Criminal Justice Bachelor of Science (CJBS) Assessment:
Capstone Seminar Student Papers

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Introduction

As part of the assessment plan for the CJBS\(^1\) major, for the second year in a row we reviewed a sample of student papers from the required capstone course, CJBS 425. The assessment aimed to determine the extent that students emerge from the course with demonstrable achievement of the course’s learning objectives within the overall context of the objectives of the CJBS major curriculum.

The results indicate students are generally able to demonstrate above average knowledge of the material and skills expected of a CJBS student. One learning objective, however, proved more difficult to achieve than the others. Like the year before, students in the sample did less well in attempting to integrate theoretical and empirical material in a written paper. This represents the most challenging and sophisticated skill undergraduates are generally required to learn in a social science major.

Background

Originally, the report on assessment for the year 2011-12 was submitted to the college in June of 2012 in order to meet the annual deadline for assessment reporting. Subsequent review of the submission revealed serious flaws that could be fixed only by auditing the numbers and re-analyzing the data again. As such, the LPS department withdrew the initial report and provided the current report in its place. We note that the original assessor (not the author of this report) skipped the inter-rater reliability step in the process. Where appropriate, this report will indicate when that methodological flaw affects data analysis and the ability to draw conclusions. The report will also suggest the way forward for assessment of the major in the future, as the need for improvement is very much implied by what we report here.

Methods

This assessment is an examination of the CJBS 425 learning outcomes, allowing us to understand student learning in a comparable form as we continue to collect data year-by-year. The learning outcomes\(^2\) for CJBS 425 are:

1. Describe and explain the mechanisms, dynamics and situational and social context of the criminal justice system in the United States, including the law, police, courts and corrections. Identify and consider the effectiveness of various methods of prevention and treatment.

2. Analyze major issues, theories and research about the criminal justice system in the United States with a special emphasis on making links between theory and research findings about how the system operates.

3. Describe and provide examples of how the media shapes public discourse about crime.

\(^1\) Please note that the new LPS criminal justice major is no longer referred to as CRJ, but now CJBS (as a result of a curriculum revision reflected in the learning objectives and rubrics here).

\(^2\) During the spring 2012 semester, these outcomes were modified in response to UCASC criticism; however, we use the original objectives here because those were the ones being operationalized by instructors at the time.
4. Hone research and communication skills in the discipline of criminal justice and offer substantive analysis of major criminal justice issues through writing assignment, class discussions and an oral presentation. Show sensitivity to special populations, such as the disabled, minorities, and others historically disempowered.

5. Access, interpret and apply criminal justice research through the writing assignments in the course: an annotated bibliography, a book critique, and a final research paper

To assess these dimensions, we selected a sample of final papers from two of the sections of CRJ 425 taught in spring 2012. The assignment for both courses was a final research paper and the common rubric used to score the papers addressed learning objectives #2, #5, and #6 listed above. Using only two sections of data represents a step backwards in methodology from the year before in which three sections of data were analyzed. However, the plan for next year (2012-13) is significantly more ambitious in terms of participating sections. The CJBS course being analyzed next year will have data drawn from eight sections.

To collect the data, two course instructors, Profs. Strobl and Englander, volunteered to use a common evaluation rubric (See Appendix) for a significant writing assignment within the section of the course each of them taught. This rubric represents one thing that may have gone well for this year’s report. It was modified based on the feedback from last year’s assessors who realized that the first of the four criteria being used on the rubric was compound and needed to be split into two criteria. As such, this year’s rubric has five columns with a bifurcated first criterion, mapped back to the original rubric, as Criteria A and A.1.

The total number of students in these two classes from which papers were drawn was approximately 50. Twenty student papers were randomly selected for both courses. (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professor</th>
<th>Students in Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strobl</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Englander</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>n=20</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfortunately, a random selection of some of the papers from each instructor should have been reviewed by a blind reviewer to check for coding reliability, but this was not done. Accordingly, the reliability of the scores provided in this report remains unknown. This is another step backwards from the previous year when inter-rater reliability was accomplished through a blind reviewer and scores could be fine-tuned and, in general, relied upon. Despite this year’s setback, the use of a reliability tool will be in place for next year’s reports.

Data

Table 2 below reflects the combined results after data collection. Each cell represents the percent of student papers evaluated which fell in each box of the rubric.
### Table 2: Paper evaluation results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Criterion A</th>
<th>Criterion A.1</th>
<th>Criterion B</th>
<th>Criterion C</th>
<th>Criterion D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent (90-100)</td>
<td>45% (9/20)</td>
<td>50% (10/20)</td>
<td>40% (8/20)</td>
<td>35% (7/20)</td>
<td>25% (5/20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above average (80-89)</td>
<td>35% (7/20)</td>
<td>25% (5/20)</td>
<td>20% (4/20)</td>
<td>45% (9/20)</td>
<td>45% (9/20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (70-79)</td>
<td>20% (4/20)</td>
<td>20% (4/20)</td>
<td>25% (5/20)</td>
<td>15% (3/20)</td>
<td>25% (5/20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below average (60-69)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5% (1/20)</td>
<td>10% (2/20)</td>
<td>5% (1/20)</td>
<td>5% (1/20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor (below 60)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5% (1/20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The goal for the research paper assessment is to determine the extent to which student papers met course learning objectives #2, #5 and #6, aspects of which are crystallized in the 5 criteria in the above table. The elements of the rubric provide a standard coding scheme for evaluating papers and how well students were able to demonstrate the general learning goals: the ability to understand and present content (Criteria A), use a variety of sources (A.1), integrate theory and fact (Criteria B), use critical thinking (Criteria C), and employ coherent writing skills (Criteria D).

### Analysis

The assessment aimed for the benchmark of observing students performing at the above average or better level. Based on the previous assessment, a majority of the students exhibited better than average skills and so maintaining this baseline was the aspiration for this year’s student learning—a modest goal as the department continues to fine-tune the assessment process and understand what assessment can actually do to boost student learning prospectively. In the future we hope to lift our benchmark and expect more of our courses as we strive to “close the loop” on what we learn through assessment.

In general, students performed very well across all five measures of the rubric, indicating that we met our modest benchmarking goal. Over half of the sampled students performed above average
or better in each of the five criteria. If we use our benchmarking and take the line between average and above average as a threshold for which we want most students to cross, we see that two criteria stand out as being particularly well-met. Criterion A is met by 80% of the papers and the same level of success is found with Criterion C. Criterion A relates to the presentation of knowledge about the criminal justice topic of the paper, indicating that students seem to be absorbing the criminal justice content well. Moreover, the below-benchmark scores on this dimension are all “average” and none are below average. So even those students who miss the mark do so only slightly and not disastrously. We found the same to be true in last year’s assessment. Criterion C relates to critical analysis of the criminal justice topic. It appears that the papers showcase students who can muster a viable personal or logical critique of the subject matter. This is a slight departure from last year’s results in which critical analysis was not a success standout. Because of the lack of known reliability in this year’s data, we refrain from reading too much into what this difference between the two years may mean.

For Criterion A.1, using a variety of academic sources, we find that students’ papers are successful 75% of the time according to this sample. For Criterion D, organizing and clearly writing the paper, we find that students can do this 70% of the time, according to this sample. Both are over our threshold and show that students are mostly performing well in these regards. Students exhibited a slight decrease in Criterion D performance over the year before, but again, due to reliability problems, it is hard to say whether that difference is meaningful.

The main challenge for our students remains the same this year as compared to last. The lowest scorer for student paper was on Criterion B, integrating theoretical and empirical information. In essence, this is a critical thinking skill as much as it is one of applied logic. In 40% of the student papers analyzed this year, students are average or below on this dimension; last year’s figure was 35.7%. Further, it was the only dimension that had a student paper fall into the “poor category,” as did one last year, indicated that students who are performing below threshold on this level are at-risk of completely falling to pieces in this regard. We cannot take this information lightly. The dimension is of critical importance for any social science program. Students should be able to take an abstract framework, like a theory in this case, and be able to apply it point-by-point to a certain set of facts or a particular context. For all our students who may want to attend law school in the future, this skill is very similar to taking the framework of a complicated law or precedent-setting case and relating it to a set of facts. As such, we believe it is very important to respond to this data and identify this as the primary weakness to address going forward.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Some of our conclusions are the same as those we drew from the previous year. Based on this assessment exercise, we would encourage CJBS 425 professors to continue to take seriously the need for students to practice synthesizing theory and data through writing assignments. Rather than merely rattling off knowledge, the program hopes to develop graduates who can think critically about the criminal justice system and put those critical thoughts to paper. Whereas we find that students demonstrate good knowledge of the field of criminal justice, there are uneven outcomes in terms of the ability to employ that knowledge in analytical and critical ways. Although this year’s data may suggest a slight improvement in critical analysis and a slight
decrease in writing skills associated with organization and clarity of the papers, our reliability problems prevent us from drawing any solid conclusions about this.

Our recommendation this year is to take seriously the weakness students exhibit in applying theory to a set of empirical facts (Criterion B, related learning objective #6). We recommend a roundtable workshop of CJBS instructors to come together and talk about how they teach this skill. The workshop, which we hope to offer in the spring of 2013, will serve two purposes: it will be a chance to show the instructors the assessment data so that they will be aware of what the it shows is the weakest skill, and it will be a brainstorming session as to what the pedagogical response could be. We can then see whether a more concerted instructor awareness of a particular weakness can help “close the loop” and actually lead to better student performance down the line. To draw in the instructors, we will look into funds to provide lunch at the workshop or some other minor incentive.

Additionally, we recognize that the recommendations from the previous year represent dreams deferred and they remain on the table. We adopt them again here with a more concerted effort to address them going forward. First, last year we aspired to develop a larger and more representative sample size to assess students learning. In fact, we had a smaller sample size which was less representative. However the plan for next year is in place to follow our original advice and indeed, sampling has already begun, for generating data in support of next year’s report, using the more robust sampling technique.

Second, last year we found the rubric and learning objectives to be reasonable instruments for assessing student learning (once we bifurcated Criterion A), but feared that a lack of uniformity in writing assignments across CJBS 425 threatened assessment going forward. Unfortunately, we replicated the same problem again by using student papers from the same two professors as last year. Again, they had slightly different assignments for assessment purposes. Prof. Strobl assigned a traditional research paper requiring topic identification, develop, and the consultation of library materials. Prof. Englander’s assignment is more hybrid in nature, involving some outside research, but focusing more heavily on in-class materials and argumentation (as a traditional essay assignment would). The rubric better matches Prof. Strobl’s assignment in this case. For the future, some attempt is being made to manage this problem. A different course from the major is being assessed going forward, necessitating new rubric creation and attention to practical detail. Rubric creation for the data collected in Fall of 2012 for the 2012-13 report has already begun. Every effort is being made to find the most uniformity across course assignments and/or creating a more flexible rubric which can better accommodate slight assignment variation.

Third, we said last year that the professors teaching the course should begin a dialogue about developing a standard type of writing assignment, whether a research paper, position paper, or essay examination, which would make the assessment of student learning process more straightforward. There was some early discussion about this at a departmental meeting in early 2012, but many professors were reluctant to standardize their assignments for fear of encroaching on each other’s academic freedom. The current assessment coordinator has decided that attempting to work with the assignments professors are organically requiring is the best way to be respectful of the values the department holds and so artificially creating uniformity, for now, is on hold.
Despite this year’s methodological setbacks, we believe that we have measures in place to improve dramatically. We are also committed to addressing the substantive recommendation that remain pending.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Presentation of knowledge on the mechanisms, dynamics and situational and social context of the criminal justice topic (LO #2)</th>
<th>The criminal justice topic is covered from a variety of academic sources (LO #2)</th>
<th>Integrates theoretical and empirical information on the criminal justice topic (LO #6)</th>
<th>Critical analysis of the criminal justice topic (LO #5)</th>
<th>Organization and clarity of the paper (LO #5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent (90-100)</td>
<td>Provides a detailed description of the dynamics and context of the criminal justice topic, including knowledge of key concepts related to that topic</td>
<td>Draws from a variety of academic sources</td>
<td>Structures the flow of the paper so that theoretical and empirical insights are logically linked</td>
<td>Offers ideas and opinions, backed up by logical or empirical evidence, that indicates a critical approach to the material consulted</td>
<td>Uses a strong thesis statement, logical organization, and has almost no grammar or style mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above average (80-89)</td>
<td>Provides a strong description, but does not provide enough detail, fails to cover a key concept</td>
<td>Draws from one or two sources heavily while neglecting or not relying on other sources</td>
<td>One of the theoretical or empirical insights are not logically linked to the content of the paper or too each other</td>
<td>Offers ideas and opinions, only weekly backed up by logical or empirical evidence, that indicates a critical approach to the material consulted</td>
<td>Shows weakness in one of the following: thesis statement, logical organization or grammar/style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (70-79)</td>
<td>Provides a mediocre description, and does not provide enough detail, including failing to cover key concepts</td>
<td>Draws from one source heavily while neglecting or not relying on other sources</td>
<td>A couple of the theoretical or empirical insights are not logically linked to the content of the paper or too each other</td>
<td>Offers ideas and opinions that indicate a critical approach to the material consulted, but does not back up those ideas or opinions with any evidence</td>
<td>Shows weakness in two of the following: thesis statement, logical organization or grammar/style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below average (60-69)</td>
<td>Does not provide a detailed description of the criminal justice topic in general, although covers one key concept adequately</td>
<td>Does not draw from enough sources in total</td>
<td>The theory discussed and the empirical insights do not seem relevant to each other OR both do not seem relevant to the criminal justice topic</td>
<td>Does not offer any ideas or opinions. Paper is a regurgitation of materials consulted.</td>
<td>Shows weakness in two of the following: thesis statement, logical organization or grammar/style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor (below 60)</td>
<td>Does not provide a detailed description of the criminal justice topic</td>
<td>Does not draw from any sources</td>
<td>There is no attempt to link theory with empirical insights</td>
<td>Paper is a poor regurgitation of materials consulted and has no critical ideas or opinions.</td>
<td>Fails to provide a thesis statement, logical organization and/or proper grammar/style</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>