1. Project title:

Moot Court & Expanding Experiential Learning Opportunities

2. Project objective(s):

The objective of this grant was to develop a course proposal, syllabus, and course materials for an upper-division experiential learning class. The course is designed to meet the Student Learning Outcomes in critical thinking and written and oral communication skills by capitalizing on student interest in law and the pursuit of legal careers. During Summer and Fall 2015, I conducted research and developed a sample syllabus. In Spring 2016, I designed active-learning practices for the course such as structured debates where students present and evaluate arguments and other problem-based learning exercises. I am continuing to develop assessment tools to create a feedback loop specific to this critical course. Because this is a course that could potentially be offered by a number of different faculty members in the Political Science Department, my intention has been to develop a proposal, a syllabus, a set of course materials, and an assessment toolkit that can be easily adapted to a variety of pedagogical methods and styles. These tools will help to build the kind of engaged-learning environment that can more effectively enhance the critical thinking skills of our students.
3. Project description:

One of the most successful ways to promote critical thinking is by offering students the possibility to engage more directly with course material through experiential learning. Given the advantages of experiential learning opportunities and my own experiences with their success, my goal is to expand the University’s course offerings and introduce the Moot Court program in the Political Science department.

The Political Science department has a strong record in experiential learning. We have a judicial internship program, a DC internship experience, and an award-winning Model United Nations Team. I have been leading the Model UN team for the past two years and have witnessed first-hand the benefits of experiential learning. Students have the chance to take the material they have been learning in their other classes and apply it directly to the development of written and oral communication skills. Most importantly, however, is the development of critical thinking skills that comes with being involved with simulations and experiential learning. Since many of our students are interested in pursuing careers in law, developing a Moot Court program would be particularly valuable. Other CSUs, including Long Beach and Fullerton, have offered Moot Court courses and programs for several years and with great success. By offering Moot Court at CSUN, we would diversify the University’s experiential learning offerings by designing a course that develops critical thinking abilities, improves legal research and writing skills, builds self-confidence and poise, improves relations with alumni, and likely, increases acceptance rates into law school. A Moot Court program is relevant because of the student demand for and engagement
in learning about the legal system and building skills that will make them more competitive when applying for law school and other graduate programs.

Studies suggest that lectures are less effective than role-play oriented teaching methods in developing problem-solving skills and the application of knowledge to other situations.\(^1\) It is therefore useful for instructors to consider alternative strategies for teaching complex ideas. One way to encourage student learning and critical thinking is through the use of simulations and experiential learning. A primary advantage of games and simulations is that “students are active participants rather than passive observers. Students must make decisions, solve problems, and react to the results of their decisions.”\(^2\) Courses that utilize role-playing and simulations also have a positive effect on student motivation, a critical factor when one is teaching challenging upper-division course material.\(^3\) They can "build an environment from which students can learn experientially. Therefore, students analyze situations from the inside, or the position of a participant."\(^4\) By making students active learners, we motivate them to learn the subject and succeed in the class. They also engage with the material more critically as they make decisions themselves rather than passively accepting those made by others. Active learning approaches increase student comprehension, improve student problem solving skills, and ameliorate retention

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rates. Experiential learning also generates or enhances personal interest in a subject and exposes students to a variety of viewpoints and a range of outcomes related to particular situations. Assessment data from the courses in my department that utilize simulations and experiential learning suggest that students are accomplishing their learning objectives and are able to make the connections between what they are studying in the classroom and what they are observing in the real world.

I am working to develop a Moot Court class at CSUN that will simulate an appellate court proceeding before the Supreme Court of the United States. Using the Court's existing case law as precedent, students will compete in national conferences and argue a fictitious constitutional case before a panel of judges comprised of law students, law professors, and practicing members of the legal profession. Participation in Moot Court will build familiarity with actual case law and with the Constitution; it will hone oral advocacy and analytical skills that will be useful far beyond a legal career; it will bring students into contact with active members of the legal profession; and it will give students experience that will translate directly into an advantage in law school.

4. **Evidence of project implementation:**

Please see attached draft syllabus.
5. **Description of procedures used for measuring project objectives (include your evaluation tools):**

The students will train to compete in national competitions through the American Collegiate Moot Court Association. Students will be assessed on the written work and oral arguments they prepare for the competitions. In addition, this course will build assessment of the key student learning outcomes into the structure of the course from the beginning. An assessment toolkit will be made available so that any of a variety of instructors can benefit from a feedback loop both for the current course they are offering and for future offerings. The assessment toolkit includes a pre-test to gauge students’ critical thinking skills upon entering the course and a post-test to gauge what students have learned.

6. **Project results:**

This project is designed to help students build skills to apply theories and concepts to policy problems, to think analytically in exploring alternative policy solutions, to evaluate the validity of competing arguments, and to draw reasoned conclusions. The main result of this project is a new course offering for students to develop these essential skills by utilizing a subject about which many students are already interested and engaged. This course enhances student learning on several levels. First, students will gain substantive knowledge in a relevant policy area. Second, students will develop active-learning skills through research and structured debates as part of student-learning teams. Finally, students will build the critical thinking skills essential for success in a learning-
centered university and, more importantly, for success as engaged citizens in a global community.

7. **What you learned about student learning from this project:**

I have learned that students are particularly interested in taking courses that allow them to apply the knowledge they have learned in other classes and develop the skills that will help them in graduate school and in their careers. Our students respond particularly well to experiential learning. The material they are studying becomes more relevant, and as a result, their commitment to learning is enhanced. Like our other experiential learning course offerings, Moot Court will be extremely demanding. It will require a significant time commitment from the students and will be rigorous in its preparation for competition. I expect that the interest in the class will be high and that our students will be willing and capable of devoting the time and effort necessary to the program.

8. **What you plan to implement in the future as a result of this project:**

I plan to present the syllabus and a course proposal to my department in the Fall and begin working the proposal through the curriculum process. Once the course has been approved, I will begin student recruitment.