

Political Science Program Review

Site visit and evaluation report

11 April 2017

Overview

We found the Political Science program at Weber State to be a dynamic, student-centered enterprise. Since its last review the department has added two faculty colleagues and has a new staff member, as well as an established relationship with the Olene S. Walker Institute of Politics and Public Service. The program has recently reorganized their major and minor programs and has adjusted some of their advising practices. Recent gains in course enrollment (student credit hours) and an uptick in declared majors are additional evidence that the program's strengths pay dividends. Opportunities and challenges ahead include an anticipated retirement and faculty replacement and the replacement of the outgoing director of the Walker Institute, as well as the physical transition of the entire department to swing space in anticipation of a new building.

Program strengths

It is clear that the Political Science faculty at Weber State put student engagement front and center in both their overall mission and day-to-day interactions. The faculty and staff demonstrate a collegial manner and work together very effectively. They are very satisfied with and confident in their current department leadership. Faculty are fully engaged in the shared enterprise of the department and committed to high impact practices. They have high quality partnerships in their mission both within and outside the Weber State community.

Their leadership is a key strength. Every single colleague identified Professor Kuehl's service as chair as a critical feature of their current quality of life. His evenhanded demeanor and collaborative work style clearly provide a foundation for faculty excellence and program quality. Our conversations with him suggested that he is an astute leader, willing to take initiative when it is called for, while also recognizing when delegating would be more productive to community goals.

Recent changes in the curriculum are well conceived. Given the refined expertise and teaching interests of current faculty, and the fact that many students with a choice about whether to adopt the new structure chose to do so, they appear well received. The breadth of the courses offered and the fact that most majors have an experience with each faculty member is impressive. In spite of having a small department with understandable limitations in course offerings, students have a range of options, and they are complimentary regarding the nature of instruction, the opportunities afforded them by the degree program, and the overall structure of the program.

In addition, faculty in the program seemed very satisfied with their place in the curriculum and course assignments, with General Education service courses equitably distributed and every faculty member able to teach and develop courses in their own area of expertise. As a result, faculty connect with interested students to collaborate on scholarly projects, community engaged research, and internships opportunities.

The program receives key assistance in its educational and engagement mission from the Olene S. Walker Institute of Politics and Public Service. This relatively new entity on campus has had a profound capacity building effect on the program. It promotes high impact civic engagement through a variety of practices, including developing students in preparation for internships and community engagement, sponsoring speakers and events of interest campus-wide, and being a beacon for engaged and informed citizenship at Weber State. The partnership with the Walker Institute complements the relationships the program has established over the years with other local, state and national public sector organizations, and it provides students with a full range of opportunities to apply the knowledge they gain in the classroom. Although the program and its faculty have already established itself with this level of engagement and student internships, the Walker Institute has quickly made itself a vital partner that the program makes impressive use of.

The program is extraordinary in the range of engaged learning it offers students, and for the respect expressed by each faculty member for the diversity of opportunities represented by colleagues. Both students and faculty described a rich swath of engagement. Students reported being connected to research, internship, and engagement opportunities consistent with their interests. They are mentored into quality graduate and professional programs and careers. Because many of the faculty are pursuing scholarly interests with a community engaged component, they have been able to provide ample opportunities for their upper division students. The students we met were excellent representations of the program's mission. In particular, they had a deep respect for key concepts in political theory, an excellent grasp of the different subfields of Political Science, and the role of government institutions and civil society nationally and globally.

Program Challenges and Opportunities

Change in the leadership of the Walker Institute triggers a great uncertainty the Political Science program faces. The inaugural leader established a dynamic campus center and left a big footprint to fill. The Institute's success has been in part due to its symbiotic connection to the faculty and students in Political Science; no doubt it has both complemented and freed up departmental resources to build and expand on its broad range of student engagement. Its continued success is an important factor in the program's future development.

We regard the open door policy and attitude of the faculty and key role the Chair plays in advisement as both important contributors to the vibrant culture of the department. The last

program review suggested these responsibilities be distributed across the faculty, but we agree with the program's position that the existing division of labor is appropriate (some faculty advising minors specific to their teaching and mentoring and the Chair advising all students and certifying their readiness for graduation). The new practice of having the Chair reach out to students via a visit to each Political Science classroom at the start of the semester, and providing a map of how existing coursework fits with major and University requirements, appear to be smart additions. The College's recent investment in an academic advisor to promote its General Education requirements to non-majors is likely to contribute to enrollment gains and higher visibility for the courses.

It may be difficult to identify a stable cohort among lower division students, given that the nature of the undergraduate journey at Weber. However, providing long range planning tools to students earlier in the program – perhaps even in the gateway courses – may assist students in planning more effectively. We were impressed with the faculty's generosity in adding independent studies to their already busy schedules. The extent to which they are necessitated by students being unable to get the classes they need when they need them must be assessed and incorporated into the overall curriculum planning. While not a major concern, we feel this is worthy of some consideration.

We were also very impressed with the students and recent graduates we met during the course of our visit. Given the department's size and the number of graduates each year, a high proportion seemed to be going on to post graduate study. While it was clear that the faculty and staff were very student centered, we did not hear much about work to identify and lift students who were struggling – a natural population at an open enrollment institution. Using high performing students as peer tutors or advisors can serve to attract new majors while serving to engage upper division students in service.

The faculty accomplishes a great deal of engaged scholarship with very few resources. It would be beneficial to have more support for the array of projects they initiate with students and in the community. It was clear from our conversations with faculty that they have effectively leveraged most every institutional opportunity for support. The ongoing partnership with the Walker Institute might provide soft money expertise that could fund more travel for scholarly research and conference participation. Similarly, the creation of an Advisory Board could lend expertise and energy to needs targeted by the program. The establishment of such a group is on the department's radar and should be a priority in the coming years.

The external member of the review team was very surprised by the culture at Weber around class times, both the early morning 7:30 sections and the lack of classes meeting mid to late afternoon. Having a common time on campus when one can expect most students, faculty and staff to be free can provide wonderful community building opportunities. However, if it reduces the likelihood that courses conflict, especially when courses are offered only once a year, it may be time to experiment by offering a small number of courses in that midafternoon time slot and gauge student reaction.

Program Recommendations

The Dean, Chair and faculty all agreed that the vacancy caused by the retirement of their distinguished colleague in Comparative Politics should be promptly filled with a new faculty member who shares that focus in Comparative Politics. The last review team strongly recommended that this key area of the curriculum be expanded. In order for the department to continue to represent core areas of the discipline and prepare students appropriately, we agree that the next hire must be in this subfield. A broad search may secure a new colleague ready to contribute to the community engaged learning that is standard in the department. We were pleased to learn that the leadership of the College is committed to this key hire.

The new leader of the Walker Institute is an equally important priority. As noted above, the Walker Institute is a key partner for this program. The out-going director enjoyed the community the Political Science program provided, the department benefitted from the teaching expertise and the students from the connections to outstanding internships, alumni and overall engaged learning and professional development. Even with this close connection the Institute additionally worked effectively across campus and continues to pursue initiatives with a wide range of departments. It makes sense to us that the new Director be formally affiliated with the Political Science department, that priority be given to Political Scientists whose substantive interests complement the current faculty, and that the program has a particularly strong voice in the search itself.

The department has adopted a sensible assessment plan informed by the institutional expectations and adhering closely to the guidelines provided. However, it is unclear whether the current assessment protocol can fulfill the goals of feedback on the key learning outcomes and position the department to fine tune its direction. Designing and implementing authentic assessments to inform the department of the success of curricular changes will be key in the coming years. We recommend the program seek support from institutional colleagues and work as a full faculty team to plan the next phase of their assessments. These conversations need to engage a more comprehensive set of indicators. As noted in the self-study, there may be measures of student engagement – in advisement, event attendance, internship participation, service learning – that might be leveraged by the department in the future.

Conclusion

Our review of the Political Science program reflected in its self-study and our site visit was enjoyable and even inspiring. It's energizing to see such a vibrant example that provides a good example for those of us both on the Weber State campus as well as across the country. The engagement and collegiality of faculty, the leadership of the program, the attention paid to high impact practices and an engaged curriculum, and a thoughtful curriculum plan all contribute to the success of this program. We are impressed, though unsurprised, that the Political Science program at Weber State sees increasing student numbers and accolades from

graduates and its surrounding community. It has been a pleasure to conduct this review and see this program firsthand.

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