

Raising the Stakes on a Political Science Major Field Test: Evidence from a New Capstone Course

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Abstract

Using a major field test (MFT) is a common method of program assessment. For accurate assessment to take place, however, students must be sufficiently motivated to perform. This paper studies a change in major requirements that associates a major field test to a grade in a capstone course, when it previously counted for nothing. After controlling for possibly confounding factors, a modest but robust treatment effect was found. Adding stakes also appears to cause MFT scores to correlate more strongly with other measures of student learning, which suggests more accurate assessment.

Introduction

Program assessment is a hallmark of modern academic programs. The Educational Testing Service's (ETS) major field test (MFT) in political science is a widely used measure of program assessment, with 122 universities participating in the 2016-2022 period. (ETS 2022) Standardized exams like the ETS are attractive in part because they offer a way for programs to compare their graduates to students at other schools. The content validity of the test as a measure of political science knowledge is unclear but it is widely employed as a tool for analysis nonetheless. The purpose of this paper is twofold: to assess whether a capstone course can motivate students to perform better on the ETS field test and to determine whether a capstone can better align field test grades with other measures of student knowledge, like major GPA.

The ETS Major Field Test in Political Science

The political science ETS scores student knowledge in five subfields of the discipline: international relations, American politics, comparative politics, political theory, and political methodology. Scores are reported at the individual and program-level. Both individual students and the program as a whole are scored relative to the reference group.

In its test description document, the ETS releases some information on the content of the MFT in political science. For example, the section of the test on American Government measures knowledge of constitutional principles and American political institutions (7-13% of total exam questions), the dynamics of institutional interaction (17-23% of questions), and political beliefs and behavior (7-13% of questions). Questions cover a broad range of topics including the nature of federalism, separation of powers, civil rights, civil liberties, constitutional law, presidential politics, legislative politics, judicial politics, bureaucratic politics, political parties, interest groups, state and local government, defense policy, media, social movements, public opinion, political socialization, and political participation. Similar descriptions are available for the other sections of the exam. Programs are also informed that the test is updated every four to five years to stay current with evolution of knowledge in the field. (ETS 2016)

The test covers a wider variety of topics than those included in our required curriculum. For example, the section on political philosophy cites Black political thought, the German tradition, critical theory, and postmodernism as potential subjects for examination. Our required course in political thought stops midway through the 19th century. To learn about these topics, students would need to take an elective on contemporary political theory.

It is not the case, therefore, that we have chosen to model our curriculum after the expectations of the ETS. Instead, we use scores on the test (which, for an extra fee, can be disaggregated down to the question-level) as one of several measures of content mastery. Although it is possible for our students to do very well on the MFT, many of our students choose to focus their studies on one or two subfields in the discipline. We do not expect students to excel on the American government portion of the exam if they have only ever taken an introductory course four years prior. The purpose of the MFT is to identify areas of weakness in the program and provide opportunities for faculty members to reflect on possible curricular or pedagogical changes.

Capstone Course for Assessment

Like program assessment, capstone courses have also become common practice in political science. The Wahlke Report in 1991 recommended that there should be a capstone experience at the end of the senior year and that this course should require students to integrate their whole learning experience in their major. And although integrating knowledge from the different subfields and providing a culminating experience are frequently cited as important goals for a capstone (Hummer 2014), the capstone also provides a critical opportunity for programs to conduct summative assessments of their graduates for program assessment purposes (Sum and Light 2010).

The use of the capstone as a vehicle for program assessment seems to be increasing. In a survey of political science departments, Kelly and Klunk (2003), found that 39.6% of respondents used a capstone for assessment purposes. By 2016, an APSA survey found that fully 76% of departments used a capstone as a part of the learning outcomes assessment process.(Young 2016)

In fall 2021, the political science program at my medium-sized southeastern public university received approval to launch its capstone. The decision to create a capstone course was driven in equal parts by a desire to better assess program performance and the desire to help students integrate their learning in a major where students are free to take up to 15 credit hours of unstructured electives on top of their distributional requirements (see Capstone Course Proposal, Appendix 1).

As Hummer (2014) and Sum (2015) point out, the desire to assess program learning outcomes on the one hand and integrate knowledge and insights from the disparate subfields of political science on the other are not mutually exclusive objectives. But at some level, tradeoffs are inevitable. More time spent reviewing key concepts for the MFT means less time drawing connections between the subfields or demonstrating other learning outcomes not captured by the MFT like research and writing skills.

Our capstone makes studying for and taking the ETS MFT an explicit part of the course. Twenty percent of the course grade is tied up with students' individual performance on the exam and another 20% is linked to preparing for the exam: quizzes, creating study guides, and a practice exam. This process takes up the first part of the course and lasts between five and six weeks in a 14-week semester. The second part of the course helps students demonstrate research, writing, and analysis skills through the completion of an independent research project that attempts to integrate knowledge from the different subfields of political science. Finally, the last two weeks of the course provide professional development coaching in the form of resume workshoping and mock job interviews.

The same principles guide the organization of the course online and on campus. Each subfield (American politics, international relations, comparative politics, political theory, and political methodology) receives one week of attention. Students collaboratively produce a study guide each semester based on a list of key terms provided by the instructor. Instructions for the study guide encourage students to cross-reference terms where they might relate to each other and provide context as well as definitions. On campus, lectures and short practice quizzes occupy class time.

Online, lecture slides and practice quizzes are distributed through the learning management system. The time limits on the online quizzes make it difficult for students to look everything up, which encourages preparation. However, students may take each online quiz up to 3 times. All together, students online must take 17 area review quizzes in areas such as “Theories of International Relations and Levels of Analysis” or “War and Diplomacy.”

Assessment Challenges

One of the reasons the department cited for replacing the Area Concentration Achievement Test (ACAT) MFT with the ETS MFT in 2018-19 was that it was difficult for the program to interpret ACAT results for the purposes of program improvement. For example, the ACAT reports one score for Theory and Methods (combined) and another for International Relations and Comparative Politics (also combined). No finer-grained data was available to help target possible areas for improvement. Though ETS score reporting does not give as much information as we might hope for, it does give more of an indication on whether scores in American politics are influenced by performance in sub-areas like “American Political Development” or “Dynamics of Institutional Interaction.” This information is more readily usable for curriculum improvement, though knowing the specific questions that were missed would be even more helpful¹.

Despite the increase in available information, it became clear that the task of program assessment in the area of content mastery was being made more difficult by a distinct lack of motivation on the part of our students to perform on a test for which there were no tangible stakes. From 2019 to 2021, when no stakes were attached to the MFT, nearly half our students (46.6%) tested in the bottom 20th percentile and 30% scored at or below the 10% percentile on the ETS. While perhaps some of these students truly knew very little political science, we also observed some very good students scoring very poorly. The students were often very explicit about telling faculty that they did not study or even try to do well on the MFT. Some admitted to answering essentially at random just to get through the test.

The Research Question(s)

Now that the capstone has been in operation for three semesters, it is time to assess whether the capstone succeeded in motivating better performance out of our students and whether that performance aligns better with another measure of subject matter competence (major GPA).

¹ This is where in-house major field tests are an improvement over standardized exams. The loss of comparability trades off with information about exactly where students are struggling. Our program’s practice quizzes make up for this loss to some extent.

The research questions posed in this paper are driven by two objectives. The first is a desire to know: what is the right balance between assessment and other facets of the course? The second is a desire to make sure that major field test scores are as accurate a measure of student knowledge as they can be, rather than a reflection of poor motivation.

To address these two questions, two hypotheses are tested in the paper:

- H_0 : ETS major field test scores are not statistically significantly different for political science students who take the capstone and those who do not.
- H_0 : ETS major field scores among political science students who take the capstone are not more strongly correlated with their major GPA than ETS major field test scores for students who do not.

Testing both of these hypotheses will help us better understand whether making the ETS field test an integral part of the capstone improves student performance and whether the increase in student performance gives us scores that are more in line with other available measures of content mastery (like major GPA). While raising major field test scores (relative to other departments, or relative to past cohort of graduates) is certainly flattering, ultimately program improvement depends more on field test scores being a meaningful yardstick of student learning.

Literature Review

An element of an answer can be found by looking at studies in other disciplines. For instance, Terry, Mills, and Sollosy (2008) find that making the business ETS MFT grade worth 20% of a business capstone grade in a mid-sized public southwestern university raises scores by 15.8 percentile points. Jin (2008) reports an unquantified level of progress on major field test scores for a computer science program at an HBCU, which tied 30% of the capstone grade to the major field test score. Finally, Blackford and Shi (2011) find that a capstone can raise scores on a Major Field Test for business majors through the use of simulations.

Although the practice of “high stakes testing” has its share of skeptics (see Nichols, Glass, and Berliner 2005, for example), it does not follow that moving from “no-stakes” to “some incentive” is similarly problematic, especially when initial levels of performance are low and do not seem to track other measure of student ability like program GPA or ACT scores. (See Table 1)

Table 1 Selected Academic Attributes of POLS Graduates by Quintile on the ETS					
	Bottom 20%	4 th Quintile	Middle Quintile	2 nd Quintile	Top 20%
Program GPA	2.85	3.23	3.37	3.32	3.43
Graduating GPA	3.06	3.3	3.3	3.05	3.72
Best Composite ACT	20.1	25.6	22.08	25	23.25

The Terry, Mills, and Sollosy study is the closest to yielding the information we seek, but the authors do not disclose how students are assigned to capstone courses. This introduces a possibility of selection bias, despite their best efforts to control for demographic and other potentially confounding factors. If weaker students can self-select into capstones that do not make MFT scores a part of the final grade, we would not be surprised if the MFT scores in those sections were lower. GPA and ACT scores might help control for this, but overall college GPAs are at best an indirect measure of a student's proficiency in their program of study. Even GPA within one's program tracks a variety of student attributes.

Furthermore, while the study shows that extrinsic incentives appear to motivate students to perform better on the Business MFT, it does not shed any light on whether the higher scores are a better reflection of learning within the program. Students might manage to inflate their scores in a variety of ways that are not strictly a reflection of increased long-term recall of knowledge (for example, by cheating, cramming, or ingesting stimulants). Therefore, it is important to check whether any increase in MFT scores "fit" well with other measures of student learning collected by the program.

Data and Methods

Students who declared a political science major prior to the spring of 2021 were exempted from the capstone requirement, no matter when they ultimately applied for graduation. Students who declared the major (or changed their program of study in any way) in spring 2021 and later acquired the capstone requirement. All students are required to take the ETS major field test. This means that for the past two years, some graduating students each semester take the capstone and some do not.

This method of assignment should be understood as quasi-random. Whether or not they are assigned to a capstone is not a decision that students can affect very much. They cannot avoid it when it is required. It is possible to sign up for a capstone without being required to do so, but no students have thus far chosen to take a capstone who were not required to do so. 99 students are in the sample (80 in the control group and 19 in the treatment group).

Despite the method of assignment and also because of the relatively small size of the treatment group, checks are necessary to establish the relative similarity of the treatment and control groups. The following control variables have been found to be significant in studies on the performance of students on MFTs in other disciplines: Gender, GPA, ACT scores, (Bagamery et. al 2005, Terry et. al. 2008, Contreras et.al. 2011, Blackford and Shi 2011, Barboza and Pesek 2012), Transfer status (Bagamery et. al. 2005, Blackford and Shi 2011), Age (Bagamery et.al. 2005, Contreras et. al. 2011), and the number of courses completed in the major (Stoloff and Feeney 2002). The table below summarizes these differences in the capstone and “no-capstone” population.

Table 2		
Mean Attributes of Treatment and Control Group		
	No-Capstone	Capstone
Overall ETS Score	141.4***	150.4
Gender	55% Female	61.1% Female
GPA	3.15**	3.43
Major GPA	3.07**	3.39
Best Composite ACT Score	21.9	23.1
Transfer Status	48.6% Transfers	38.9% Transfers
Age	26.9***	23.2
Number of POLS courses	15.6	14.9
N	80	19
*: p<.1; **p<.05; ***:p<.01		

Despite the quasi-random assignment of students, the means of several variables are significantly different, using a difference of means test for continuous variables and a chi-square test for the nominal variables. To control for these potentially confounding factors, an OLS regression is therefore used to test H_0 instead of a difference of means test. All the controls above are included, though Transfer Status is discarded both because it is not a significant predictor and

because it correlates highly with age. Major GPA is included instead of overall undergraduate GPA, since it is presumably a better measure of political science knowledge, but the differences in the OLS model are negligible.

The dependent variable used in the OLS model is the percentile score in the reference group, though nothing changes if the absolute test scores are used. In the sample, this varies from 1 to 96, with a mean of 30. To test H_0 , the aggregate ETS score is used, since we are more interested in the absolute performance of students rather than relative ones, though again, the results are not sensitive to which measure we use.

Major GPA (mean: 3.13; SD: .69), Highest Composite ACT scores (mean: 22.2; SD: 3.99), Age at graduation (mean: 25.88; SD: 6.58), male gender (42.7% of the sample), and the number of courses completed in the major (mean: 15.45; SD: 4.23) are expected to take on a positive sign. Two additional variables are included in the model to improve its predictive accuracy: the percentage of courses taken with adjuncts (mean: 23.74; SD: 14.11, expected to take on a negative sign) and a measure of critical thinking skills taken during their junior year using the Washington State University Critical Thinking Rubric (mean: 56.53; SD: 13.82), which is expected to come back positive (see Phillips 2019 for a discussion of this measure).

Results

The uncontrolled difference between the capstone group and the “no-capstone” group is nearly 15 percentile points (43.2 vs. 27.3). Once we control for some of the differences in the two samples, our chosen model shows a more modest but statistically significant positive difference of 6.14 percentile points on the test for those who were assigned to the capstone. All of the control variables come back significant at the 95% level or better with signs going in the expected direction, with the exception of Age at graduation (positive sign but not significant). The model overall captures a respectable 66% of the variation in ETS scores in the sample. A Durbin-Watson test fails to detect any significant autocorrelation in the model and a plot of residuals detects no heteroscedasticity.

Table 4 Determinants of Political Science Field Test Scores, OLS Regression		
	B	SE
Intercept	-129.04	
Program GPA	9.23*	4.78

Composite ACT	1.75***	.63
Age	1.9	1.29
WSU Critical Thinking	.58**	.23
Percentage Adjuncts	-50.9***	18.93
Total POLS Courses	2.16***	.67
Gender (Male)	8.61***	2.67
Capstone (Yes)	6.14**	2.81
R ²	.660	
Adj. R ²	.604	
N	57	
*: p<.1; **p<.05; ***:p<.01		

On the question of whether the ETS scores of students assigned to the capstone correlate more strongly with their GPA in the major than the scores of those who were not assigned a capstone, the answer is yes, but only very slightly. ($r=.39$ vs. $r=.41$) The ETS MFT scores of capstone students fit their major GPA slightly better than the ETS MFT scores of those who were exempted.

Discussion

Students motivated by a capstone grade and coached with some review sessions perform better on the ETS MFT than those who were not subject to this treatment effect. The effect size of the capstone class, however, when adjusting for relevant confounding factors, is neither big nor small: around 6 percentile points relative to the reference group. Some departments will find this a worthwhile trade-off, while others may see it as too small to justify any investment. Better study techniques and better practice quizzes and tests might shift this number upwards in the future, but the effect seems smaller than what Terry, Mills, and Sollosy (2008) found for undergraduate business majors (around 15 percentile points).

The expectation was that correcting the motivational deficit on the MFT would make for a much better fit between the ETS MFT and other proxies for political science knowledge (like major GPA) but the improvement in fit is only slight. One can only speculate as to the reasons, but perhaps more data and more distance from unusual pandemic conditions might yield better

information. Major GPA is only a very loose proxy for political science knowledge. In the future, one might search for other measures of political science knowledge such as final exam scores in core courses to compare to the ETS MFT scores. As I noted earlier in the papers some students will choose to specialize in one or two subfields of political science and may excel in those subfields and yet know comparatively little about other areas of the discipline. One could try to compare ETS subscores in comparative politics (for example) with available measures of comparative politics knowledge in students assigned to the capstone and students exempted from it.

Another area for future research might be the differences between online and on-campus capstone classes. With only one section of an online capstone so far, early indications are that the on campus students fare much better, but sample sizes are too small to draw any definitive conclusions as yet. Further research is also needed to separate the incentive effect of tying the major field test score to the capstone from any effect related to review and practice testing. Some departments might be willing to attach a portion of the capstone grade to scores on the MFT, but be unwilling to devote any class time to reviewing the content. Conversely, perhaps reviewing the content will give students enough confidence to try their best on the MFT without the need to associate a course grade with the exercise.

Ultimately, the purpose of program assessment is not to make the program look good, but to accurately assess the state of the program, both relative to objective measures of political science knowledge and relatively, as against other comparable programs. The information obtained from the ETS field test, practice tests during the capstone, and student reflections all contribute to identifying areas of improvement within the program, both at the level of the curriculum and at the level of individual courses. As long as major field test scores are weighed down by scores from students who have knowledge but no motivation to demonstrate it, MFT scores are unlikely to either make the department proud or provide useful information on where to focus its efforts.

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Appendix 1

Successful Course Proposal for a Capstone

Bulletin Description:* The goal of the Senior Capstone seminar is to provide students with a culminating academic experience organized around the study of a political science topic bridging the different sub-fields of the discipline. The Seminar is premised on the assumption that students will have a working familiarity with the foundational knowledge in the sub-field(s) relevant to a research project they are to engage in, a mastery of the practical skills introduced in foundation courses and further developed in intermediate courses, and a willingness to engage actively in a rigorous, sustained inquiry into an important topic.

When listing pre-requisite(s)/co-requisite(s), please be sure to indicate "and/or" correctly when multiple courses are required for a pre-req or co-req.

Prerequisite: POLS 3760

Co-requisite:

Pre/Co-requisite:

Equivalency:

The equivalency field is utilized to indicate if a course should be counted as another in the banner system. For instance, if you are renumbering a course from ART 1030 to ART 1035, the equivalency field would list ART 1030. If you have created a new course for the major and an older major requirement may still be utilized to fulfill this course, please indicate the course number in the equivalency field.

Equivalency:

Cross Listed: course taught by two different departments but covers the same subject matters. Example MGT 3410 and ENGT 3610 Productions Operations managements

Dual Listed: course taught at the graduate and undergraduate level. Please note that Dual listing is only able to be utilized between 4000 level and graduate level courses only. Examples: PSY 4010 and 5010 Death, Dying and Bereavement.

Cross Listed:

Dual Listed

Justification for creating new course:*

As the major currently stands, graduates of the political science program have a common entry point (POLS 2000), but no common exit point.
The American Political Science Association recommends a capstone or senior seminar as a way to integrate & synthesize knowledge in a field that is diverse. (Wahlke, 1991)
The most recent Program Review (2019) recommended the creation of this course.
A course such as this is now common practice in Political Science programs. (McLellan, 2015; Smith & McConnaughey, 2019)
A senior seminar/capstone course also provides advantages for program assessment. The lack of a common exit point makes it harder for the department to meet SACSOC and THEC requirements for program assessment. (Currently, intermediate level required classes are being used for assessment) Ultimately, the goal is to gather sensible longitudinal data on students as they enter and exit the program.
Furthermore, the capstone course, as conceived by the department, will serve to reinforce program learning outcomes. Although students have an opportunity to practice essential skills (research, writing, oral communication) throughout their time in the program, the degree of practice varies with the electives taken. Having a capstone course reinforces the idea that the knowledge students acquire in their other courses is not disposable.

Library Resources

List any recommendations for needed library resources. Include: Books (give bibliographic citations, and prices); Periodicals (give titles, years and vendors); and Computer-related databases/ services (attach brochure, etc.). Bibliographic information and prices for all recommended materials may be obtained from the Library's Resource Management, ext. 1325.

Are additional library resources needed to support the course?*

☐ Yes

☒ No

Additional Library Resources Needed:*

None.

Total Estimated Cost:
\$

Contribution of the course to the University's mission and strategic goals:*

The course contributes to the University mission in the following ways:
- It enhances critical thinking skills through integration, synthesis, and reflection on an academic field as well as a student's personal journey through the political science program.
- By requiring an original research project, the course reinforces essential job skills, such as data analysis, inference, and information literacy skills.
- The seminar format will also foster collaborative and oral communication skills. Mock job interviews and presentations of research are currently envisioned.
Ultimately, the department believes that this course will help release students into the world who are better prepared for what comes next: either the job market or graduate school.

Course-level Student Learning Outcomes:* Oral Communication

Students completing this course will be able to orally:

- Organize a message.
- Deliver a message clearly.
- Adapt mode of communication (register) to the audience.
- Acknowledge differences of opinion.
- Accurately communicate alternative perspectives.
- Identify the meaning of questions directed at them.
- Respond without equivocating to questions directed at them.

Written Communication

Students completing this course will be able to:

- Organize a message around a thesis.
- Deliver a message clearly.
- Acknowledge differences of opinion.
- Communicate a synthetic review of the literature relevant to their topic.
- Accurately communicate alternative perspectives.
- Anticipate objections.
- Avoid more than occasional spelling, grammar, or syntactic mistakes.
- Format citations in the format requested by the instructor.
- Assess implications of the work accomplished.

Methodological Literacy

Students completing this course will be able to:

- Situate their research within a relevant theoretical framework.
- Select appropriate methods for the study of a research topic (qualitative, quantitative, or other.).
- Identify the dependent variable(s) of their project.
- Identify explanatory variables of interest.
- Present a coherent written summary of results.
- Present a visual representation of results.

Topics Covered:* The vision for the course is that each year, department faculty will choose a topic of national or international relevance that will form a backdrop for the course and associated research projects. The important feature of any such broad topic is that different sub-fields of the discipline are able to contribute to it. For example, immigration could be a topic that could be analyzed by students from in the context of American Politics, Comparative Politics (how different countries address the issue), International Relations, Political Economy, Law, Political Theory, and Public Policy. Other possible topics could include: Pandemics, Globalization, Corruption, and so on.

Opportunities for Student to Demonstrate their Learning:* Students will demonstrate their skills and knowledge through the completion and defense of a project proposal, a literature review, and a final 15-25 page paper. Students will have the opportunity to lead discussion and engage in peer review. The department's major field test will also be attached to this course.

Assessment Procedures:* The ETS major field test will take the place of a final examination. Some assessment will be at the instructor's discretion, though Association of American Colleges & Universities VALUE rubrics will be encouraged for assessing written work and oral presentations (with a view to harmonizing assessment between POLS 2000 and POLS 4999 to enable longitudinal comparison of student progress through the program)

Does this proposal require Teacher Education Council approval?* ☐ Yes ☒ No

