

California State University, Fullerton

PROGRAM PERFORMANCE REVIEW (PPR) for Political Science

External Reviewers' Report

Introduction

Reviewers:

- Amy Cabrera Rasmussen, Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science, California State University Long Beach
- Paul D'Anieri, Professor, Department of Political Science and School of Public Policy, University of California Riverside
- Elaine Lewinnek, Professor, Department of American Studies and Program Chair, Environmental Studies, California State University Fullerton

Overview of the review process:

After reading the department's careful self-reflection, the reviewers met on February 14, 2024 with Dean Jessica Stern, Associate Dean Carl Wendt, PAJ Division Chair Phil Kopp, POSC coordinator Rob Robinson, and Political Science faculty Shelly Arseneault, Robert Castro, Pam Fiber-Ostrow, Sarah Hill, Matt Jarvis, Brian Lovato, Valerie O'Regan, Alexei Shevchenko, Scott Spitzer, and Steve Stambaugh as well as adjunct faculty Stacy Fox, Michael Rabi, and Simon Tang and three student leaders.

I. Department/Program Mission, Goals, and Environment

Strengths:

CSU Fullerton's POSC department serves its majors and master's students well, providing a combination of substantive knowledge and skills-based learning outcomes. In addition, this department serves the undergraduate curriculum more broadly through core university-required courses such as Political Science 100: American Government, as well as extensive General Education offerings. In this way it extends its reach and provides essential citizenship skills and knowledge to all graduates, serving an average FTES of 701 or 3,507 students each year.

The Department has many strengths upon which to build in this current moment, making the most of the discipline's fundamental and unique role to support civic education and engagement within a public institution of higher education.

For instance, CSUF Political Science's long standing and broad embrace of High Impact Practices makes this department stand out from most other political science departments and

makes it well suited to serve its campus' larger mission. The department displays an extensive array of HIPs that reflect faculty passion, provide impressively equitable access, and make profound impacts on the region, state, and nation. These programs currently include but are not limited to: Moot Court, the Town Hall Meeting, the Cal State DC program, Internships, and Transfer Student Learning Communities for both first-year students and transfer students.

Challenges:

The Department's self study identifies some significant trends shaping political science departments in the current historical moment: an enhanced focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts; the rise of political, cultural, and ideological polarization; and the need to weather demographic shifts. The Department does not seem yet to have coalesced around concrete strategies that are sufficient to address and/or make the most of these trends.

We learned from students and faculty alike that the department's many unique high impact practice programs could have greater visibility, more robust staff support, and clearer succession plans, which are especially essential because burn-out is palpable among those who lead these programs. Conversations during the visit indicated that the department is not yet touting these innovative student success efforts as much as they could.

On a related note, modes of communication are not fully exploited to reach intended audiences, and the profile of these programs and the department more generally are not what it could be in the university & wider public.

Recommendations:

CSU Fullerton's POSC department has the potential to build on its existing strengths to serve as one of the key spaces on campus that facilitates student and university engagement within the local community. It could have an outsized influence on such efforts due to its well-established emphasis on public institutions and public policy—especially in the domestic context.

In order to do so most effectively, we encourage the department to lean into this potential by leveraging its existing focus on high-impact practices and experiential and engaged learning to make this the unique character of their program.

We encourage the College and University to continue and expand resources to the department to advance this goal. We understand there is a new staff position that has been created with a focus on work that supports faculty and students involved in HIPs, including logistical support, event-planning, communications, and publicity. This may reduce some of the existing sizable burdens on faculty and address workload concerns. More generally, we encourage increased funding for HIPs, not only for the current faculty who are doing the very labor-intensive work it takes to make these programs successful, but also to ensure the continuation of these programs as new hires join the faculty, as well as to maintain and expand equitable access and participation by students seeking such experiences. In addition,

we urge the university and college leadership to do more to recognize the contributions that the department and its faculty make to the larger institution through such a strong set of high impact practices.

Likewise, we believe that rounding out the set of HIPs, including a revival of the Model United Nations program and the growth of participation in other HIPs would be beneficial. Such programs support student success and could also impact student recruitment and retention, convert more GE students into majors and minors, and build connections with alumni who have gone on to many impactful careers post graduation.

These sorts of efforts could also support expressed aims among many faculty with whom we spoke to claim their department's unique place within the university and community.

II. Department/Program Description and Analysis

Strengths:

Given the relatively small size of the faculty, the department provides a significant amount of teaching to roughly 370 majors as well as providing an MA program and teaching a large number of general education courses. We note that the department of political science has only 10 tenured or tenure-track faculty members. (The numbers in Appendix C of the self-study report appear to be for the entire Division of Politics, Administration, and Justice.)

The BA curriculum is roughly comparable to others across the country. The undergraduate major consists of a small number of required courses, a breadth requirement, and a series of electives that can be taken in any order, minimizing the curricular obstacles to degree completion.

Challenges:

The location of the department in a larger Division of Politics, Administration, and Justice is a somewhat unusual aspect of the program. An ongoing plan to devolve more authority to the department is widely seen as beneficial, though opinions remain split about whether the divisional structure benefits or weakens the Political Science Department.

There is a sense that the major would be more robust if there were more sequencing of courses (with some courses being prerequisites for higher-level ones), but this appears to cut against the students' needs for maximum flexibility given their other commitments (such as work and commuting) and the priority on raising graduation rates.

The curriculum lacks sufficient breadth on the world outside the United States. For example, a course on China is just now working its way through the curriculum approval process and will have to be taught by a lecturer. A hire focused on Latin America is underway and this will help. It is unclear whether a department of 10 faculty plus lecturers can achieve the breadth

needed to meet all the goals, such as providing competent global coverage – including to the Middle East and North Africa – while also increasing attention to diversity within the United States.

The department plans to develop a course on race and ethnicity in American politics, but a more holistic approach to this issue would include embedding ideas about diversity & equity in every course, making use of curricular resources that some faculty have already begun to develop.

The department is aware of the need to assess whether the MA program serves student needs. The MA no longer satisfies requirements for K-12 teachers, and while some students use the MA as a bridge to a PhD, the vast majority of PhD programs do not require an MA. As the self-study says, “There are almost as many reasons for pursuing a master’s degree as there are students in the classroom.” Faculty members seem to enjoy the opportunity to teach graduate courses, and offering graduate degrees may be a significant part of the department’s identity, so jettisoning it may not be easy, even if doing so might allow greater focus on the department’s core undergraduate mission.

Recommendations:

Consider leaning into the already strong HIPs and experiential learning efforts through making participation in an HIP a requirement of all majors. Many political science departments have a practicum or other requirement that could be a model. While the department does indirectly incentivize such courses through allowing up to two to count as part of breadth requirements, this could help to solidify their centrality within the department’s identity.

Conduct a review of the MA program, assessing how the MA might be restructured to meet an important unmet need, or whether the very hard decision to end it might be needed. If possible, suspending admissions rather than formally terminating the program might be considered to preserve options for the future.

Develop a deeper long-term hiring plan in consultation with the Dean’s office. Given the desire to focus more on US diversity and the need to offer more international coverage, a more specific plan to gradually change the composition of the faculty should be developed.

We also encourage the department and college to find new ways to value and recognize existing efforts to incorporate diversity and inclusion.

III. Documentation of Student Academic Achievement and Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

Strengths:

The department has a strong record of informal assessment through collegiate conversations, including closing the loop by developing curricular changes. The department has recently formalized their assessment process and successfully revised undergraduate SLOs.

Challenges:

It appears faculty may be assessing only their own students' work and it is unclear whether the work students do in sections taught by adjuncts gets assessed. Some undergraduate SLOs are missing records of assessment, and, for graduate SLOs, by a small margin, students have not been achieving at the levels the department has established.

Recommendations:

The department can consider using sampling techniques, exit surveys, or other techniques to both streamline and deepen their assessment process. Other departments on campus can provide models.

IV. Faculty

Strengths:

The department has a strong roster of dedicated faculty, in both the tenure-line group and the lecturer cohort, including one recent hire and one hire pending at the time of our visit. Priorities for future hires are laid out in a plan within the self study.

The majority of faculty with whom we spoke display a strong commitment to students and program success and embrace a spirit of innovation and pride in what the department has to offer.

Many faculty with whom we spoke referenced an improved climate among faculty within the department since the last PPR seven years ago.

Challenges:

Despite many faculty expressing an improved climate, others shared their concerns about the continuance of a variety of climate issues within the department: for instance, some gender inequities seem to be persistent, including workload, sense of voice in faculty governance, and participation with the leadership of the department. Those in part-time lecturer positions expressed an unmet desire to participate in the full life of the department and for contributions, especially to student success in the classroom, to be better recognized.

As noted above, the department's size has limited its scope of coverage within the discipline; with few faculty with global politics expertise, and for instance, no one trained in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

Differences exist in terms of the method and scope of efforts needed to address diversity, equity, inclusion, and access needs. While the prevailing view seems to be that new hires can contribute needed descriptive and substantive representation, others feel this is a responsibility best shared by all faculty. Such disparate approaches have led to less than effective outcomes and threaten the likelihood of either separate approach bearing fruit.

Recommendations:

We suggest incorporating an external facilitator to cultivate the possibilities for setting true common goals regarding climate, as well as the crafting of a common and inclusive mission, values, and agreed-upon modes of interaction. Cultivating a sense of shared responsibility, no matter one's positionality, could be beneficial.

Targeted efforts could include a dedicated attempt to catalog existing DEI successes and brainstorm ways to incorporate greater DEI content and strategies throughout the curriculum, policies, and more.

Overall, we feel that DEI efforts as currently imagined are insufficiently robust in terms of scope and potential impact. For instance, the newly created DEI committee could play a front-and-center role in the expressed goal of creating new bylaws for the department that might address some persisting structural inequities. As political science scholars, department faculty should be well-suited to analyzing power relations, decision-making and policy processes and their implications, aspects of positionality, privilege and marginalization, and more.

Lecturer faculty could be incorporated into many of these efforts to garner their insights and currently uncatalogued contributions; seeking ways to compensate and value this work, however, is essential. The College and University may be able to support this effort through stipends or other forms of lecturer remuneration and more thorough-going evaluation processes, wherever possible.

V. Student Support and Advising

Strengths:

The department has extensive high impact practices that provide students with the feeling of small-group community within this larger department, including Moot Court, Intelligence Community Scholars, Town Hall Meetings, and extensive internships both in our region and through the Cal State DC program, as well as impressive cohort experiences for both first-year and transfer students.

Since the last PPR review, the 4-year graduation rate has more than doubled and the equity gap has been substantially reduced. The college's new tandem advisor model, using a permanent professional advisor, is succeeding well.

The department has also just hired a long-needed staff member to work on social media & event planning to support their many HIPs.

Challenges:

Faculty perceive room to expand HIPs to bring students to experience lobbying in Sacramento, develop more internships and a partnership in public interest law, resurrect the Model U.N. at CSUF, better engage in community-wide conversations during election seasons, and/or make Cal State DC available to more students. Those possible expansions are limited by challenges of funding, staffing, and visibility. Each of POSC's impressive HIPs relies on specific faculty leaders, raising a risk of burnout and a challenge of establishing methods for succession.

Both the department's self-report and the students themselves acknowledge communication issues that can impede students' knowledge about opportunities such as minors & concentrations, scholarships, and career paths.

Finally, like many departments, political science faces challenges acknowledging the burdens of cultural taxation.

Recommendations:

The faculty can reflect together to establish succession plans for the HIPs they already do, possibly seeking ways for adjuncts to also pursue opportunities to lead.

The department should work with IT, Strategic Communication, or other college resources to improve their website, and may choose to seek out strategies beyond the website to better communicate opportunities to students, such as an email list or Canvas page for majors. The many POSC minors, experiential learning opportunities, and passionately dedicated professors are incredible strengths that deserve to be better known.

VI. Resources and Facilities

Strengths:

Political Science faculty have successfully raised endowments for scholarships; they have a strong record of alumni fundraising for programs including Cal State DC and Moot Court, as well as plans to connect even better with alumni in the future.

The IRA recently revised its funding rules and the Dean's office also offered new support to help fill funding gaps: these recent changes are a new strength, especially if they become permanent.

Perhaps most importantly, the department has recently hired another member of office staff to support this large program with its many events & special programs.

Older issues around competition for large classrooms have eased up as other departments shift online, though POSC could still use more access to rooms, including smaller classrooms.

Challenges:

Despite their creative fundraising and demonstrated records of student success, the department's HIPs operate on a shoe-string.

The faculty also lack access to the larger conference rooms in the TSU for their many public events.

For such a large department, it is surprising to see no common area for students to gather together to study, deepen community, or access information.

Lecturers feel isolated, partly because their offices are not just on another floor but in another building.

Recommendations:

The department can seek ways to locate lecturers in the same building as tenure-track faculty.

The college and university can seek ways to reduce administrative roadblocks to faculty initiatives and to further amplify the impressive programs that Political Science faculty are already leading.

VII. Long-term Plans

Strengths:

Overall, it should be recognized that the department is doing a great deal with very limited resources. The commitment to quality undergraduate education is widely shared among the faculty. The array of high impact practices is especially noteworthy. There is a shared goal to increase the number of publicly-facing events.

Challenges:

Some of the biggest strengths, such as the provision of HIPs by dedicated faculty, are not institutionalized and are in danger of eroding. Institutional investment will be needed just to sustain what is currently available. Two important needs appear to be staff support and greater flexibility with managing resources.

The question of the structure of the division remains a topic of disagreement. It appears that this may reflect other differences of perspective, such as the relative importance of a commitment to social justice versus value-neutral social science. Consensus on how to proceed seems unlikely, so the disagreement will need to be managed skillfully.

A majority of the department appears content with the heavy focus on the United States, but this results in a somewhat limited perspective on the world. Update of the faculty and curriculum to address diversity both in the US and globally will be needed.

Recommendations:

As well as ongoing dialogue within the department, dialogue between the department and Dean's office might help align priorities more effectively. Most of the improvements that appear to be within reach will require both willingness on the part of the department and investment on the part of the Dean's office. One has the sense there may be more consensus on certain paths forward than is realized by the parties involved.

VIII. Other Comments

We acknowledge that we have not shied away from raising some difficult questions. The department is doing well in many important ways, and we have the confidence that with the proper support, it has the ability to not only resolve some of its existing challenges, but to also take its existing strengths and make more of them in the current context – to the benefit of its students, faculty, staff, and the broader college and university. We encourage the department to start with prioritization of some matters of internal decision making and community-building that seem to be shifting but perennial foundational concerns.