

External Review Report
Department of Women's and Gender Studies
Sonoma State
Site Visit: April 30, 2023

The Department of Women's and Gender Studies was reviewed by external reviewer Dr. Larissa Mercado-Lopez, Professor and Department Chair of Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies at Fresno State. A self-study sent prior to the visit was carefully reviewed. During the site visit, Dr. Mercado-Lopez participated in meetings with Chair Dr. Lena McQuade, WGS faculty Dr. Don Romesbug and Dr. Charlene Tung, Dean Troi Carleton, and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs/Dean of Undergraduate and Graduate Studies, Dr. Stacey Bosick. Additionally, Dr. Mercado-Lopez met with students in a senior capstone course.

Curriculum Coherency and Currency

The WGS department has made major changes since the last program review to revitalize their curriculum and provide students with an education and training that is consistent with the ever-growing fields of feminist and queer studies. As faculty shared, the program was transformed in response to their most recent program review, namely by creating an introductory WGS course, designing curricular pathways for the BA program, creating a Careers course, and developing a curricular framework grounded in intersectionality and transnational feminisms. The BA core provides students with a foundation in intersectional feminisms and transnational feminisms, a WGS minor, and a minor in Queer Studies. The Pathway model allows for students to choose courses that best support their post-graduate plans; the Community/Clinical pathway in particular makes the WGS degree more intelligible to future employers who have little understanding of WGS.

Upon evaluation of the course descriptions and syllabi, it is clear that the program provides students with a wide range of courses and experiential learning opportunities to prepare students to enter a variety of fields and graduate programs. Students who graduate with a BA in WGS leave with a solid foundation in intersectional feminisms; an understanding of gender issues in local and global contexts; and a widely adaptable set of skills in community engagement, organizing, and activism. WGS at Sonoma State is a degree that prepares students to work in diverse and marginalized communities; find solutions to systemic problems; and work toward transformational social change. True to their mission statement, WGS at Sonoma State clearly emerges as a "degree you use every day." The utility and significance of a WGS degree, particularly in our current political and social context, should be strongly recognized and celebrated by the College and University.

The Department has leveraged opportunities within the General Education curriculum to expand their reach and diversify their offerings. Of particular significance are the lecture series classes in both WGS and Queer Studies, which are high-enrolled and effective recruitment courses that connect students with feminist practitioners and give them tangible connections between their degree and possibilities for future employment. WGS recognizes GE as an opportunity to contribute to the strengthening of the university's mission to deliver a high-quality liberal arts education—hence their recognition as a GE “powerhouse—yet struggles with the workload challenges that GE presents. Currently, GE comprises $\frac{2}{3}$ of the WGS target. While TT faculty desire to teach more within their areas of expertise and less within GE, without additional faculty, they risk losing valuable student enrollment that is crucial to their recruitment. However, the work of recruitment should not be the work of WGS alone. The extent to which WGS is woven into the college and university leadership's narratives is important for amplifying and extending the reach of WGS.

Despite their small faculty, WGS has managed to provide a wide array of courses that instill students with a strong foundation in the discipline as well as courses that reflect the interest of WGS students and are responsive to the trends in the field. However, as is the case with many small programs, the reliance on GE to sustain enrollment prevents faculty from teaching courses that are within their areas of expertise, which not only limits students' access to their professors' scholarship, but is key for faculty satisfaction and retention. In the meeting with WGS students, the students expressed a strong desire for more upper division courses within their professors' areas of expertise, pointing to Dr. McQuade's successful Reproductive Justice course as an example.

The internship program cultivates feminist practitioners by placing students in organizations or provides leadership opportunities through which students can apply their skills in organizing, consciousness-raising, research, education, and connecting people to resources. It is especially significant that the internship is required, as WGS has a faculty of three and internships involve heavy supervisory responsibilities and community partnership. For these reasons, internship *requirements* are not the norm in WGS programs, which makes Sonoma State's WGS program exceptional. Considering the growing interest in DEI specialists and social justice-centered practitioners, WGS is playing a key role in providing the local and regional communities with practitioners who possess these areas of expertise. The workload associated with creating and maintaining community connections, placing students in internships, ensuring that students and community partners comply with university internship policies, and supervising and mentoring students throughout their internships, must be addressed through structural solutions in order to remedy the overload.

Throughout their curricular revitalization, WGS has responded swiftly to CSU Executive Orders that have called for changes to the GE pattern, including Area F. It is clear that WGS provides

meaningful support to Ethnic Studies through incorporation of ES courses into their degree requirements and electives; in their advocacy; and through cross-listed classes. As WGS transitions to a new college with Ethnic Studies, opportunities for joint hires must be explored to both support the current WGS curriculum and strengthen the partnership between the two disciplines. Such opportunities would help promote the university's mission as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI).

Commendations:

- Addition of Intro class that strengthened students' foundational knowledge in feminist studies
- Successful lecture series courses that support recruitment, support GE, and connect students to the community
- Strategic and swift responses to CSU Executive Orders that maintained enrollment and supported a robust offering of GE courses
- Successful internship program that has enriched local communities and increased post-graduate opportunities for students through tangible skills and work experience
- Vibrant feminist programming for Sonoma State and local communities

Recommendations:

- Financial support from the college for the highly successful lecture series courses so that their success does not depend on availability of IRA funding
- Count internship in WTUs the same semester that the faculty oversees the program (find a solution other than banking WTUs for future course releases); at minimum, technical and staff support should be provided to help process internship forms
- Increased support from the College for recruitment and stronger messaging about the community impact of WGS
- Promote the workforce-related skills that students are gaining in WGS
 - Create a skills map with courses and the skills/tools students gain in the classes
 - On the WGS website, be explicit about the skills students graduate with, where students have gone on to work, and how those skills supported graduates in their careers

Assessment

WGS takes assessment seriously, is diligent in their efforts to assess, and has innovated how they assess learning outcomes over the course of students' academic careers. The self study discusses assessment of SLOs within the internship program, the factors that bring students to the WGS major, and what the WGS major means to graduating WGS seniors and how this aligns with their Learning Objectives.

WGS should be commended for its extensive work to cull data from various sources to understand student experiences and learning. For example, internship data was drawn from student comments in the exit surveys, in their internship papers, and in their senior seminar portfolios. Through meticulous coding, themes were identified and correlated with SLOs. The rich qualitative data gathered for the internship assessment indicated that students were strongly drawing connections between their experiences and the feminist education. The data strongly indicates that learning outcomes are being met; the internship is excelling as a high-impact practice; and students are graduating with a sense of preparedness for the job market and workforce.

WGS also sought to pursue understanding of students' experiences of finding and joining the WGS major. This section, while important, did not seem to fit the purpose of assessment. While the question is important—how do students become WGS majors? – it was unclear how the data was being used to assess learning objectives/outcomes. Perhaps the department, for program review purposes, can make a distinction between assessment of learning outcomes and assessment of department strategies. That way, they can measure the effectiveness of particular department strategies for recruitment through the analysis of the students' experiences. For example, “Advising,” “Outreach in GE courses,” “co-curricular programming,” “communication through department website and literature,” etc. This would be easier to measure in order to better track progress through assessment measures. Or, the department could focus on themes such as “destigmatizing or demystifying WGS,” “making WGS relevant to personal lives,” “connecting WGS to students' career goals,” etc. Surveys can be used to measure the effectiveness of these tactics for recruiting students to WGS.

In the third area of assessment, WGS sought to understand the meaning of a WGS degree to its students. The results show that students clearly value their degree and have gained proficiency in their identification, understanding, and application of WGS learning outcomes. Importantly, what comes clearly across is both micro- and macro-level analyses of social structures and experiences of oppression, indicating a strong foundational understanding of feminism and high-level thinking and application of feminist thought. Again, the idea that WGS is a “degree you can use every day,” comes across in the way that students convey the significance of a WGS education in both their personal and professional lives. This holistic and comprehensive educational experience that the students describe aligns with the core values of the CSU and represents what many programs aspire to be.

It should also be noted that in the session with the students, a student remarked that the process of putting together her portfolio enabled her to see the evolution of her feminism from “white liberal feminism to intersectional feminism.” Thus, not only are students learning, but they are aware of *how* they have learned. The E-Portfolio assignment that Dr. McQuade is developing will prove to be a powerful tool for more deeply understanding student learning and could be a

model for other programs in the college and across campus. Support should be provided for continued development, implementation, and cross-campus training.

Commendations:

- Good use of surveys to collect meaningful data
- Internship proves to be highly effective for students to meet SLOs
- Students are graduating with proficiency in all SLOs
- Good recognition of systemic challenges, such as workload/overload, that prevent WGS from improving the internship experience

Recommendations:

- Create some internal assessment goals for the department related to recruitment and outreach, as discussed above
- Consider assessing learning outcomes in particular classes to understand how well SLOs are being met in those classes. This would allow for a trend analysis through which faculty can glean insight into their own classes
- Consider using a variety of tools to assess SLOs. For example, short papers assigned in class, Intro to WGS tests/quizzes, etc. This would allow for SLOs to be reviewed at both the lower and upper division levels.
- The College should provide support (funding/release time) for development of assessment tools, such as the E-Portfolio, that could serve as a model for other programs.

Resources

The greatest challenge for WGS appears to be the low number of tenured/tenure-track faculty. As faculty noted, WGS has not had a new hire in 15 years, and a recent attempt to secure a hiring line under Area F was not successful despite the strong partnership between WGS and Ethnic Studies. The number of doctoral programs in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies has sharply grown over the past 15 years, which means that it is becoming the norm for WGS programs to have faculty with actual WGS degrees, as opposed to the previous reality where nearly all faculty had training in WGS but held degrees from other disciplines. The students expressed a desire for more faculty to 1) lighten their professors' teaching and service workloads, 2) diversify the curriculum, 3) increase access to courses needed to graduate (particularly for transfer students who are on a shorter timeline).

Increasing faculty hires in WGS would also strengthen curricular offerings in related disciplines. For example, Dr. Romesburg's extensive expertise in K-12 studies would enrich course offerings in the School of Education, support California's requirements for LGBTQ learning objectives in

K-12 schools, and potentially generate streams of revenue through professional development offerings for teachers. Though WGS has cultivated a network of affiliated faculty to support course offerings and increase disciplinary on campus, more investment is needed to strengthen such cross-campus partnerships and collaborations.

In terms of research, time is the greatest resource that WGS faculty need. While WGS faculty have the ability to apply for course releases for research, such releases are limited and, importantly, there are not enough faculty to teach the recruitment-promising courses that faculty would likely be giving up. Faculty noted in the visit that WGS often forgo opportunities to teach summer courses and supplement their income because they must use their summers to catch up with research. Thus, the workload challenges that impact faculty research have serious implications for quality of life and lifetime earnings. Importantly, there is also a detrimental effect on how faculty feel in relation to their field. During the visit, faculty expressed that their less active research agendas makes it challenging to stay connected to and relevant within their discipline. WGS and Queer Studies are quickly-evolving fields that require that its scholars and practitioners continuously engage in learning and knowledge sharing and production. Importantly, faculty who are active in research also provide more opportunities for students to become involved. In the meeting with WGS students, the students expressed a desire for not only more undergraduate research opportunities, but specifically for opportunities to work with faculty on faculty research projects.

WGS faculty have creatively sought out external and internal sources of funding to support their programming; to enhance classroom experiences; and to provide assigned time for program development. While individual and departmental grant activity is generally expected in the CSU, for programs such as WGS where all faculty are involved in all areas of service, the workload burden is high. Additionally, it is not sustainable for courses, such as the lecture series courses, to be supported by IRA. Thus, the college should consider regular investments in efforts with proven records of success in supporting enrollment and enhancing student learning, in addition to department efforts to revitalize curriculum or run time-intensive programs such as internships.

Commendations:

- Creative efforts to secure external and internal funding to fill in institutional funding gaps
- Strong efforts to strengthen affiliated faculty networks in order to support access to courses, curricular diversity, and collegiality; this also supports retention and belongingness for faculty
- Successful development of a course within a faculty's area of expertise

Recommendations:

- Hire at least two more faculty, one of which can be a joint hire, in order to diversify course offerings, relieve workload challenges, create more opportunity for faculty

research, allow for faculty to teach within their areas of expertise, and increase access to classes needed for graduation.

- College leadership should create practices for ensuring that faculty have opportunities to teach within their areas of expertise on a regular basis.
- College leadership should work with faculty to identify department priorities for regular funding
- WGS has a powerful story to tell about its impact, its history, and its importance in this current moment. Resources, such as technical support and student assistants, should be provided to produce outreach videos and materials that help WGS amplify its message, tell the story of its impact, and facilitate and strengthen connections between the university and community.
- College leadership/development officers should work with WGS on identifying and working toward fundraising goals; WGS fundraising goals should be considered part of the College's fundraising priorities

Students

WGS is a program that excels at understanding and supporting students' needs and interests. In the student session, students spoke of many ways in which WGS has provided an exceptionally quality education and gave suggestions for how the program could improve.

WGS students shared that WGS was “empowering” and fulfilled gaps in their education that they “didn't even know were there.” WGS allowed them to find and grow their passions and create an educational experience around those passions. They expressed that WGS helped them navigate and participate in conversations about the current moment, which is clear evidence that WGS promotes fuller and more inclusive civic engagement—democracy.

As Dr. McQuade describes the program, WGS does indeed appear to be a “retention solution.” Students spoke of the department's intense mentoring and exceptional advising, noting that WGS faculty have provided more accessible and strategic advising than their college advisors, which has allowed them to make timely progress toward graduation. One student stated that WGS helped her remain in her other major because WGS provided the support she needed to succeed.

Again, the internship plays a key role in serving students by growing their skillset and improving their marketability. The WGS Alumni section in the self-study provides evidence of not only the program's success in helping students acquire jobs, but shows the wide applicability of the WGS degree to a variety of careers. WGS students remarked that the internship gave them a “vision of what they can do with WGS degree”; they liked that it was required; they felt set up to succeed; they believed that the internship connected them more strongly with community; and have been

offered jobs at their internship site. The internship appears to play a role in retention, as students are able to not only see but experience the potential of their degree.

The students were most lively in their suggestions for how they'd like to see the program grow. Their visions suggested that they cared for the program and wanted to see it thrive and better serve future students. Their suggestions were mostly related to faculty and curriculum. For example, students asked for more faculty to distribute the workload and diversify the classes (specifically queer studies and black studies scholars); course offerings in disability studies, trans studies, and Asian studies; more upper division courses; and more TT faculty teaching the Intro class because they create a difference experience than lecturers (which, they said, affects recruitment).

Importantly, the students asked for more opportunities for individual research; the opportunity to attend the National Women's Studies Association conference; more experiential learning opportunities; and more encouragement and support to join the McNair program. They pointed out that Sociology has many opportunities for their students to join faculty-led research teams and that allowing faculty to have more time for research would create such opportunities for student participation. The fact that students are asking for more high-impact learning experiences speaks to the insatiable desire the students have to engage more deeply with their program and the field of Women's and Gender Studies.

WGS not only centers students, but is responsive to students, and inspired by students. WGS faculty have exceptionally collegial relationships with their students, working with and alongside them to create change on campus and in their communities. Importantly, WGS has made significant curricular changes to ensure that the program stays relevant to the field and provides the highest quality education and workforce preparation for its students.

Commendations:

- High retention of WGS students and supportive of retention for non-WGS students
- Strong, effective advising to support degree completion and institutional navigation
- Creation of meaningful learning experiences within the classroom
- Courses are continuously improved upon to stay current and align with the field of Women's and Gender Studies
- Strong sense of collegiality between faculty and students

Recommendations:

- Consider working with students on syllabi development; this would provide an experiential learning opportunity and would help with workload
- For high-recruitment classes with lecturers, TT faculty should make visits or guest lecture to expose potential WGS majors to more instructors and other teaching experiences

- Consider a partnership/faculty exchange with a WGS program at another CSU to help students build connections across the system and provide opportunities for students to be taught by others in the field

Conclusion

It is the understanding of the reviewer that Sonoma State is undergoing major structural changes. As the changes take place, there must be continued support, protection, and development of departments that, while underresourced and misunderstood, provide an education and experience that supports retention, degree completion, self-actualization, community engagement and leadership, and equitable civic participation. In short, programs that promote democracy. That is Women's and Gender Studies.

Investing in WGS, as the self-study reveals, supports not only student retention and success, but campus-wide faculty retention and satisfaction (through affiliated faculty groups and alliances); community partnerships and community trust; and a social justice-centered and culturally competent workforce. The story of the impact of WGS is not just a story to be told by WGS, but by the College and the University. The current moment demands thinkers and practitioners that are trained to respond and evolve while remaining rooted in values of equity, inclusion, diversity, justice, and non-violence, and the extent to which WGS graduates can work in communities to advance these values is partially determined by the degree to which the story of WGS is woven into Sonoma State's narrative about programs that provide educations of value.

Increased support, particularly in the form of faculty hires, can provide access to a high quality education for a greater number of students, more experiential learning opportunities, diverse curricular development, and overdue workload relief for the three dedicated tenure-line faculty in the department. It is largely believed among feminist scholars that the health of a university's WGS program is a reflection of the health of a comprehensive university. As gender studies and ethnic studies programs continue to be targeted or cut across the country, Sonoma State has the opportunity to send a clear message about its commitment to social justice, community engagement, and adaptability and responsiveness through its preservation, support, and amplification of the Department of Women's and Gender Studies.