

DEPARTMENTAL FACULTY RESPONSE TO:
The Undergraduate Program Review Evaluation Team Report
(WSU Department of Criminal Justice)

April 12, 2017

On February 17, 2017, a program review evaluation team visited the Criminal Justice Department at Weber State University. The team consisted of Dr. Lish Harris (head of the Criminal Justice Program at Dixie State University) and Dr. Branden Little (associate professor of History at Weber State University). The purpose of the visit was to assess the criminal justice undergraduate program, to identify its strengths and weaknesses, and to make recommendations for change. During the visit, member of the visiting team reviewed and discussed the department's self-study, and conducted interviews with the College Dean, the Department Chair, departmental faculty, and students. This document is in response to the visiting team's various findings.

In the preamble to the visiting team's report, team members gave an overall positive assessment of the department by saying that, "... before we begin, we would like to note that our overall evaluation experience led us both to view the program as one of strength within the College and the University." The Department is grateful for these opening words and uplifted by this initial general impression.

The visiting team mentioned four "strengths" of the program, including the faculty, community integration, practitioner/theoretician balance, and experiential learning. The Department takes particular pride in the team's finding that "the strongest aspect of the CJ program is the faculty" who offer "diverse educational and professional backgrounds" which enable them to "offer a wide range of courses" and result in our students "quickly identify[ing] the individual attention and care they received from various faculty members [as] the most important and noteworthy part of their experience in the CJ program." The faculty is grateful for these comments and hopes to do the work needed to continue to be worthy of such praise.

The visiting team describe its concerns with our program as either "challenges" or "weaknesses."

The first "challenge" was "Advising." Advising in the Department is accomplished by all full-time faculty taking a share of students, based on the first letter of a student's last name. The Criminal Justice program has well over 600 majors and some faculty members expressed feelings of being overwhelmed. In addition, some students have trouble locating their advisors and consistency of care can be uneven. The Department agrees that this is indeed a challenge. Our plan for dealing with this is found below under "recommendations for change."

The second “challenge” identified was “Adjunct Supervision.” Various faculty members expressed concerns regarding insufficient evaluation and monitoring of adjunct professors. We agree with the need for improvement and have formulated a plan (see below).

The last “challenge” concerned our potentially adopting a completely online degree (to be added to our face-to-face program) in response to encouragement from Continuing Education. This challenge has already been addressed since the team’s visit and is discussed under “recommendations for change,” found below.

In addition to the above-noted “challenges,” the visiting team also identified three “weaknesses.”

The first identified weakness was our lack of a healthy number of written and oral communication assignments within our program. Like advisement, this proves challenging given the number of our students. Nevertheless, we agree that this is a worthy goal for us to pursue. Our “Action Plan” is addressed below under “Recommendations for Change.”

The second “weakness” involved our forensic science degree (i.e. lack of students pursuing the “lab scientist” option within our two-prong forensic program coupled with the lack of openings within the field). We agree that this is a real concern and will discuss our plan in the next section.

The third weakness concerned our CJ Senior Capstone Course and the lack of breadth and rigor within it that is typical of courses entitled, “senior capstone.” As the visiting team learned, this course is currently being used as a delivery system for a standardized test, the results of which are used for student assessment (i.e. what a student has learned in the CJ program). Our department is always committed to improving the way we do assessment, and as will be noted below (under “Recommendations”) we are making efforts to rethink both our capstone course and some aspects of our assessment efforts.

This brings us to the last (and perhaps most important) part of the visiting team report: “Recommendations for Change.” Six such recommendations were made and we will state below whether we agree or disagree with each specific recommendation, and if we do agree, what plans we have made to effect said change.

The first recommendation is for us to “rotate and incentivize advising duties.” As mentioned above, we agree that our advising system presents challenges that can discourage both faculty and students. A lot of this is beyond our control: we have well over 600 majors. Nevertheless, we seek to improve and are considering adopting a centralized system of advisement in which a single faculty member is given a course release each semester in exchange for taking over all advisement. This should help with the development of expertise and the creation of consistency of care. We are aware that the Psychology program (another very large program in our College) uses such a system and reports a lot of success with it. The Dean has indicated to us that he would allow a one-course reduction should we choose to

adopt Psychology Department's model. We will be voting on this matter very soon as a department. Should the faculty vote "no," or should no suitable faculty member be willing to be our department advisor, then we will explore rotating advisement with a course buy-out like the visiting team specifically envisioned.

The second recommendation calls for us to "study the likely implications of an Online Bachelor's Degree." Continuing Education has encouraged us to consider doing this, and there is concern among some of us regarding future competition for students from UVU which is planning to launch its own online degree soon. Subsequent to the visit of the review team in February, Drs. Horn and Bayley of our department were tasked with investigating the pros and cons of our creating such an online degree (to be added to our face-to-face degree). They did a fine job in creating a highly detailed, lengthy and nuanced analysis and presented their findings to department members in a faculty meeting. The faculty then voted and decided not to pursue the creation of an online B.S. degree at this time. Too many of us lacked enthusiasm for such a method of delivery; and there were concerns that the thread-bare majority who favored the idea did not constitute sufficient consensus for the entire department to start down this ambitious path.

The third recommendation was for us to "create a schedule of adjunct evaluation." Given our rather substantial reliance on adjunct faculty (especially at night in Ogden but also some during the day in Ogden and also in our programs at the Davis and SLCC campuses), we agree that a plan in this area is needed. It is our intention this fall to form a department-level committee, which will be tasked to come up with a better system of more regularly, and thoroughly, evaluating the teaching effectiveness of our adjunct faculty, including, if possible, wide participation from the entire tenure and tenure-track faculty (to lighten the load).

The fourth recommendation is to create a "writing intensive and oral communication designation." Given the huge number of students we teach, professors can understandably be reluctant to require many writing intensive or oral intensive assignments in their (often) large-enrollment courses. That said, communication skills are very important. We shall make this an important item of discussion during one of our early department faculty meetings in the fall of the coming academic year. We shall determine the exact extent that professors in our core courses already have such assignments and the degree to which such assignments could be expanded, if necessary. The recommendation from the team was for two core courses to be designated: one as "writing intensive" and the other "oral communication intensive." We will discuss the feasibility of officially designating a particular core course as "writing intensive" and another as "oral communication intensive," including the possibility of rotating such designations somehow among the faculty.

The fifth recommendation is to "disassemble the forensic science degree." We have two forensic degrees: a degree that prepares one for a career as a forensic lab scientist (an evidence analyst) and a degree that prepares one for a career as a crime scene investigator (an evidence collector and preserver). The visiting team no doubt is referring only to the former. Dr. Horn,

the Director of our forensics program, has expressed his desire to eliminate the forensic lab science (analyst) component for some time, given the lack of students selecting to major in Lab Science (as opposed to our CSI program) and the paucity of employment opportunities for forensic lab scientists. Dr. Horn will soon come up with a plan to start the process of ending the lab science degree, in consultation with the Dean, and assuming the Dean gives his approval. Current students already in the program will need to be given a path to finish what they started.

The sixth and last recommendation is to “recalibrate CJ 4995, Senior Capstone Course.” We have already begun the process of re-thinking and re-inventing this course, including the implications this could have in our assessing our undergraduate program. This course includes the administration of a standardized test, which we use to assess student learning for the entire B.S. degree. One criticism that the team had with calling this a capstone course was that the course does not include a paper or rigorous project as is typical in a capstone course. In January of 2017, we formed a new department assessment committee consisting of four members, two of which are co-chairs (one co-chair takes the lead for graduate program assessment while the other for undergraduate program assessment). Dr. Mark Denniston, the co-chair over undergraduate assessment, has set a goal for undergraduate assessment and for recalibrating our capstone course in the upcoming academic year. He plans to have the newly formed committee, “Revisit the undergraduate program objectives, particularly the proposal to add a writing objective, and how the Senior Capstone course fits with those objectives.” Should it be decided not to require a paper or project (given the large number of graduates each year) and to continue with just an exam (or series of exams), the department will plan to drop the “Capstone” designation for this course (i.e. retitle the course), as was recommended.

CONCLUSION: Despite the list of helpful recommendations, it is important to remember the visiting team’s overall assessment that our program is one of “strength.” There are, however, improvements to be made. The Department is indeed committed to improving itself and appreciates the visiting team for its efforts and for its very insight advice.

Respectfully submitted,

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Department of Criminal Justice