Department of Criminal Justice
Weber State University
Graduate Program

Program Review Evaluation Team Report

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Introduction

The Master of Criminal Justice (MCJ) program is a fully online graduate degree that requires students to complete 36 semester hours with an overall minimum GPA of 3.0. The courses reflect traditional criminal justice offerings designed to develop critical thinking, strong analytical skills, and effective communication. The current marketing campaign targets potential applicants nationwide. The Graduate Program Director is Dr. Bruce Bayley, who coordinated the site visit by the external review team. This report reflects the first external review of the MCJ program delivered in an online format.

The Program Review Evaluation Team for the MCJ program at WSU consisted of Dr. Yvette Farmer (Division of Criminal Justice) at California State University, Sacramento, Dr. Don Davies (Department of Chemistry) and Dr. Greg Lewis (Department of History) from Weber State University, and Lt. Lane Findlay from the Weber County Sheriff's Office. The comments offered in this report are based upon a review of program materials (e.g., department self-study) and meetings with faculty, the Dean, and resource support staff. The following self-study criteria or standards (A-G) will be mentioned in relation to: program strengths, program challenges, program weaknesses, and team recommendations for the program.

A. *Mission Statement* – The mission statement clearly reflects the program's goal to provide an educational experience that encompasses both theory and practice to future leaders within the criminal justice system.

B. *Curriculum* – The course offerings cover the areas suggested by the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, including: Administration of Justice, Corrections, Criminological Theory, Law Adjudication, Law Enforcement, and Research and Analytic Methods.

C. *Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment* – The faculty have engaged in discussions related to the assessment of student outcomes, the development of an action plan, and they are currently in the process of collecting data about their four core courses. They are also planning to conduct an exit survey with their MCJ graduates.

D. *Academic Advising* – Students are advised using a variety of formats, including: electronic messages, phone conversations, and face-to-face meetings. Although the faculty are not aware of any advising concerns, they are planning to assess the effectiveness of their advising strategy as part of their program assessment efforts in the future.

E. *Faculty* – The full-time tenured/tenure track faculty have obtained doctorate-level degrees within their respective fields. Their collective education reflects various disciplinary training experiences and they are actively involved in scholarship. They are currently adjusting to the new online delivery format of their courses and most of the faculty have completed the WSU Master of Online Certification (MOTC) training.

F. *Support (Staff, Administration, Facilities, Equipment, and Library)* – The MCJ program receives administrative support from the department secretary, Faye Medd. She was not

initially hired to perform the graduate program duties, but assumed the tasks when another position was eliminated. The program also receives support from Dean Harrold, who has provided an adequate budget to market the program and has encouraged faculty throughout the transition to an online delivery format. The MCJ faculty also receive support from the library and the Information Technology (IT) staff.

G. *Relationships with External Communities* – A number of MCJ faculty serve on community boards or work as consultants in law enforcement and corrections.

Program Strengths

Program

The review team identified faculty consensus re: the improvement in the graduate program over the past few years. There are many resources to support the program including, but not limited to: an adequate budget to run the program, marketing support to help recruit qualified students, library assistance, and technological support (see Standard F). The program is also very affordable which should help attract MCJ students. The curriculum reflects both appropriate and varied coursework for a Criminal Justice Master's program, which pertains to Standard B. The review team also spoke with two students that reported being highly satisfied with the program (see Standard C).

Director

Dr. Bayley is well-regarded by the faculty and they acknowledge his efforts to move the program forward. He has also been responsive to faculty needs as they relate to student expectations about academic rigor. The faculty would like to see Dr. Bayley more involved with the campus community—specifically, groups that focus on graduate program issues.

Faculty

The Program Review Evaluation Team reviewed faculty qualifications and then asked the faculty a variety of questions during a group meeting. It is clear that the faculty teaching in the MCJ program are highly qualified with diverse interests and care very much about student learning (see Standard E). They are also compensated for teaching in the graduate program ($750 for professional development if the course is taught as part of their normal load or $3,500 - $4,500 [dependent upon level of training] if the course is taught as an overload).

Program Challenges

The review team identified a number of program challenges during their visit. Many of these challenges may reflect the transitional nature of the program (from an on-campus to an online format). In fairness to the program, they were already aware of some challenges and have plans to address them. Still, this report discusses the program challenges with regard to students, faculty, program, and University administration.

Students

At the time of the external review, the program used course evaluations to obtain student feedback, but did not have a routine activity to assess overall program experiences. This type of information would aid the department's need to assess the program (see Standard C). The team was informed that the program has a plan to implement an exit survey to all graduating students and we support that effort.

Another student-related issue pertains to the possibility that students may misperceive the rigor required in a graduate program. Apparently, students have indicated that since they are working while attending the online MCJ program, the online program should be easier than a traditional on-campus program. The department has taken steps to inform all of the students about the expected number of hours that they should be working in each graduate course.

Faculty

During the review, the faculty were asked about their experiences with the graduate program and they were very candid in their answers. The team learned about how difficult it has been for the faculty to adjust to the numerous program changes in recent years. The faculty are also aware of the need to stabilize the program and they have agreed to adopt certain changes (e.g., dropping the GRE admissions requirement) for a period of time.

The team also learned that the faculty struggle with the choice between an academic vs. business model in terms of program delivery issues. For example, the choices that have been made to attract students to help the program survive (business model) may be inconsistent with the desire to challenge students with a rigorous academic curriculum (academic model). There is value in both of these models; however, they can also be at odds with one another and this inconsistency manifests itself as a lack of common vision. This particular challenge pertains to Standard E.

In an effort to attract students, the MCJ program has identified a target audience. The focus is on law enforcement personnel from across the nation (and possibly beyond). It is very important for faculty to understand the target audience and their educational desires and needs. They may find that this new group of online students is very different from the traditional graduate students leading to the need for faculty to adjust their expectations regarding the desires of online students (see Standard A).

The faculty also indicated some reservations about the online nature of the graduate program. One faculty member framed a concern about the investment of effort and resources in terms of recruiting students as compared to the lack of quality students in the program. Another issue identified was the lack of non-monetary incentives (e.g., a course reduction) for faculty teaching in the graduate program. The current incentive structure rewards faculty more if they teach graduate courses as an overload rather than teaching such courses as part of their assigned teaching load.

The faculty also mentioned that they prefer more interactions with students which is limited by the online nature of the program. The opportunity to develop collaborative professional relationships (e.g., conducting research together) is limited. It was also mentioned that students in traditional programs have the opportunity to help develop each other's abilities to succeed by working together which is also limited by the online nature of the program in its current form.

Staff

The review team discussed the administrative support for the graduate program. In the past, a staff member occupied a part-time position that supported the graduate program, but that position was eliminated in tough budget times. Instead of filling that vacancy, the department secretary assumed the responsibilities and has since taken on additional administrative tasks in support of this program. She has done so with minimal additional compensation.

Administration

The Department Chair and the Graduate Program Director discussed the historical pressure from the University administration to continue the MCJ program despite faculty reservations and a low number of qualified applicants. It appears that this influence contributed to the adoption of a business model with the goal of program survival. This goal led to such decisions as dropping the GRE admissions requirement to attract a nationwide pool of students with law enforcement experience.

Program Weaknesses

The review team identified three program weaknesses as follows: 1) there is an underwhelming demand for the MCJ program despite marketing efforts – combined with the affordable price of tuition, the program does not bring much money into the University; 2) there is a lack of scholarships which may help attract qualified students; and 3) student writing skills may not be fully developed without courses that require revision of writing assignments and the completion of a culminating experience.

Recommendations

Based upon the team's review of program strengths, challenges, and weaknesses, we recommend that the department engages in the following activities:

1-Explore the idea that an online graduate student may differ from a graduate student that attends a traditional program so faculty expectations may need to be adjusted. Students seeking an online degree may not be looking for an opportunity to develop collaborative relationships with faculty and other students or the academic rigor of a traditional program;

2-Explore the appropriate curriculum for the target audience; a traditional curriculum may not attract target students (e.g., law enforcement) that may be looking to learn more cutting-edge policing techniques;

3-Explore ways to make the curriculum more interactive (e.g., use video conferencing tools to approximate a more traditional classroom environment) since both students and faculty indicated that they enjoy such interaction;

4-Explore the possibility of compensating the department secretary for the additional graduate program duties – if she is working beyond her current classification, her classification and corresponding salary should be adjusted;

5-Address faculty feelings about the graduate program – some faculty members do not feel enriched by participating in the graduate program;

6-Since the University administration has a stake in the MCJ program's survival, they should consider offering incentives (such as a course reduction) for teaching in the graduate program in an effort to maintain morale and job satisfaction; and

7-Faculty should assess the MCJ program again in 24 months and decide whether they want to continue offering the program and the University administration should abide by their decision.

Conclusion

The MCJ program at Weber State University has transitioned into an online degree program for a national pool of students, but the transition is still relatively new. Many of the issues identified in this report—marketing campaign outcomes (e.g., qualified applicants), classroom experiences, and faculty expectations of students—reflect the struggles associated with such change. Despite the struggles, the collegiality of the faculty and their efforts to adjust to the transition are evident.

This transitional phase is also an ideal time to re-examine the program's mission. For example, with an online delivery format and a nationwide student pool, will the online classroom experiences result in future leaders that can effectively communicate within the criminal justice system? This is a time to explore what the program can reasonably accomplish and what faculty hope it will accomplish.

Although there are several challenges in this transitional period, the MCJ program has a number of strengths. The strengths include effective leadership, adequate resources, and respectful and hard-working faculty. These strengths will be key components in the resolution of the current and future challenges.