

Overview of Five-Year Program Review

The Committee met On March 5, 2012, to review the Political Science Program at Weber State University with attention to the program's strengths and challenges. We reviewed the self-study document, and spoke at length with department faculty and staff, college administrators, and students, current and past. The report is an overview of our findings with recommendations.

Program Review Team:

Erika Daines, Professor of Foreign Language, Weber State University

Victoria Farrar-Myers, Professor of Political Science, University of Texas, Arlington

Lauren Holland, Professor of Political Science, University of Utah

Brenda Marsteller Kowalewski, Professor of Sociology, Weber State University

Introductory Statement

The self-study documents and conversations during the site-visit demonstrate that overall the political science program is effectively meeting its goals and missions. Particularly noteworthy are 1) the quality of the faculty, 2) a curriculum that provides a broad based coverage of the political science discipline, and 3) the faculty's use of pedagogical approaches incorporating high impact practices. Areas noted for program improvement focus on 1) workload issues, 2) the program advisement structure, and 3) program assessment.

Program Strengths

The major strength of the Department is the core teaching faculty including adjunct instructors. The faculty and adjuncts have solid academic credentials, provide a sufficiently diverse group given the number of faculty members, and exhibit a genuine passion for teaching and concern for their students. Faculty and adjuncts reiterated the strong sense of community and mutual support that they feel from each other, and the department secretary. Students commented that the faculty is very accessible and rigorous but fair in their grading.

A related strength is the curriculum which features 41 courses that provide a broad based coverage of the Political Science discipline. Also laudable is the pedagogical approach embraced by the faculty which combines a traditional content based/theoretical presentation of the material with a practical exposure to community based learning. Students reiterated the value of having their

classroom learning experiences reified by engagement with activities beyond the classroom such as Model UN and other high impact programming.

The Department also is making a good faith effort to meet the requirements of the assessment necessary for university accreditation. Data sets have been identified (such as pre-test/post-tests, exit interviews and content analyses) and an effort is in place to develop appropriate rubrics for evaluating the success of classes in meeting the learning outcomes.

In an effort to address previous concerns about retention, the Department created a separate BA/BS, which provides the foundation on which the Department can more systematically enhance its current practice of mentoring students towards professional career goals.

The Department is strengthened by the skills of Debra Strait, the sole administrative staff person whose efficiency, thoughtfulness and support contribute to the success of the department.

Program Challenges and Recommendations

While the strengths of the Political Science Program are significant, there are a number of major and minor challenges being faced by the Department, all of which are addressed in this section. All in all, the program mission statement is appropriate and even ambitious given available resources, but could be further recast to highlight the strengths of the Department. *We recommend that the Department's existing high impact programming and connections to the college and university mission statements be more clearly articulated.*

One major challenge for the political science program is that five faculty members are carrying the entire work load for the department, responsible for teaching 41 courses that rotate annually. This stretching of resources threatens to weaken the Department's ability to offer a sufficient variety of courses for majors, particularly if attention is not paid toward mapping a student's degree plan or the sequencing of courses, while still supporting minors and general education program needs. For example, despite the departure five years ago of the faculty member teaching most of the law classes and advising students in the pre-law minor, this position remains unfilled. This situation has led to a weakening in that field of the discipline and ability to service what is traditionally a significant source of majors in political science (i.e., students intending to go to law school), and has put an extra burden on most of the other faculty members who are already spending a great many

hours outside the classroom in high-impact projects. The department explained during the review that it has received permission to fill this post again and is in the process of interviewing candidates. *We hope that a suitable candidate can be found who is willing to accept the position and will be able to share in the many obligations of the department.*

A new hire in the legal field will still leave the department short in the international and comparative fields of political science. If and until these positions are filled, the Department may need to assess the scope of course coverage it provides based on available faculty, such as focusing attention on course sequencing (especially with respect to the methods course) and rotations, or evaluating whether interest and demand necessitates so many minor tracks or course offerings. *We encourage university authorities to consider funding for an additional position in one or both of these areas.*

A related issue is the process that currently is used to replace faculty who leave or retire. The current system appears to favor a sub-field to sub-field replacement without a more holistic and strategic discussion of what sort of curriculum a small faculty is capable of providing. *Given the success of the current process for hiring, perhaps it would be appropriate merely to broaden the conversation to include the distribution of program roles and responsibilities and program specific needs. In addition, the department should consider realigning the course offerings in a way that makes a cleaner parallel among the available faculty, student interests and curriculum offerings. Soliciting from students their interests in the discipline of political science could drive a reevaluation of the courses currently being taught and perhaps the manner in which they are taught (e.g., online or hybrid courses; adjusting offerings to address the needs of non-traditional students), which might provide a way to retain more majors and encourage a higher graduation rate.*

Another issue about which faculty raised concerns was the distribution of workload within the department. It is not apparent that all faculty members are equally sharing the workload. The system for distributing responsibilities currently is ad hoc. *We recommend that the faculty consider a more regularized way to rotate teaching requirements, particularly of the core courses such as Quantitative Analysis (POLS 3990).*

One of the Department's greatest strengths is also one of its major challenges. The level of faculty involvement in high impact learning opportunities is highly appreciated by and critical to the

learning needs of students. However, such activities are time consuming and undervalued by the RPT process. Given the strategic importance of high impact and co-curricular activities to the teaching of political science, *we recommend that the Political Science program formally recognize the value of these activities in tenure and promotion decisions.*

Another major challenge being faced by the department is the advising process for majors, minors and students in the General Education courses. One faculty member is officially in charge of advising all of these students, although students unofficially consult with a faculty member of their choosing. In addition, there is no mandatory advising at Weber State University. The result is that many political science majors and minors do not receive the information they need to make a strategic academic plan, one which would include a list of optional classes that would better prepare them for their chosen careers. *We recommend that the Department discuss how to rectify the situation; suggestions to consider include: use of group advising sessions; split advising among faculty, perhaps based on area of interest or expertise; and develop online tools (e.g., FAQs) to address standard questions, provide forms (such as sample degree plans), etc. Also, there should be proper assessment of the advising experience, both as currently conducted and for any revisions.*

Another challenge being faced by the department is program assessment. There is increased emphasis at the institution on assessment by tying learning outcomes to assessment data and using the results to improve courses and programs. The review team recommends that the faculty take advantage of the available university personnel skilled in assessment to guide them through the process and make productive use of the data sets already collected. Colleagues in the Teacher Education Department as well as the assessment team in Academic Affairs are resources worth exploring. *We recommend that the Department and its faculty place a deliberate focus on developing improved learning outcomes (e.g., using action verbs, mapping to specific levels of Bloom's Taxonomy) and increasing the number of assessment measures used for at both the course or program levels (particularly within core and required courses), for example, by using more formative and not just summative assessment, developing a rubric to provide at least one direct measure of learning where no such measure is readily available, and taking advantage of other data collected in the department or by the University (e.g., number of students advised, number of internships, etc.). Furthermore, given the Department's expressed Mission Statement being related to student placement after graduation, the Department needs to further develop its exit interviews,*

and track students, (perhaps with the assistance of the Alumnae Office), as to demonstrate fully their stated objective as a program.

A minor challenge in the department is a graduation rate that appears to be at the bottom of the college. The committee feels that the recommendations above concerning assessment and advising might shed some light on this issue and lead to an improvement in the coming years. Also, the Department should strive to strengthen its relationships with external communities of interest and to form an external advisory committee. The use of such external communities, particularly alumni (whether by service on an advisory committee or even periodic alumni surveys), may further assist in structuring the program to increase graduation rates and address the challenges raised above.

Conclusion

The Political Science Program at Weber State University is commended for fostering student learning both inside and outside the classroom with a high degree of rigor. The faculty members are poised to address the areas for improvement, specifically addressing the learning outcomes and assessment of the program. Overall, the Political Science Program at Weber State University is very successful with a few areas in need of attention to better leverage its strengths.