

Program Review, B.A. in Political Science
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Overview

In my role as external reviewer, I was able to (virtually) meet separately with senior faculty, junior faculty, lecturers, students (a meeting without faculty present and a classroom observation), Chair David McCuan, AVP Stacey Bosick and Dean Troi Carleton.

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 2021, the previous external review by that I did for the department in 2015, data on POLS section shifts due to GE revision and AI requirement changes, recent student faculty ratio data, diversity data for the department and SSU overall, the departmental website, and the SSU Mission Statement. I also reviewed the curriculum of similar sized CSU Political Science departments.

My overall impression is that the department does an exceptional job of preparing its students to be engaged, thoughtful, discerning participants in our democracy. The department has a clear commitment to maintaining academic rigor (this came up again and again) and equipping students with strong critical thinking and analytical skills which are increasingly necessary in our disinformation-filled landscape, along with core competence in all of the major sub-fields in the discipline. The department does a remarkable job of pulling off a complete political science program with only seven tenure line faculty members (including the chair) and a handful of lecturers. They are capably performing the truly life-expanding work expected by the liberal arts mission of Sonoma State.

The department is remarkably collegial – noted among tenure-line faculty, lecturers and also students. I was impressed by the feeling of cohort connection the senior students I observed and talked with had. They clearly have a sense of connection and reliance on each other, even in this bizarre Covid time.

The department does face some daunting challenges, from a GE shift from 4 to 3-unit courses (a special issue for lecturers who essentially just get a pay cut for each course), changes in the American Institutions requirement, adaptation to AB1460, displacement from their building while its under construction, and of course, a pandemic --- all at the same time.

Since I last visited Sonoma State for a review, there have thankfully been a couple of new tenure-line hires (but also retirements), bringing fresh perspectives, diversity, and energy into the department. Preparing for turnover due to anticipated retirements in coming years is needed to keep the department on track going forward.

Curricular Currency and Coherence

The department's curricular mission is completely appropriate for a strong comprehensive undergraduate Political Science program at a university that emphasizes a much-needed liberal arts training for all students. The department does an excellent job of instilling a sense of political competence and civic and political engagement in its students. The curriculum aligns well with the learning outcomes and goals the department sets for students in the program. The curriculum is current and coherent. One welcome shift since my last review is some innovation and updating of available electives. I was pleased to see thought-provoking and up-to-date courses that reflect the current direction of the discipline. For example, POLS 313: Critical Theory: Race and Gender, POLS 314: Environmental Political Theory, POLS 446: International Relations of the Middle East: Israel, the Palestinians, and the United States, POLS 449: Gender and Geopolitics in Science Fiction and Fantasy, POLS 481: Politics of Regulation and Land Use, POLS 485: Political Power and Social Isolation and POLS 466: Political Psychology. There is also dynamism and flexibility with the POLS Special Topics offerings, featuring such timely courses as "Ethics in the Age of Trump" "Politics of Reproductive Rights" "Politics of Direct Democracy", "Freedom, Equality, and the Courts" "Transpacific Partnership", among others. The department should be commended for this growth and adaptation.

Along with those, the department teaches an incredibly solid array of essential courses in each sub-field and all of the critical courses for the discipline that one would expect to find at any respectable university. The department seeks to prepare them for public service, the responsibilities of citizenship, and skills that enable them to truly explore and comprehend the world around them. Students report that they feel amply prepared for anything in their futures that emphasizes research, “understanding of why things are the way they are”, and critical analysis. All of this is done while upholding high standards. One student noted that, “we do really well because our professors push us.”

There are nevertheless a few bumps that could use attention. One that I heard a fair amount about not only this year, but also six years ago, is the disconnect between 302, the research methods course, and 498, the senior capstone course. I should say that there have been some positive changes on this since the last review, with more rotation of the course between faculty members. However, students still complain that the methodological focus of 302 varies with the instructor and may or may not slot in well with the expectations of the professor teaching 498. Many felt unprepared for some aspect of the capstone course (which, to the department's credit, is taught with a high level of rigor).

I have a few suggestions. The first came up in discussions with faculty and is at least somewhat underway. The idea is to create paired, thematic 302/498 courses taught by the same instructor. That way, students who had an interest in qualitative methods and certain applications could choose that course pair, while others might take the more quantitative route. This would do a great deal to alleviate student concerns about a mismatch between the courses. However, this may be realistically difficult to achieve, given the rotation of courses and limited scheduling options due to the size of the faculty. Another, perhaps complimentary approach could be to devote more time in other upper division (or even lower division) courses to utilizing the skills from 302 to better cement them and prepare students better for the capstone. For example, other courses could require literature reviews in their assignments, or they might assign journal articles using varied methodological approaches to better familiarize students with these concepts outside of 302. Library sessions could be scheduled and taught by librarians to help teach skills like how to do proper literature reviews. Regardless of the approach the department chooses, something needs to change. The fact that the same issue persists 6 years later certainly proves that.

Course availability is another challenge for the department, since there have been reductions of the numbers of sections offered in some cases and some courses rotate only every 2 years. This means students may not be able to take classes in the proper sequence and worst case, graduation might be delayed. Proper stair-stepping is vital to student success in terms of absorbing course content as intended. The solutions here are tricky, given obvious constraints. Part of the answer is in careful advising, especially for transfer or interdisciplinary students who sometimes fall through the cracks. Ultimately, offering more sections is best, via new tenure-line hires, and/or better college-level compensation for faculty on buy-out or leave.

Another recurrent issue is the variation in the way the same course is taught by different faculty members. If the pre-requisite course is not taught consistently, students in the subsequent course may have different understandings of content. Though faculty clearly bring different emphases and perspectives, and rightfully so, there could be more communication – perhaps sharing syllabi and considering some common goals.

Something the department is considering is increasing the writing intensive courses so that students could readily fulfill that requirement within the major. More could also be done in relation to other disciplines. Some students wished the department capitalized more on the courses in other fields that might benefit them, such as communications for those wanting to go into political journalism, for example.

The department might also consider offering a sophomore experience course that might draw more students into the major. It seems that there is also room for 200 to be more tailored to non-majors as a way to enable them to more easily connect to the content, which might result in more major recruitment as well.

Though the curriculum includes courses focusing on diversity, equity, inclusion, and identity, more could be done to integrate these topics into all courses (this is done reasonably well now, but the current environment demands increased effort on this from all of us).

I came away from my meetings at Sonoma State impressed with the comprehensive, relevant, and high-quality education the very fortunate

students at your university are getting from the Political Science Department. The skills on display in the capstone course were incredibly impressive, showing a depth of training, interest in the content, and personal support that is rare in public universities these days. Kudos to the department for holding the line on rigor and maintaining high expectations for student success. The department does all of this with very few faculty members with many demands on their time and energy, which is truly impressive.

Learning Outcomes and Assessment

The department has come up with a very clear, comprehensive, and appropriate set of learning outcomes. These are even featured on the departmental website. In addition to learning outcomes, they have gone beyond that to identify specific skills that students should acquire in each of the 4 main sub-fields after taking courses required for the major. These are extensive, specific and for the most part, measurable.

Assessment can of course be a mixed bag. In the worst case, it is an empty busy-work exercise that saps energy that could be devoted to just doing the work. In the best case, it shines a light on areas of needed improvement and leads to such adjustments. Given the heavy time demands on the faculty at Sonoma State, I worry that it may feel more like the former. However, department members do show evidence of open-ness to new ideas and innovations and appreciative of feedback. The draft self-assessment is quite thorough and shows thoughtfulness about how to adapt to changing expectations from the university and evolving student needs. Students report that they feel free to give feedback to the department as well. One area that might use some attention is in student evaluations of faculty. Given the importance of those evaluations to the RTP process, the department could afford to provide students with some explicit education on the inherent racial and gender bias in those tools – thereby inoculating them a bit prior to filling them out.

Student Needs

This department places a great deal of emphasis on the needs of students. The student faculty ratio is still low enough to allow a great deal of personal interaction between faculty and students, and this faculty succeeds at creating

a welcoming and stimulating environment for students. They respect the students as scholars, not customers, as is the trend in some quarters. Students were downright glowing in their reports about faculty and the program. They felt like they were provided with the tools and knowledge they need to succeed and inculcated with a devotion to service as well. They clearly get much more personalized attention and feedback on their work than many students in the system do. They said that early courses in the major enticed them to stick with it. They mentioned time and again that the faculty were “super great” and professional about de-escalating ideological disagreements in class (a big occupational danger for political scientists), being respectful and inclusive of varied opinions and ideologies. They feel respected and welcomed and nurtured. They also report good relationships with their fellow students, which enhanced their college experience. Faculty work closely and individually with students, and it shows.

Advising

The department divides out its advising responsibilities equally amongst tenure-line faculty alphabetically (with one professor solely responsible for MPA advising). This is equitable and reasonable, but does create workload issues when faculty are on leave – increasing the burden on everyone else. Another advising issue is the increasing expectations from the university for faculty to advise not just on the major, but on everything, putting even more time and energy pressure on the faculty. Advising software is also apparently not ideal, not connecting all the information one needs to properly advise students.

Perhaps some creative thinking on advising could lighten the load. Though some advice is very personalized, a significant portion does not vary much. Perhaps the department could schedule some group advising sessions during the semester in a classroom or conference room so that multiple students could be served at the same time. This could be especially effective for transfer students, for example. It would be even more helpful if group advising sessions on GE could be done at the college or university level. Or, perhaps creating a student mentoring/advising program, wherein advanced students pair up with incoming ones and help them along. It requires a little training, but could be mutually beneficial. It could even possibly be a 1-unit course – they could add on things like attending relevant university events, library sessions, etc.

Transfer Students

It looks as if the department (and maybe the university) is experiencing an uptick in the number and proportion of transfer students. There have been some issues with them not being able to register until courses are full, problems with unit comparability for some courses, and curricular disconnects. I urge the department to think systematically about what might be done to ease the transition for these students.

If it isn't already done, perhaps some seats in key courses can be reserved and held for transfer students so that they can get courses they need. Maybe there could be specific drop-in advising sessions for transfer students to help them get oriented and integrated into the department. They could be targeted for student mentorship. Perhaps a 1-unit course could be developed to make up for the unit gap that sometimes occurs. Since they may not take the core courses that subsequent courses build upon, perhaps the advanced courses could devote a short amount of time to refreshing everyone's memory – as well as orienting the transfer students.

Career preparation

Students mentioned that they would like to have more specific career preparation in terms of awareness of options, but also internships during their time at Sonoma State. The department does connect students with internships, but perhaps more purposeful and comprehensive efforts are needed. Maybe a session where the Sacramento Semester director for the CSU system (Jaime Jackson at Sacramento State) Zooms in to explore options? Maybe a practitioner guest lecture series? Alumni visits to encourage and inform students about future options? As I write this, I do recognize that all of this requires additional labor that is a scarce commodity. Perhaps coordination with other university internship programs could lighten the load?

Students do appear to be involved in actual politics, volunteering for campaigns, non-profits, etc. In addition, some are involved in the award-winning (and much praised) Model United Nations program and otherwise preparing themselves in practical ways to be global citizens. All of this is key for a truly well-rounded experience in political science.

Resources

It appears, when reviewing data on enrollment from Spring 2015 to Spring 2021, that the enrollment numbers and numbers of majors and minors peaked in 2017-18, and declined after Covid lockdown measures changed the landscape for everyone in 2020. Interestingly, this same decline did not happen with the MPA program, which actually continued to add students during lockdown – perhaps because night classes seemed more reasonable and feasible to working professionals if they could just Zoom in from their home office where they'd been Zooming all day anyhow. It also looks like the drop in enrollment was not as significant for POLS as for some other programs in the college – perhaps due to the more evidently vital nature of our discipline during the upheaval of 2020 and 2021. It's hard to know exactly how things will shake out after the pandemic, but it seems reasonable to expect that the numbers will climb once again, increasing the need for additional faculty.

The decision to reduce GE courses from 4 to 3 units is having a serious impact on Political Science, along with the AI shift which has created serious reductions in sections of intro courses and students served. Ultimately, that may negatively impact the budget of a department that is already overburdened and stretched thin. Some administrative allowance for this adjustment would be most useful of course. Short of that, the department will have to be more creative in structuring the major and attracting more students. Creating excessive demand is likely to result in additional course offerings, benefitting all.

Relatedly, it became clear in my evaluation that the department, while exceptional in terms of internal functioning, may want to consider working more on participation in college and university level functions. Building solid working relationships with other campus units and offices often pays dividends, even if it can feel difficult to add yet another level of engagement to one's workload. Attracting new students to the major is also easier if the department is more visible across campus. For example, I heard from multiple interviewees that there is some resentment of pressure on faculty to engage in recruitment and student outreach activities. While these sorts of efforts are certainly not part of the job description and may be well outside of most faculty's wheelhouses, the stark reality is that enrollment has been dropping – not just at Sonoma State, but at other peer institutions across the country. Smaller, liberal-arts focused colleges have been especially hard hit (this began pre-pandemic and will likely continue

after). Putting some work into attracting more students to this very appealing program may be necessary for longer-term survival for the university, regardless of how we feel about such extra work.

Another resource concern is the advising overload that has to be shouldered by remaining faculty when a tenure-line member is on sabbatical, release time, or other leave or buy-out. Though in some of those cases (like sabbatical), the college provides teaching replacements, there is no such workload counter-balance for advising. In a larger department, this may not be a major burden, but at this size, it may mean a 20%+ increase in advising load for each tenure line faculty member. In a department that takes student mentoring this seriously, that is significant. Perhaps the college could consider hiring some adjuncts to do a few hours of advising a week in these circumstances. There are likely to be savings on their salaries due to the GE unit reduction, so perhaps this is the perfect time to implement such a program.

Adjuncts report feeling supported and welcomed and that their needs are responded to by the department. They do express some additional need for resources, such as graders that can access the course management system.

Many of the issues the department is experiencing with class availability and order, diversity, advising load, etc. could only truly be alleviated via additional tenure-line hires. Luckily, the state budget is actually in surplus at the moment, though we have yet to see how that shakes out for the CSU. In addition, the Biden administration's Covid relief packages are bringing extra funds to campuses this year and likely next. Though those funds are not able to be used for faculty hiring, they could and should be used for extra assistance and support for high-functioning and over-stressed departments such as this one.

Other Observations

The department has made some positive strides on diversity in terms of hiring since the last review, hiring a junior faculty member who specializes in racial and ethnic politics. The department should work extremely hard to pro-actively encourage candidates from diverse backgrounds to apply to their next tenure line openings. I suggest also asking for a diversity statement as part of the application process to better identify applicants who prioritize this vital work. There are also a number of course offerings that focus specifically on social

justice, civil rights, identity and other DEI related topics, which is fantastic. Some student feedback was that they wished there was more of an emphasis on social justice throughout the curriculum. Additionally, a concerted effort needs to be made to make sure faculty of color don't carry most of the weight of student needs around DEI – a common occurrence across many campuses. The department should also show a clear commitment to defending faculty who may face harassment from students due to race, gender, or other demographic factors.

Another concern is that junior faculty may struggle with a lack of clarity on the department's RTP expectations. This can create a situation in which Associate professors feel pressured to accept all assignments to be sure that they are above the bar for tenure and promotion. Vague RTP standards can allow for flexibility for faculty with different emphases and skill sets and can be used to protect those who might vary from the norm, yet at the same time, some explicit guidance about minimum expectations could be useful and reassuring for junior faculty – something to think about if/when the dept. gets new hires in coming years.

Conclusions

The Political Science Department at Sonoma State University is doing a wonderful job of delivering an excellent 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 in the semesters that work best. The department is a bit top-heavy, with 5 full professors, and when I visited, 2 assistant professors and no associates (though Emily Ray was simply waiting for final confirmation of her promotion). This creates the risk of retirements happening in coming years that upset the delicate balance of responsibilities for courses, advising, and service. In a perfect world, new lines would be granted so that there is no gap in offerings between a retirement and a hire. Hiring may not even be automatic after a retirement, but this is not a department that can spare a professor. One hopes that the rosy California budget ends up creating a favorable fiscal environment for new hires. If so, this department should be prioritized, given the smaller decrease in majors due to Covid and the intense necessity of civic involvement and competence at this moment when democracy is under threat around the globe.

I want to commend the department for holding up so well under so much pressure, especially in the last year in which everyone struggled with the transition online due to the pandemic. They are handling multiple moving parts with GE, and AI changes and making accommodations in the curriculum. This review period is an opportunity to think in fresh ways about how to handle the future. I feel confident that they will emerge even stronger.