must contain all elements of the Foundational Component Area. How does the proposed course specifically address the Foundational Component Area definition above?

POLS 207 (State and Local Government) is the second half of a two-course sequence in Government and Political Science (the other half is POLS 206, American National Government). The course is a survey of state and local government and politics with special attention to the government and constitution of the state of Texas. Governmental institutions are analyzed throughout the course, but especially in the sections on American Federalism, Government Finance, Local Government, State Legislatures, State Executives, State Courts, and State and Local Policy. Political behavior is the focus of the weeks on Participation in Politics and Parties and Interest Groups, in addition to being an ongoing theme. The course addresses civic engagement throughout the semester, but especially in the section on participation, where the theme of "the individual in democratic government" is treated. The political and philosophical foundations are the focus of the first two weeks of class, the section on "the origins of concern with government," as well as an ongoing subject of discussion.

Core Objectives

Describe how the proposed course develops the required core objectives below by indicating how each learning objective will be addressed, what specific strategies will be used for each objective and how student learning of each objective will be evaluated.

The proposed course is required to contain each element of the Core Objective.

Critical Thinking (to include creative thinking, innovation, inquiry, and analysis, evaluation and synthesis of information):

Among the learning outcomes on the syllabus are "demonstrate critical thinking," specified with "a. Appreciate that political actors and analysts do not share a common vocabulary and sometimes use unique definitions," and "b. identify biased or incomplete use of empirical information." Thus one of the main ways in which students exercise critical thinking during the course is by learning to be critical consumers and savvy producers of quantitative information about state and local government. This is modelled in lecture with innovative real-time animated simulations, among other modes of instruction. Each chapter of the textbook encourages creative thinking about the material with a series of stimulating questions for further thought. Students practice innovation by being provided with multiple sources of raw data about state and local government which they can manipulate to answer their own original questions (these are provided for every topic in the course). Using these data sources as well as the material in the main articles and original sources included in the textbook, students inquire about state and local government. Throughout the course and the text, students are prompted to think critically about their knowledge of government (for example, they learn to identify spurious relationships early in the course). Evaluation of information is a particular focus of this course, as students are introduced to better and worse methods of data analysis in class and in the textbook. A late section of the text prompts students to consider the fact that "causality is difficult to determine." Students synthesize what they have learned in class discussion and on exams.
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Communication (to include effective development, interpretation and expression of ideas through written, oral and visual communication):

This course features an innovative communication system in which the instructor uses a tablet computer to maintain constant communication with the large group of students in class in real time. Students who might not ordinarily raise their hands to ask questions post queries by e-mail or text, and the instructor responds to everyone in real time. Most communication in this course happens between the instructor and students in lecture or via e-mail, and between the students and instructor on exams. However, there is also communication among the students and with the supplemental instructor. The syllabus encourages students to prepare for exams by writing out answers to essay questions provided in the textbook and discussing these with each other and the supplemental instructor. Students develop ideas in class in interaction with the instructor, who presents data in both raw form and analyzed. The text includes a large number of opportunities for individual interpretation of data; for example, a series of state-by-state comparisons on various measures are presented for the students to compare and draw their own conclusions. Students express their ideas about state and local government in class discussion and on examinations. In addition, visual communication is central to both the in-class and text experience, as students repeatedly draw inferences about government by translating raw data into structured comparisons. Students synthesize what they have learned in class discussion and on exams.

Social Responsibility (to include intercultural competence, knowledge of civic responsibility, and the ability to engage effectively in regional, national, and global communities):

Social Responsibility is a central aspect of this course in State and Local Government. Intercultural competence is developed in the sections on "wealth differences," "demographic differences," "social problems," "political culture differences among the states," "other political differences," "race and ethnicity requirements," and "the past affects the present." Knowledge of civic responsibility is fostered in the sections on "participation in elections," "the individual in democratic government," "seeking public office," "attending public meetings," "communicating with representatives," "making a choice at the polls," "democracy in local government," "volunteers," and "state and community governments matter to you." The ability to engage effectively in regional, national, and global communities is stressed in the entire course, especially the sections on "fifty states and 90,000 local governments," "politics among the states," "centralization of government," "confederacy and federalism," "possible forms of public participation," and "the first active government: that at the local level." Students synthesize what they have learned in class discussion and on exams.

Personal Responsibility (to include the ability to connect choices, actions and consequences to ethical decision-making):

Personal Responsibility is an important topic for this course in State and Local Government. Students are encouraged throughout the course and in the textbook to become active, critical consumers of information about government. They learn to use social science to make empirically informed comparisons among different governments and policies. Ethical decisions and personal consequences are dealt with especially in sections on policies (for example, speed limit policies). The philosophical underpinnings of government are covered in the section on the origins of concern with government, while individual ethical choice is highlighted in "the individual in democratic government." Students are prompted to engage in ethical reflection in the last chapter especially, which includes sections on "state and community governments matter to you," "do we have a democracy, or even a republic?" and "the present affects the future." Students synthesize what they have learned in class discussion and on exams.

Please be aware that instructors should be prepared to submit samples/examples of student work as part of the future course recertification process.