First Exam Learning Goals: The first examination measures students’ written communication skills, as well as the breadth of their knowledge of the discipline. These examinations test students’ understanding of major scholarship and of their ability to use key concepts. Questions are designed to explore how well students understand the major political institutions, processes and policies, in addition to general economic, cultural, social, psychological, historical and political phenomena.

Description of the First Exam:
The First Exam is a written examination, administered in two sections. Committees of three faculty from each subfield collaboratively draft the exams and work with students in preparation throughout each semester. These same faculty serve as the grading committee for the exam. Students are expected to take the core 700-level courses in their subfields as preparation for the first exam. They also form study groups, take practice exams, and consult with faculty about their answers in order to enhance their performance. The students’ major field requires a three question, six hour exam and the minor field requires a two question, four hour exam.

Determining Success:
Each subfield in the program has devised a grading rubric by which students’ answers are evaluated by a team of three faculty readers specializing in those areas. Grade assignments of Fail, Pass, and Pass with Distinction are assigned to each answer as determined by one or more of the following criteria: 1) the extent to which the answer responds appropriately to the question and makes an argument; 2) the relevance and comprehensiveness of the literature cited; 3) whether the answer displays mastery of a body of literature necessary for the student to craft an undergraduate syllabus on that subject; 4) the application of theory to substance.

Goal Achievement and Revisions:
Pass rates on our first exam have fluctuated considerably over the past five years, ranging from a low of 54% in the spring of 2010 to a high of 82% in the fall of 2011; the mean pass rate is 70%. In order to improve our students’ success on the first exam, we have made several changes:

1. Some of our subfields provide the questions to students in advance of the exam. This is done by providing substantive sub-categories for study, a reading list for each, and inviting students to identify study questions from which the exam will be drawn.
2. Each subfield has prepared a grading rubric that is made available to students and faculty.
3. The most successful revision we have made over the past few years has been an “Early Pass” option. Having identified that students who took the exam earlier in the careers tended to perform better, we allow students who have amassed between 14 and 25 credits to take the exam on a “free strike” basis, i.e., if they take the exam and pass, they pass, if they take the exam and do not pass, it does not count as one of their two chances to do so. This measure has been particularly successful with the pass rate among “Early Pass” takers approaching 100% since the measure was implemented.