

**External Review of the Early Childhood Studies Department at Sonoma
State University**

Final Report

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Prepared by

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Introduction

This report is the product of an external review of the Early Childhood Studies (ECS) Department at Sonoma State University (SSU). The external review consisted of analysis of the ECS Department's *Program Review Self-Study* and a one-day site visit held on April 6, 2018. The *Program Review Self-Study* document included an overview of the program, student and faculty profiles, assessment of student learning outcomes (SLO's), and information about program quality and integrity as well as program instruction, advising, and resources. The extensive links to source documents (e.g., syllabi, assessment rubrics, and the student handbook) found in the *Program Review Self-Study* were especially helpful and provided immediate evidence of the program materials and resources being discussed. Dr. Johanna Filp-Hanke, the Department Assessment Coordinator, should be commended for the comprehensive and thoughtful manner in which the *Program Review Self-Study* was organized and for her careful attention to detail.

This report begins with the description of the methodology used to conduct the external review, followed by a brief overview of the ECS Department at SSU. Program strengths are discussed next, followed by an overview of the challenges currently faced by the Department. Opportunities available to the program given the current context of early childhood education (ECE) and the Department's considerable strengths are then discussed. The report concludes with recommendations that should be considered as the Department continues to work towards its mission of preparing knowledgeable and caring early childhood professionals.

Methodology

The first step of the external review process consisted of a document analysis of the *Program Review Self-Study* report developed by the ECS Department. Review of this document

provided an overview of the program as well as materials such as course syllabi, faculty biographies, and assessment data. Careful examination of this report generated a series of questions, as well as insights, that were used during the site visit to obtain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the ECS Department.

The site visit began with a meeting with Dr. Johanna Filp-Hanke, the ECS Department Assessment Coordinator, and Dr. Emiliano Ayala, the Director of Assessment and Accreditation for the School of Education at SSU. This meeting provided an overview of the day and served to communicate the value that the School of Education places on assessment and reflection as a tool to support student success and faculty development. Subsequent meetings were held with a group of approximately 40 ECS students, Dr. Carlos Ayala, the Dean of the School of Education, ECS faculty (both tenure/tenure-track and lecturers), Dr. Chiara Bacigalupa, the Chair of the ECS Department, and Dr. Karen Moranski, the Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs. The site visit also included a tour of the campus Children's School.

The following questions were used to assess student and faculty perceptions of and experiences with the ECS Department at SSU. Although all of the questions were not asked during each of the meetings, they provide insight into the approach used to obtain a more fine-grained understanding of both the Department and the larger University context.

- What are you proudest of in terms of the ECS Department?
- What is working especially well in the ECS Department?
- What do you see as the biggest challenge facing the department?
- If you could wave a magic wand, what would you ask for?
- What resources do you need to do your job successfully?

Following the site visit, information from the *Program Review Self-Study*, student and faculty meetings, and observations made while on campus were analyzed for underlying patterns that then informed the findings of the external review.

Overview of the Program

The ECS Department is located within the School of Education at SSU and is dedicated to providing graduates with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to work effectively with children in early childhood (birth to age 8). Students earn a Bachelor of Arts degree and can select from two areas of concentration: Early Childhood Development and Early Childhood Education and graduates enter a variety of fields that include teaching, social work, counseling, and special education. The program has a strong commitment to social justice, which was evident in the *Program Review Self-Study* document, course syllabi, and in conversations with faculty.

The ECS major is a new program at SSU and began in the Fall of 2012. The program has grown rapidly since its inception; in the Fall of 2017 there were a total of 413 ECS majors, making it the third largest major at SSU. Dr. Bacigalupa and Dr. Filp-Hanke have done a tremendous amount of work to ensure that the program maintains high-quality standards and a commitment to student success despite having a limited number of tenure/tenure track faculty and increasing enrollment.

Strengths

The strengths of the program were evident in the quality of the curriculum, the use of assessment to inform practice, the organizational climate, and the faculty.

Quality of the Curriculum

The quality and intentionality of the curriculum is a major strength of the ECS Department. The SLO's of the major are aligned with the Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs standards set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a national organization focused on the quality of educational and

developmental services for children from birth through age 8. This alignment ensures that the curriculum is based on current research and best practice recommendations in the field and that students are prepared to enter the workforce with the skills, knowledge and competencies expected by employers. Adherence to a set of national standards also ensures that the program is prepared to meet changes in the ECE landscape, including the recent implementation of the Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) and the proposed changes to the Children's Center Permit structure currently underway in the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC).

The quality of the Children's School also strengthens the curriculum of the ECS Department. The outdoor environment in particular is a model for what programs can accomplish when they dream big and place developmental science about the environments and experience children need to learn and thrive at the forefront of decision-making. The teachers and director of the center should be commended for their vision and commitment to best practices.

Student Learning Assessment

The careful assessment of SLO's and willingness to engage in continuous improvement is a significant strength of the ECS department. Student progress towards meeting SLO's is carefully monitored by the Department and thoughtfully used to make adjustments to the program curriculum. Supporting student success is at the forefront of these efforts, and faculty is not afraid to make changes to the program of study in order to achieve their mission of preparing knowledgeable and caring early childhood professionals. The most noteworthy example of this is the Department's creation of the second concentration in Early Childhood Development. That this task was undertaken when the program was so new is indeed noteworthy and reflects the Department's commitment to excellence and responsiveness to student needs. The ECS faculty's use of data to inform their own practice as educators is strength that should be noted by

the University, and the ECS Department can be held up as an example of how the assessment of student learning can be used to inform curriculum.

Organizational Climate and Faculty

Another strength of the ECS Department is its organizational climate and faculty. Faculty genuinely seem to like one another and are committed to student success and the success of the Department. ECS students noted the faculty's passion for early childhood and willingness to engage with students as a strength of the program. The extraordinary leadership shown by Dr. Bacigalupa and Dr. Filp-Hanke during the five years that the Department has been in existence is remarkable, and they should be recognized for their dedication to the program, its faculty, and its students.

Faculty expertise matches key facets of early childhood, and the addition of a new tenure track faculty with expertise in infant toddler development will make the program of study even stronger. Importantly, the Dean is committed to the success of the ECS Department and its students and has a clear understanding of the critical importance of the early years on children's success in school and in life. His support of the Department has been key to its success during a time of tremendous growth and has helped to ensure that program quality has not been compromised.

Challenges

Many of the challenges faced by the Department seem to be the result of the uneven quality of faculty in the Department, university restrictions on what classes students can take, and a lack of resources provided by the University related to advising, especially for students transferring from community colleges.

Uneven Quality of Faculty

Although the Department takes great care to support and mentor lectures, as described in the *Program Review Self-Study*, students shared that the quality of faculty was often uneven. This disparity was evident in their comments regarding having different experiences in different sections of the same class based on who the instructor was and their belief that oftentimes lecturers were hired at the last minute and had little time to prepare for their course. Students commented that it was especially important to have seasoned faculty teach the Portfolio class, as it requires an instructor with knowledge of the program of study and the signature assignments. Students also felt that this course should be three units rather than one because of the workload involved.

The unevenness in the quality/expertise of the faculty was also evident in student comments about advising. While some students spoke about the wonderful experiences they had with advising, others stated that the experience was frustrating because of their advisor's lack of knowledge. Faculty stated that sometimes advising could be cumbersome because of the level of expertise it requires and the confusing nature of University requirements. Faculty also noted that advising, when done well, takes up a good deal of their time and takes time away from other important activities such as pursuing their research agenda.

Availability of Courses

Students stated that they wish they had the ability to take courses outside of the Department. This sentiment came primarily from students in the Early Childhood Development concentration who felt that too many of the courses focused on preparing students to enter the teaching profession. Students in this concentration also stated that they wished they had the opportunity to have field placements more closely related to their anticipated career (e.g.,

hospital setting, community-based program serving young children and families). It is important to note that this challenge is surely the result of this concentration being so new, and students were aware that faculty were actively working to address these issues. Students from both concentrations said that prerequisites often prevented them from taking courses outside of the department, despite advising documents that indicated these courses were available to ECS students.

Advising

In addition to the challenges with advising noted above, students were very vocal about the challenges they faced transferring to SSU from community college. Students stated that the process was confusing, that they received little support from the University during this process, and that this negatively influenced their ability to graduate in four years.

Opportunities

The considerable strengths of the ECS Department afford the program with several important opportunities, described below:

- The Department's focus on children birth to 8 years of age is somewhat unique within the California State University (CSU) system, making ECS well-positioned to assume a leadership role in preparing students to meet the recommendations provided by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC) (2015) report, *Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce for Children Birth –Eight*, a guiding policy document for the field of ECE.
- The Department's focus on children birth to 8 years of age, its alignment with NAEYC standards, and its skill in using assessment data to inform practice make it uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of how the CSUs will integrate the new CCTC requirements for early childhood professional preparation into coursework.
- The Children's School at SSU is a model for best practice in ECE, especially as related to the outdoor environment. The work being done at the center could be used to leverage research funds, attract graduate students, and advocate for what high-quality early learning looks like.

Recommendations

The following is a list of recommendations based on the external review process:

- The University should continue to make funds available to hire tenure/tenure track faculty in the ECS department. This will help address faculty workload issues as well as the unevenness of the quality of teaching and advising. Particular emphasis, and a goal of the ECS faculty as stated in the *Program Review Self-Study* document, is to hire faculty from diverse backgrounds who represent the diversity of the student body.
- In order to address the Department and University level concerns about advising, concerns about the quality of advising for transfer students, and the University and CSU's commitment to improving four-year graduation rates, GI 2025 money should be allocated to improve the frequency and quality of advising provided to students.
- Because the ECS program is committed to providing hands-on experiences to students that mirror what they will be doing in the workplace, it is in need of classroom space that accommodates the type of messy (e.g., paint, gardening, gross motor activities) and collaborative learning that takes place in ECS courses. Classrooms with storage and that are assigned consistently throughout semesters would help facilitate the kind of learning that is essential to preparing early childhood professionals.
- Recent changes being proposed by the CCTC will require that early childhood students have more field based learning as part of their professional preparation. Unfortunately, the Children's School is too small to meet this requirement and managing field placements can be time consuming for faculty and may place the University at risk. For this reason, it is recommended that: 1) the University consider building a new Children's School that can accommodate more lab placements (and possibly enroll students from the local community to help generate revenue), and 2) create a field placement coordinator position to ensure that the requirements of the CCTC mandates are met, systems are in place for student supervision, and that students are being sent to field experience placements that have been fully vetted for both safety and quality.

Conclusion

In sum, it was a pleasure visiting and getting to know more about the ECS Department at SSU. As noted in this report, the program has an abundance of strengths that are extraordinary given the program's short time as a Department within the School of Education. Faculty, staff, and students were warm and welcoming and administration is clearly committed

to the program's success. The ECS Department should be proud of all that it has accomplished over the last five years!

References

Institute of Medicine & National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.