

APPENDIX IV

Program Review, B.A. in Political Science Sonoma State University Spring 2015

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Overview

I spent a very full and enlightening day at Sonoma State on April 22nd, 2015. While there, I met with four of the six members of the tenure track faculty (Cynthia Boaz, David McCuan, Catherine Nelson, and Diane Parness), a long time lecturer (Barry Preisler), two separate groups of students (one group of ten students over lunch, and a POLS 302 class), Interim Dean John Wingard, and Provost Andrew Rogerson.

Prior to writing this report, I also reviewed a number of documents, including a draft of the Political Science Department's self-study from Spring of 2015, the previous external review by John Travis in 2008, the Department's Program Review and Assessment Plan from 2007-2008, data on POLS FTES from 2008-2013, student faculty ratio data from that same time frame, diversity data for the department and SSU overall, data from the Student Exit Survey from 2012-2014, the departmental website, the SSU Mission Statement and Diversity Vision Statement, and I reviewed the curriculum of similar sized CSU Political Science departments.

Curricular mission

The department's curricular mission is completely appropriate for a strong comprehensive undergraduate Political Science program at a university that emphasizes a solid liberal arts training for all students. The department does an excellent job of instilling a sense of political competence and civic engagement in its students. Students report feeling confident in their critical thinking, policy analysis, current events understanding, and many other very relevant skills for POLS majors. The department is doing an exceptional job of fulfilling the Universities' mission statement, particularly in terms of training students to "have a foundation for life-long learning" to "have a broad cultural perspective" particularly, of course to be "active citizens and leaders in society" who are "concerned with contributing to the health and well-being of the world at large".

The department appears to be doing a fantastic job of maximizing very limited resources and providing majors with perhaps even more than might be expected given the small number of tenure track faculty members and burdens on their time and energy. I came away from my

study of Sonoma State's Political Science Department feeling very impressed with the high quality education it is providing for its students.

Diversity

One area, however, where the department could use some improvement is in diversity. The SSU Diversity Statement says that the University will be "supporting, retaining, and attracting students, faculty, and staff who reflect the diversity of our larger society." While this may not be particularly the fault of members of the department, the faculty, staff, and students of the department are strikingly lacking in diversity. Compared to the SSU student population, Political Science students are significantly more likely to be White, and less likely to be Asian, Latino, or Multiracial. Women are a rather large majority of students on campus (63%), but a minority in the major (43%). Drilling down a bit on the ethnicity and gender data spanning the Fall 2008 to Fall 2014 time frame, it appears that the trend for ethnic diversity is encouraging, getting progressively more diverse over those years. The trend for gender is less striking and is in the direction of slightly less gender parity over that time period. I should note that though these numbers are disturbing, it is a problem common to most Political Science departments. The field tends to attract fewer women and minority students than most other social science disciplines.

It's difficult to come up with recommendations for improving diversity in the department, given that it is a pervasive problem in the discipline. One consideration is in hiring. Diverse faculty can serve as role models and mentors for students who might otherwise not feel as welcome in the department. Outreach within the university may also be possible, working to recruit students from all sorts of backgrounds. The curriculum does reflect a global, inclusive outlook. Minority and female students who are not majors may just not be aware of the merits of the major and its ability to encourage broad and diverse means of exploring the world.

Curriculum

The curriculum as it exists on paper is appropriate and in line with other Political Science Departments. The core courses cover the major fields in the discipline and prepare students well for additional study in the major. The pairing of a research methods course and an eventual capstone course in which students are expected to apply their recently acquired skills and knowledge is fantastic and well thought out.

The curriculum includes plenty of courses that encourage multicultural, multinational approaches to issues and problems. The curriculum reflects the contemporary state of the field of Political Science. It fosters creative thinking and problem solving. The faculty are well qualified, including some excellent long term lecturers who shoulder much of the teaching load.

However, in application, it appears that there are some issues. Specifically, there are issues with the frequency of course availability, subject areas with less faculty coverage than is ideal, a disconnect between the methods and senior seminar courses, a lack of innovative multi-

disciplinary approaches, and a potential need for new conceptions for the major. I'll address each in turn.

Course Availability

Course availability is clearly a problem. This is largely a result of a lack of a sufficient number of full time tenure track faculty (more on this later), compounded by a propensity for faculty to be heavily involved in service and activities outside the department, which stretches teaching resources even further. The catalog lists a more than sufficient list of courses, many of which students report they have never seen offered. Multiple students mentioned a desire not just to see catalog courses offered, but to see a more timely rotation of courses. In particular, they point to the bottleneck courses (302 and 498), and popular courses that are rarely taught (middle east, terrorism, Africa courses). This is a significant frustration for students that obviously presents a challenge to timely graduation. The solutions to this are difficult. Clearly more hiring is called for, but also a re-prioritization of tenure track faculty assigned to upper division courses might alleviate this problem somewhat.

Undercoverage

A related issue is that there is not as much faculty coverage of some areas within the discipline. Specifically, the department is lacking in American Politics institutionalists. Students seemed genuinely surprised to hear that most PS programs offer courses in Congress, the Presidency, the Courts, etc. Theory seems weak as well, but the new hire may alleviate that somewhat. Even in the relatively strong comparative politics section, the department is lacking in Africanists, courses on the EU, etc. Again, the department simply needs more hiring.

302/ 498

An issue that came up with almost everyone I spoke with was the disconnect between the 302 methods course and the senior seminar (498). There seem to be two main problems. One is that the 302 course is taught differently according to who the instructor is. Sometimes it is a more theoretical research design course and other times it is a more applied econometrics type course. The chief problem with that approach is that once students get to senior seminar, they are mixed in with students who took the other version and the 498 instructor expects them to be conversant in both versions. This creates tremendous frustration. Communication of expectations seems to be inadequate.

I had the opportunity to talk to the students in Prof. McCuan's 302 course (while he stepped out so they could speak freely). I was frankly stunned by the overwhelmingly positive attitude they had towards the course. In many PS departments, methods is the most reviled course, since students think they are getting away from math by choosing the major. It was clear that the course was very challenging. I was impressed by how much advanced methodology gets covered in the semester. Students very clearly valued the skills based learning they were getting though, and even though they were struggling in some cases, they felt supported and engaged. Many of them expressed a desire for MORE methods coursework.

I have several suggestions for solving this 302/498 issue. As many people suggested, it would be so much more beneficial to students to offer 2 semesters of methods. One could be research design and perhaps some qualitative methods and the other could be hands-on stats. Perhaps tinkering with the number of units for each course (from 4 to 3?) would help with the problem of zero sum units in the major. This would reduce student and faculty frustration at not being able to get to everything in one course, be pedagogically more sound, and it would provide students with more marketable skills when they graduate.

Senior Seminar also clearly has some issues. Students were very frustrated with not knowing the expected pre-requisite content, with the fact that there's a time gap between when students tend to take methods and the seminar, and with the limited range of faculty teaching the course. Perhaps it could be more evenly rotated between all faculty in the department, and perhaps expectations could be more clearly communicated to students as they go through the program.

Innovations

Overall, the curriculum design is solid and appropriate, but it is not especially innovative or creative. Given the limited resources of an under-staffed department, and the expectation by administrators that programs strive to be more interdisciplinary, it would make sense for the department to make more use of cross-listed courses and filling out the major with courses from other departments.

Another idea I heard from administrators, faculty and students (and something we are working on at my campus too) is creating concentrations or even skills certificates within the major. The idea is that it gives a sort of “credentialing” to the student which helps once they are on the job market. Some students complained that career placement was lacking (unsurprising given how full the plates of faculty already are), and a change such as this might at least give a nod towards valuing future careers (besides the already good work done on internships and study abroad). Perhaps, for example, a certificate in “political data analysis” could be created, maybe incorporating some statistics, psychology, computer science, etc. courses in addition to those you already offer in-house. Students could integrate things like working with Professor McCuan on his *California Initiative Project*, etc. as part of the curriculum. A related student project could be submitted for 498. I encourage the department to explore some new ideas such as these to make the program more future focused.

Program Effectiveness

All evidence points to a very effective program. Exit surveys reveal exceptional ratings by students in every area, with especially strong scores in critical thinking, responsible citizenship, and analytical writing, but truly with no weak spots. I was incredibly impressed by the poise and sophistication of the students I spoke with and the clear sense they had that the program was demanding, challenging, and rewarding.

Students have great extracurricular opportunities, like a strong Model United Nations program, and very successful placements for any student who desires an internship either within a branch of government, with a campaign, or with an NGO or non-profit.

There are clearly some very passionate, committed, student-centered faculty members in the department. Students tend to develop real nurturing relationships with faculty. Coming from a much larger campus, I admit to being struck by the personal connections between faculty and students at SSU (heck, even the fact that faculty seem to know most student's names bowls me over). Everyone from administrators to faculty to students recognize that this is a fantastic program that enriches student's lives, contributes to the community, and sets students on a course to lead successful lives of contribution to society.

Advising

One area which could use some tinkering to improve effectiveness is advising. Currently, students are assigned to an advisor based on last name. It is left up to the student to take the initiative to seek out any help. Both students and faculty expressed some concerns with how this is working out. One problem students mention is that some faculty are far more available to students than others, and some students have tried to contact advisors, but have found that they weren't in their offices during office hours. Aside from simple access, it seems that there is a communication breakdown. It sounds as if motivated, persistent students do manage to get good advising, but others fall through the cracks.

I have a couple of suggestions. One is to perhaps hold some sort of group orientation to advising each year. Many issues can be addressed in such a setting, and if the expectation is that every student attends, those who might have fallen through the cracks will not. Related to this, I understand that there is new course planner software that could perhaps be more effectively deployed. Another idea is to perhaps designate 2-3 advisors and give those faculty members relief from other service obligations (or perhaps even release time) in order to allow for them to see so many students. This sort of assignment generally works best if it is rotated regularly, so that it doesn't become an undue burden on the same few members of the faculty.

Resource Use

The small number of tenure track faculty members in this department are doing a remarkably good job of providing a well-rounded and effective course selection, and a high quality education to the majors. However, the full time faculty are stretched quite thin. Because of the small numbers, each member needs to contribute in significant ways outside of the classroom, including serving as an internship coordinator, grad program director, advisor, chair (obviously), coordinator of the Holocaust lecture series, advisor to MUN, etc. This stretch is compounded by the propensity (mentioned by multiple sources) for members of this department to also involve themselves heavily in service outside the department (some of which brings release time), which further stretches the meager numbers of tenure-track faculty. In the 2008 external report, the dearth of tenure track faculty was highlighted

as an issue for the department. At the time, the department was expecting to have 8 FTEF in tenure line positions in the following year, and the report urged more hiring to meet all of the demands. Since then, the number of majors has increased 27%, yet the number of tenure line faculty has decreased. After a new hire who starts in fall of 2015, there will be 6 full time tenure line faculty (one of whom is serving as chair), and one tenured faculty member on FERP (teaching half time). Given the burden on these few faculty (which also, I might add, includes fielding an MPA program and contributing heavily to the GE program for the campus in addition to serving undergraduate majors), it is absolutely clear that this department desperately needs more hiring.

Another resource issue is the library. The campus has a state of the art library and an energetic new library director. It also contains a writing center and tutoring center. Some of the burden of teaching students basic research skills (such as the oft-mentioned literature review) could likely be off-loaded to staff located in the library. I encourage faculty to integrate library resources into their classes in order to maximize utility for the students and to potentially offset the overload on faculty time a bit.

Conclusions

The Political Science Department at Sonoma State University is doing a fantastic job of delivering a high quality education to students enrolled in the program. This is true in spite of some serious challenges in terms of how far faculty are stretched and the ability of the department to consistently offer the full range of courses that students desire. I am confident, however, that the department is introspective and motivated enough to implement a few changes that will correct some of the issues mentioned in this report, and with the state budget improving, the department should be in line to get a few much needed new hires.