

27 November 2007

Re: Disciplinary communication/W requirement in the Politics Major

A. Introduction

This memo is in response to CEP's request for a discussion of the Politics Department's views about revisiting the W requirement in light of the Senate's actions last spring and the expanded notion of disciplinary communications.

Politics sent a letter regarding the W requirement last January. At that point Politics decided it would not sponsor a W requirement within the major. We stand by the logic of our stance, but we are willing to reconsider, with the hope that the Senate action will mean something, and mostly because we do not want to disadvantage or inconvenience our majors.

We are already a writing-intensive major. That is to say, our resistance to the W was not because we don't teach writing. Precisely the opposite -- we emphasize papers (over exams) in nearly all our courses. It would be difficult to graduate from the major without having written 15-20 papers with an average length of 5 pages. Most Politics majors use the senior seminar as their exit requirement and our senior seminars typically require a substantial research paper of 15-25 pages.

Our resistance or reluctance was largely because we did all this and more and experienced mostly negative resource consequences (see the attached letter). We remain suspicious that any resources given over by the central administration to facilitate the W would be gobbled up in a competition by those departments best able to make the claim that writing is not what they do or have done. It's also difficult to avoid the conclusion that nothing will be done to deal social sciences a better hand as far as TA allocations.

B. Disciplinary Communication and Writing in Politics

We have a traditional understanding of effective communication in the major. Our majors should be able to communicate analytic arguments clearly in both written and spoken forms. As noted, we emphasize papers and do that part reasonably well. It's doubtful we do as well getting students to speak effectively. Discussion sections in most courses are only partially successful in this regard; the one seminar opportunity comes in the form of the exit requirement; and our upper-division courses could and often do enroll 50 students with no sections or TA support.

Our courses are based around extensive readings and students are typically asked to make arguments through and about the readings. This is done in several ways, of course, but the goal is always to get them to produce a coherent and well-documented argument. Again, it is difficult to do something analogous with public speaking.

In some ways, the problem is more basic and profound than their analytic skills. Leaving aside the large number of undergraduates who do not have a solid command of written English, I would consider it a major accomplishment if all our majors graduated knowing the difference between, and how to use (properly), the two principal citation systems used in political science: MLA parentheticals and Chicago-style footnotes. My estimate is that the majority of students at Santa Cruz left high school knowing neither. Instead, without detailed and endlessly repeated instructions, they tend to produce idiosyncratic hybrids. I am working on an addition to the Politics website that will detail each system and thereby allow faculty to hold students, more clearly and easily, to a consistent standard. I am also planning to propose that the 4 upper-division core courses cover/require this quite explicitly as part of the training in the major.

C. Options

With all this and CEP's new DC guidelines in mind, the Politics Department feels the following are viable (mutually exclusive) options for our major.

1. **Bring back the "100" writing-intensive seminars.** The Department used to have a real W course required as part of the major -- a writing-intensive seminar with a ladder faculty taken in the sophomore or junior year so that the course would improve, presumably, the bulk of the student's work in the major. It is the only proposal in this list that addresses oral communication skills. This would require resources. We had to mount 8 of these each year to cover our majors. To reproduce this system of seminars without damaging other parts of the curriculum would require about 4 course equivalents per year in soft funding.¹

2. **Designate completion of the series of 4 required upper-division core courses as the W.** These courses, nearly without exception, already involve at least 2 papers for a total of 10-15 pages per class. These papers emphasize the kind of close analysis of the course materials essential to our view of disciplinary communication. So what we do here already would meet the spirit and letter of the W. However, given that there will continue to be pressure on TA allocations and with the growth of our major and graduate program, we could argue for limited resources to keep the student/TA ratio at or below 50/1. The department currently cannot afford any TA support for upper-division electives, which, as I noted, can be rather large classes. The bulk of the department's TA allocation goes toward the core courses already. So I would feel quite justified pairing this proposal with a request for 3 TA positions to offset the concentration of resources on the core courses.

¹ This is based on the logic that the 8 seminars averaging 20 per class were replaced in essence by upper division courses averaging 40 students (without TA support). With say 4-5 of these larger courses covering the same 160 or so students, that freed up 3-4 slots badly needed for our graduate program and other areas affected by growth in the majors (including Legal Studies).

3. **Designate the major a W-intensive major.** With certain guarantees from the department about all courses requiring at least one paper, and the upper-division core courses requiring at least 2. We pretty much do this already; so the resource implications are not clear.

I hope this is helpful and I look forward to hearing from you about what option or options you think we should pursue.

Sincerely,
Daniel Wirls, Chair