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**Subject:** Commentary on Student Course Evaluation Report

## I. Attainment of Learning Objectives

- On this dimension, which is by far the most important, SAMPOL306, Autumn semester 2019 was the most successful in the history of this course.
  - 64% of the candidates received an A or B grade, a success ratio which is almost never realized;
  - The remainder of the candidates received a C grade; there were zero candidates that received D, E, or F grades. Again: this is an extraordinary testament to the student efforts and skills, in addition to the implementation and structure of this course.
- 95% of student respondents reported having a “very substantial” (40%) or “substantial” (55%) academic gain from the course. This is a fact that all the course seminar leaders should feel proud of.
- I myself have held anywhere between 45% (5/11) and 67% (8/12) of the seminar meetings in SAMPOL306 in any given year since its creation some ten years ago. I can attest on this wide basis of experience the following: student preparation for seminars and *informed* student participation in seminar was at a level at least 20% higher than the *next best* performance in the history of this course.
  - This extraordinarily impressive student performance attests to the success of the key course innovation which was implemented this semester: each essay submission is based upon all of the themes and their associated readings, as opposed to the past, where students would write on only *one* theme of their choice per essay.
  - The previous structure resulted in two seriously problematic outcomes:
    - In-seminar participation was often at a low and uninformed level, *except for* the students who had chosen to write on that week’s theme.

- The above was symptomatic of the pattern wherein students would choose *not* to read at all any material associated with themes in which they did not write, or else read only a limited subset of the readings.

## II. Suggestions for Reform

- Several course evaluation respondents expressed disgruntlement over the reading load.
  - SAMPOL306 requires on average between 200 and 250 pages of reading per session. Such an average lies *meaningfully below* that which one encounters in comparable serious MA political science programs around the world
  - While one may consider reducing the reading load, this would imply two decisions:
    - Create an even greater distinction between SAMPOL306's reading load and those of comparable MA programs internationally
    - Degrade to that degree the degree of learning associated with the course
- Several course respondents expressed disgruntlement over the "short" period of time allowed for essay-writing.
  - Optimally, one could consider scheduling three "essay weeks" (as I myself have implemented as a new reform this Spring 2020 semester in SAMPOL307). But such a reform faces two tight constraints:
    - Several years ago, *in response to student requests*, SAMPOL306 implemented in its schedule two consecutive non-meeting weeks in order to maximize the degree of coordination with writing assignments in SAMPOL305.
      - Interestingly, the students in Autumn 2018 expressed complete satisfaction with this structure
    - The autumn semester is short in length, restricting our scheduling options
  - Suggestion: Move the seminar meeting day to Tuesdays, thereby making possible an addition full day of "writing time"

- Some students observed what appeared to them to be insufficient “coordination between the seminar leaders”. I can testify to the fact that I sent many emails with all relevant information to all the seminar leaders throughout the semester, as well as detailed, clear guidelines concerning how to select readings and what to include. The fact that some shortcomings nonetheless appear to have emerged calls forth for a slight modification.
  - Suggestion: face to face group meetings at the outset of the semester (to coordinate planning) as well as at the mid-term of the semester (to assist new members with preparation and information on how the sessions had gone and what to expect). I want to say in addition that I did indeed send emails with precisely this information. In addition to that, I held individual meetings with each and every seminar leader in the course. Nonetheless, face to face group meetings could indeed enhance the effectiveness of the communication and maximize coordination.
- Breaking up the classes into small groups paid high dividends: students were prepared and knowledgeable in the sessions. At the same time, it is very difficult when spontaneously discussing such engaging material to “stick to the plan” of group presentations. A stronger effort to do this could be well advised for the future.
- There were some patterns concerning readings and themes that worked better or not with respect to students’ evaluations. I advise that the undersivningsleder contact the respective theme leaders and communicate such requests to modify the reading list.