To: Confidential to Aidan Kestigian, PhD Student in Philosophy

From: Garrett Stack, Graduate Teaching Fellow

          Katie Walsh, Teaching Consultant

RE: Early Course Feedback, Focus Group Report

Date: February 11, 2016

Nineteen students participated in the student feedback session for your course. After assigning students to small groups comprised of three to four students, we briefly explained the process to the class. One person from each group wrote down the students' suggestions for strengths (i.e., what is helping you learn?) and suggestions (i.e., what changes could be made that would help you learn?). After seven minutes, we paused the discussion to add the following two questions: 1.) Are course expectations clear, why or why not? 2.) How are class discussions helping to facilitate your learning, and what suggestions do you have (if any) for improving class time? As individual students suggested feedback, group members checked whether all of the students in the group agreed with each point raised. Students wrote down the points upon which they agreed; other points were discussed and clarified in the group. Dissenting views in each group could also be recorded. After ten minutes of small group discussion, we asked for the key points from each group, and—by a show of hands and further whole class discussion—determined whether each point had at least majority agreement. A clear majority agreed upon the key points unless indicated otherwise below. On the following pages, the main points listed (in no particular order) are those generated in the whole class discussion. Additional supporting and clarifying bullet points came from the group worksheets and whole class discussion.

Summary of Student Feedback:

Strengths that assist in learning:

Class discussions are engaging and assist in comprehension of course readings. Students feel as though their input is valued by the instructor.
- "More than a few people talk frequently."
- "Allow for opinions and perspectives to be heard."
- "Balances free flow of class while staying on topic."

Course readings are interesting and provide context for course concepts.
- Readings provide "current relevance."

Class time is used effectively.
- Class time helps to clarifying difficult concepts from the reading.
- Class structure "is good and well-linked to real life events."
- Students generate key definition and summarize key concepts.

Students know what is expected of them in the course.
- Syllabus provides clear expectations and course schedule.
- Course assignments sheets are helpful.
- All assignments are online.

Miscellaneous Comments:
1.) Instructor is "approachable and personable." (3 students)
2.) Instructor is "well-versed in material." (4 students)
3.) Blog posts "show how concepts relate to actual issues that are occurring in present-day politics." (3 students)

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Summary of Student Feedback:

Suggestions to improve learning:

Students suggest providing discussion or guiding questions (i.e., "what do look out for") for especially difficult readings.
- Another way of explaining the challenging readings could be an in-class demonstration.

Students suggest adding a "key takeaways" or "check-in" point at the end of every class so that they know what to take away from class discussion.
- Students suggested stating an objective for each class session (e.g., "by the end of today's class, you should be able to. . .")
- 25% of students were did not support adding a "key takeaways" portion to the class because they felt as though the class is opinion-based and everyone takes away different ideas.

Students suggest discussing the practical application of course concepts.
- More discussion about "real world" political issues.

Miscellaneous Comments:
1.) Shorten the amount of small group time because "we exhaust all of our ideas." (4 students)
2.) Definitions are too open-ended. (3 students)
3.) "Unsure what criteria the blog points are being graded by." (3 students)
4.) More varied topics (e.g., very centered on voting). (3 students)

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