

Sonoma State Human Development Program - External Review Report - 2023

The Human Development program at Sonoma State is a robust interdisciplinary program that bridges multiple disciplines including Anthropology, Psychology, Sociology, and Women and Gender Studies. The program offers a cutting-edge curriculum designed to prepare students to work with diverse groups of people across the life course in professions that vary from the medical and mental health fields to the social service and educational sector. The focus on understanding the life course in socio-cultural context and using an intersectional framework reflects best practices in the field of human development. Students' education is further enhanced by the incorporation of a number of labor-intensive high impact practices (HIPs) into the curriculum, including service learning courses, internships, and research-intensive courses where students complete original research projects and present their findings at a public conference. The emerging focus on health and disability in the curriculum is positioning Human Development to be particularly well-suited to train students for a variety of medical and mental health professions, including social work, counseling, occupational therapy, physical therapy, nursing, and other allied disciplines. The program works to incorporate intersectional and culturally-rooted understandings of health that are at the forefront of emerging approaches to health in California and beyond. The flexible and wide-ranging curriculum also prepares students for a variety of careers in the fields of education, social services, human resources, and other human-centered professions.

The Human Development program at Sonoma State was created in 1994 as an experimental interdisciplinary program and was largely run by allied faculty in associated departments until 2014, when the program was moved into the Department of Anthropology. It is currently largely run by one tenured faculty member, Dr. Ben Smith, who was hired to continue to develop the program in 2016. Dr. Smith has transformed an already strong program into an exceptional program that has maintained the number of major students (currently around 66) and FTES amidst a steep decline in the student population. Dr. Smith is universally highly regarded by faculty, administrators, and students as an excellent and caring professor who has created an innovative, interdisciplinary program that reflects the priorities of the university and college. All of these stakeholders, including students, are clearly aware that he is overworked and that his workload is unsustainable, however.

Sonoma State is also currently undergoing a dramatic reorganization of the academic units at the university as a response to a declining student population and financial crisis, and departments across the university are being required to merge in order to use departmental resources more efficiently and prevent the closure of some departments. Although very troubling to many of the faculty, this reorganization also has the potential to reinvigorate the disciplines, creating new interdisciplinary connections that can be used to creatively address 21st century problems in innovative ways. The Human Development program and the Department of Anthropology, have thus proposed a merger. This merger, as proposed, will potentially bring the larger number of HD majors to support the declining number of Anthropology majors and also hopefully allow the larger number of faculty members in

Anthropology to help manage Dr. Smith's advising and teaching workload with Human Development majors. The Department of Geography, Environment, and Planning will also be part of this merger.

Although not discussed extensively in the self-study, much of my time during the on-site visit was spent discussing the impending merger of the Human Development program with the Department of Anthropology, which will restructure the program in several ways. The core faculty of this department will consist of Dr. Smith, Dr. Alexis Boutin, Dr. Thomas Whitley, and Dr. Allison Ford. There seems to be a lot of positive feeling amongst the faculty and administration about working together to develop this new program and it seems to be a well-thought out and innovative plan to reduce redundancies and more equitably share the workload.

In the following sections, I will evaluate and make suggestions regarding the curriculum, the need for more resources, and the program's responsiveness to student needs.

CURRICULUM

Curriculum Coherency and Currency and the Relevance of Program Learning Outcomes

As appropriate to the interdisciplinary nature of the field, the human development curriculum includes both interdisciplinary courses within the major, taught largely by Dr. Smith, as well as a number of course options in other departments that fulfill different aspects of the lifespan requirements. The courses reflect a need to cover the lifespan from childhood through adulthood and aging from different disciplinary perspectives. The number of human development courses has significantly increased over the past five years, which has allowed for the topical content to be presented in a more interdisciplinary fashion appropriate to the field and to be focused more narrowly on issues of life course.

The program learning outcomes reflect the increasing emphasis in the field on social justice, intersectionality, and service-learning, one which many human development programs including the program at CSULB are integrating into the curriculum. The PLOs are appropriately mapped throughout the curriculum, as Dr. Smith has demonstrated in the curricular map in the self-study (pg. 15). There has also been a concerted effort to integrate a new PLO having to do with using health, wellbeing, and ability as a framework from which to understand development throughout the life course. This learning outcome connects the curriculum to the career paths of many of the students at Sonoma State and the needs of California employers in the health sector. The addition of this PLO demonstrates the currency of the program and its ability to adapt to the needs and interests of students and the larger state economy.

Of particular note is the way in which the curriculum speaks directly to students' future career paths through the use of HIPs pedagogies throughout the curriculum. The program now requires a service-learning course (HDEV 322: Politics and Ethics of Service in the Helping Professions) where students complete a number of hours working at one of two local social

service providers and then connect that experience to the larger curriculum during class. The second HIPs course that is now required is HD 450: Producing Research on the Life Course, where students engage in a class research project and then present their results in a spring public mini-conference, which includes outside scholars who present their research and comment on student work. These efforts are to be commended and were cited by students as some of their most meaningful experiences in the program and as central to their professional development in the major. Not only are students able to directly apply what they are learning to their everyday lives, but they are also developing professional skills and gaining insight into potential career paths.

Effectiveness of Learning Outcomes Assessment and Use of Assessment for Program Improvement

The syllabi I reviewed and the class observation that I attended (in HDEV 330: Unequal Childhoods in the United States) reflect a wide variety of assessments used to evaluate students' achievement of learning outcome goals. During the class, for example, students presented research that they had been conducting on the "Portrait of Sonoma County" local community documents designed to assess the well-being of Sonoma County residents. As the original documents produced by the county were centered on adulthood, Dr. Smith asked his students to produce reports on childhood in the county. Students were instructed to use the theoretical frameworks they had been developing throughout the class to illuminate local data on childhoods including structural violence, intersectionality, and social and cultural capital. The students' presentations were well-researched and connected primary data to the theory in critical and creative ways. Students clearly had a good understanding of the main concepts in the course and were able to apply them to ongoing issues of importance in the community. Students also reported to me in a group conversation after the class that they found this and other assessments in their human development courses that encouraged them to think about larger socio-cultural contexts enriching and important. They felt they could apply the skills and knowledge they were learning to their current work lives and one student even used her research report to inform discussions at the social services agency at which she worked. Taken as a whole, these student projects met all six of the program learning outcomes. Similar assessments were reflected throughout the syllabi provided to me before the campus visit demonstrating high-quality assessments that enriched student learning and met learning outcomes.

As Dr. Smith notes in the self-study, a number of changes in the curriculum, the ongoing reorganization of the program, and larger societal disruptions including the COVID-19 pandemic and wildfires have made it difficult to consistently implement ongoing assessment of the program. He has moved away from the use of exit surveys in the HD 490 Senior Seminar which tended to measure student satisfaction rather than assessment of the achievement of learning outcomes, which is a good step forward. He did provide some limited data that suggests that students are applying their knowledge of the ethical and political concerns involved in providing services to the community (PLO #5) to their service-learning placements. He also provided evidence that students are able to identify and apply the theories that they are learning about

in HD 321 to a documentary coming of age story. Once the human development program has been integrated into the Department of Anthropology and further curricular adjustments have been made, Dr. Smith plans to create an ongoing assessment plan that addresses each of the six PLOs, building on the already solid assessments he has begun to conduct. Of course, this will require resources that are in short supply right now, as Dr. Smith is already carrying a tremendous service load. This level of assessment would only be possible if some units of reassigned time were allocated to Dr. Smith or if additional faculty are able to significantly participate in this process.

Curricular Recommendations

1. Expand the health-related focus of the program

One of the most promising areas of growth in the Human Development program is the focus on health, wellness, and ability. Health professions are one of the most significant interests of students at Sonoma State (and across the CSU system) and a massive area of growth in our economy. Critical human development education in this area is especially important as we are facing an aging and diversifying population and multiple public health crises, including increases in youth mental health problems, addiction, and climate-related health concerns, all of which are related to larger inequities in society. The Human Development curriculum is particularly well-suited to set the foundation for students who wish to pursue the health professions at the Masters or above level, including MA-level social workers, mental health and educational counselors, special education teachers, Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, psychologists, nurses, and medical doctors. Human Development also prepares students to work at the BA-level as social service workers, early childhood workers, and people who work with the elderly in nursing homes, hospice, and other institutions. The focus on health in socio-cultural context, which seeks to illuminate health disparities in particular, promote best practices when working with diverse populations in California and beyond.

In my conversations with faculty and administrators, it sounds like there is a renewed focus on helping students who enter the university and are interested in the health professions find their niche. Human Development can play a unique role in the landscape of the health sciences in the university in its focus on the integration of social and biological sciences and understanding health in context. Expanding the focus on health could be a significant way to increase student enrollment in HD, but also to increase student retention at the university as a whole. Students, who are not able to complete the nursing program and are more oriented towards the social sciences and humanities, for example, might find an HD major to be an attractive alternative that will allow them to pursue similar career goals. My suggestions for developing this area of the program include:

- **Hiring an additional faculty member in Human Development whose focus can develop this area. A particularly good area might be health equity, which might also attract more diverse candidates.**
- **Continuing to develop the curriculum both in terms of new classes and in the cross-listing of classes around this area of interest.**

- **Expanding the internship program to include more opportunities for students to do internships in the health professions.**

2. Develop a Human Development Minor and/or Additional Credentials

The Human Development curriculum could serve as the basis for new minor or a certificate program. The program would be attractive minor for many students across the university - including students interested in careers in health, education, and social services. Developing a minor or other certificate program would be a good way to promote the growth human development and recruit students to the major, especially if more faculty are hired to share the workload of administering the work. Drawing in students from Kinesiology could be particularly fruitful, as there a number of synergies between these programs that faculty are developing.

3. Consider Offering More Hybrid and Online Asynchronous Classes

Students noted a lack of hybrid and online asynchronous classes and wished there were more offerings in different modalities. Especially students who are balancing full-time work and school benefit from being able to take some of their classes online. As discussed below, teaching HIPs courses in hybrid modalities could further help to reduce the tremendous workload of the Human Development faculty without having to eliminate these highly-valued pedagogical practices.

SUFFICIENCY OF RESEOURCES

As all of the faculty, administrators, and students that I met with were well aware, the Human Development is run largely by one faculty member – Dr. Ben Smith – who is significantly overworked. Not only does he do most of the advising of the human development students, he also shoulders the burden of administering the service-learning and research components of the program, in addition to much of the program-level service. This includes recruiting students, managing service-learning and internship students, scheduling classes, advising, and communicating with students about requirements and opportunities. His workload has been particularly exacerbated by the removal of the three units of reassigned time that he was previously given as program coordinator. Under the new arrangement, the chair of Anthropology has taken over the administrative aspects of the program, although with the limited reassigned that he has been allocated for his chair role of both programs, he is not able to fully execute both positions (nor should he be expected to). With a faculty to student ratio of 1:66, there clearly needs to be more tenure-track faculty hired and more reassigned time given for administrative duties in order to fulfill the needs of the program. Without further resources, it will be necessary to scale back or eliminate many of the innovative aspects of the program.

My two major recommendations to address the lack of faculty resources in human development are as follows:

- **Hire at least one, and preferably two, tenure-line faculty as soon as possible.** My recommendation would be to hire a faculty member in the area of ability and disability, and possibly in the area of health equity, to build up that dimension of the program as discussed above. A second hire might focus on health and wellness across the life course. My recommendation would also be to work towards crafting a job description that would attract a diverse applicant pool.
- **Reinstate the three units of reassigned time for the human development coordinator.**

I also recognize that the university is currently in a very dire financial situation this year and so I would also like to make some suggestions on how to manage the workload if these resources are not immediately available.

Managing the Advising Workload

Although the faculty in the Department of Anthropology have agreed to share the advising load for the Human Development majors, Dr. Smith is still primarily doing most of the advising for the HD students because they know him best and seek him out, despite the other anthropology faculty being available and willing to advise students. This has become especially burdensome as the three units of reassigned time that used to be given to the HD coordinator have been rescinded. There was some concern expressed to me over whether this situation would improve after the merger with Anthropology, as Dr. Smith will continue to be the primary instructor in Human Development classes and students will continue to seek him out.

Recommendation: Advising should be broken up by student last names (or on some other equitable basis) and assigned to faculty. Students should stick with their advisors throughout their major experience in order to avoid having to change advisors in the PeopleSoft system. Although there may be some discrepancy at times in the number of students assigned to each faculty advisor, it will prevent the current situation where Dr. Smith has taken on the bulk of the students.

Managing the HIPs Workload

One of the major factors in Dr. Smith's workload burden is his engagement in high-impact practices in his courses. This includes a required service-learning course that is managed by Dr. Smith, optional internships at the service-learning sites that students can pursue once they have completed the service-learning, also managed by Dr. Smith, and a research intensive course that requires students to complete an original research project and present this research at a formal, public conference that he also organizes. The Department of Anthropology also has a number of courses that engage students in HIPs, including hands-on fieldwork in the different four fields approach, and research and internship opportunities. There is some concern over how or whether this workload around the HIPs can be shared in the merger.

Recommendations: It will be important for faculty to engage in a frank discussion around how to manage these workload-heavy HIPs courses. It is clear that the amount of work that Dr.

Smith is putting into these programs is unsustainable without another hire or other faculty to participate in the management of these programs. It is also not clear that other faculty are interested in participating in these classes, as they were created as part of a separate program and without their buy-in.

Some suggestions on how to make these courses more manageable from a workload perspective include:

- **Utilize the Center for Community Engagement** in the service-learning course to support the application process, relationship management with the community partner, and student-community partner problems.
- **Reduce the frequency of or eliminate the conference associated with the research methods class.** Although this is clearly a wonderful learning and community-building opportunity for students, there are other, similar, opportunities for students to present their research to a larger audience, including the Social Action Student Symposium (SASSy). It is not clear that other faculty have the bandwidth to assist in the running of this conference.
- **Run the two HIPS courses as hybrid F2F/asynchronous courses that take into account the service-learning and fieldwork research as part of the course time.** I was surprised to see that these courses meet as frequently as they do. In the Department of Human Development at CSULB, for example, our three-unit internship course only meets for 1 hour and 15 minutes each week, as students are spending six hours each week at their internship. We understand that the time that the faculty member spends coordinating with the organizations hosting students and dealing with paperwork and student issues at the internship, constitutes part of the time that an instructor would normally spend in the classroom. It is both a burden on the instructor and student to spend too much time on the classroom when much of the learning is occurring at the agency or fieldsite. Online reflections and discussions can supplement experiences in the field.
- **Change the curriculum to offer these HIPS classes as electives rather than requirements and teach them more infrequently.** If there are not resources to effectively support these programs, then they should not be required, especially if only one faculty is able and willing to teach them.

UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENTS' NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

I met with around twenty-five students during my visit, all of whom were students in Dr. Smith's Unequal Childhoods course, and we did a series of mini focus-group exercises. Students generally reported a high degree of satisfaction with the human development program. They reported that they felt that they were receiving a high-quality education and felt particularly supported by Dr. Smith who taught most of their courses and was the main advisor for most of the student in the major. They did express some concerns about what would happen when he went on sabbatical in Spring 2024, especially as many were graduating. This speaks to the importance of spreading out both the advising and teaching workload, so that students feel connected to multiple faculty members who are able to run the program in the absence of Dr. Smith.

Students also felt that information about possible career paths could be more legible on the department website and in the advising materials. One student suggested that an infographic might be helpful to show students the variety of careers that can be pursued with a Human Development degree. Creating more public-facing information that links the program to specific career outcomes can help to recruit student and to potentially reduce the advising workload.

Students also reported that they wished there were more Human Development classes offered and a greater variety to choose from. They sometimes found it difficult to fulfill the requirements and enroll in classes when there were only a few choices each semester. Again, this speaks to the need to expand the faculty to offer more course choices for students.

SUMMARY

The Human Development program at Sonoma State is an innovative, interdisciplinary program positioned to educate students who will be serving diverse communities in their future careers. The curriculum is rigorous, cohesive, and student-centered. The incorporation of high-impact practices demonstrates a commitment to experiential learning and the professional development of students. The primary challenge of the program is the heavy workload shouldered by Dr. Smith, who, as program coordinator, plays a central role in advising, teaching, and program administration. The forthcoming merger with the Department of Anthropology presents an opportunity to address some of these challenges through the redistribution of the advising and teaching workload, as well as a reevaluation of the commitment to the HIPs practices in the new department.

The Human Development program has tremendous potential for growth, especially in the expansion of the focus on health, wellness, and (dis)ability. In its social science orientation, the program addresses important issues in the provision of health services that often go unaddressed in the traditional study of health sciences. This includes the socio-cultural contexts of health and working with diverse population, health inequities within an intersectional framework, and critical approaches to health institutions. The allocation of additional resources to the program including the hiring of two new tenure-track faculty, reinstating the reassigned time for administrative duties including recruitment, and the development of a minor, would allow for this program to flourish and continue to innovate in providing a critical, interdisciplinary education to a diverse student population.

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