

Political Science Program Performance Review—Response to External Reviewers

March 19, 2024

We begin by thanking our external reviewers for taking the time to visit our campus, speak with members of the department, review our self-study, and offer cogent analysis and helpful recommendations. In this response, we note both where we agree with the reviewers' suggestions as well as where we differ, aiming to create a document that refines elements of the department's strategic plan and identifies areas where advice or resources from the College and the University are needed to achieve our goals.

Our response is organized into subsections, each one an area which both our self-study and the external report noted as points of emphasis.

High-Impact Practices

We are pleased to find that for at least the second consecutive external review, reviewers have indicated that the Department's high-impact practices (HIPs) are a competitive advantage and strength to build on. That said, we agree with the reviewers that there is work to be done in maintaining our existing practices in the face of faculty burnout or turnover, as well as to expand the reach of these practices to as many majors as possible. The department's recommendations and requests from the College and University regarding HIPs are as follows:

Not making HIPs mandatory. We disagree with the recommendation that participation in a HIP be made a requirement for all majors. Simply put, like many CSUF students, our majors often work off-campus while maintaining a full course load. Some HIPs require significant investments in time as well as travel, putting them beyond the reach of these students. Cohort classes designed to foster a sense of community as well as particular goals (such as the social justice cohort adaptation of POSC 300 and POSC 320 for transfer students) are valuable, yet will be missed by students who have already tested out of these courses, taken an equivalent course prior to transferring, or simply wish to take other courses. Finally, forcing a student to participate in a HIP when they do not wish to do could lead to poor performance or disruption. Practicums and similar capstone events are also less likely to work well in a major where students have widely divergent interests and career goals.

As an alternative, we suggest tracking of how many majors participate in one or more HIPs, using this data to guide our choices regarding future expansion.

Expanding HIPs. By contrast, we agree with the reviewers that we should continue to "lean in" into our high-impact practices by expanding their reach. One theme of the external review was

the need for greater coverage of international and comparative politics in our curriculum—this extends to our HIPs as well, as students interested in international politics have fewer HIPs options than those interested in law or American politics. Reviving Model United Nations is a reasonable goal, as is expanding student presentation of research in the annual Royce International Symposium. Another possibility for expansion is increasing the use of HIPs that can be primarily done within a classroom setting, such as the transfer cohort described above. These expansions could help reach students who lack the time or flexibility to participate in programs such as Cal State DC. Finally, we should continue to encourage as many students as possible to participate in one of our three internships (politics, law, or public administration).

We agree with the reviewers that better marketing and communication of our HIPs will help their expansion. This will require both a better website and additional staff support as well as “strategies beyond the website” to reach students. When compared to many other CSUs, our web presence is outdated, unsightly, and difficult to navigate. POSC faculty are not trained to update websites or maintain a social media presence, meaning stronger support from staff or the College and University will be essential to improvement.

Better alumni relations. Our HIPs are gradually building a pool of alumni with strong and specific connections to the department. Attempts from within the department to formalize alumni relations have been interrupted by COVID or been hampered by limited resources and or time constraints on existing faculty. Stronger support from the College or Alumni Relations might help overcome these obstacles.

Succession planning. As the external reviewers note, “POSC’s impressive HIPs relies on specific faculty leaders, raising a risk of burnout and a challenge of establishing methods for succession.” While Cal State DC and our standard internships classes do not rely on a single faculty member to survive, both Moot Court and Town Hall lean heavily on Drs. Fiber-Ostrow and Spitzer, respectively. The dissolution of Model UN serves as a cautionary tale for the department (though COVID played a role as well). Successful succession planning will require additional financial and institutional support from the College and the University, making it plausible for either an existing or new faculty member to take on these responsibilities.

Additional staff support and reducing bureaucratic hurdles. Given the size of our department and our division, our staff support, in terms of both number and experience, remains low both in absolute terms and compared to our state of affairs two PPR cycles ago. The department does not hire, oversee, or evaluate staff, which can weaken integration between staff and department goals. We eagerly anticipate the hiring of a new staff member who can help with communication and HIPs, where our needs for support are greatest. The department also faces challenges that trouble the University as a whole, with many areas of CSUF being in transition or understaffed. Offloading administrative work to faculty (such as with the moderate but real

burdens created by the adoption of systems like Concur) reduces the time we can spend on teaching, research, and other much-needed service activities.

Along the same lines, we agree with the reviewers that “the college and university can seek ways to reduce administrative roadblocks to faculty initiatives.” This request is in line with the University’s strategic plan, where Objective 5.1, Process Modernization, aims to “modernize institutional processes to reduce bureaucratic complexity.” Faculty seeking to support HIPs face real and increasing obstacles to running their programs, including cumbersome processes – such as securing IRA funding – outside their core competencies in teaching and scholarship. Whether seeking a room to hold an event, planning travel, securing student reimbursements, or engaging alumni, faculty face byzantine procedures. These hurdles increase the amount of time and effort it takes to run a HIP, increasing burnout and discouraging existing faculty from either taking on an existing HIP or developing a new one.

Hiring. The program should, as the external reviewers suggest, work with the Dean’s office on a long-term hiring plan that will balance our curricular needs with buttressing support for our HIPs. For some HIPs, unorthodox hiring practices (such as adjunct faculty hired mainly to support a practice) may be necessary to ensure our best HIPs survive.

We appreciate that CSUF leadership has taken some steps to mitigate these burdens—such as recent attempts to modernize the IRA or providing FEID grants to support HIPs development, but many more remain. We conclude this section by reiterating the following:

- The Concur system for processing travel is more confusing and time-consuming than the paper forms it replaced.
- Building better alumni relations will require more administrative support from the Alumni Office.
- Additional staff and/or part-time hires are needed to ensure the continuation of programs such as Moot Court and the Town Hall meeting.
- Faculty need spaces beyond the TSU (which has restrictions that complicate its use) to hold events or run their HIPs, while students participating in these activities also need places to gather. As the external review notes, “for such a large department, it is surprising to see no common areas for students to gather together to study, deepen community or access information.”
- The department needs support for stronger web presence and marketing.

The department appreciates the aid the Dean’s office has already provided in supporting our HIPs, and we look forward to working with them to ensure they not only survive but thrive during the next PPR cycle.

Assessment

We concur with the external reviewers that we can improve our assessment (particularly at the undergraduate level) and have already begun to do so. Using a process designed and employed by our colleagues in Public Administration, we now use electronic forms to track specific SLOs in specific courses as specified by our course map and assessment plan.

Because assessment is tied to specific courses, rather than specific faculty, “the work students do in sections taught by adjuncts” will be assessed when adjunct faculty teach these courses (as is the case for POSC 301 in Spring 2024).

As for the MAPS program, in their recent review of the assessment program, the University Assessment Liaisons agreed that assessment through comprehensive exams was an efficient process, as well as concurring with the reviewers that data should be analyzed at the individual level to consider why some graduate students are not meeting our desired benchmarks for success.

The Masters’ Program in Political Science

Our master’s program remains at the edge of viability. While it has led to clear success stories—such as students taking on challenging and influential careers or being admitted to prestigious PhD programs—challenges remain in maintaining its numbers and on agreeing on its purpose. The challenge here is simple to understand but hard to solve: refining the program’s focus would likely reduce its numbers. While the review acknowledges that “jettisoning” the program “might allow greater focus on the department’s core undergraduate mission,” it also notes—correctly in our view—that the program is a “significant part of the department’s identity.”

Absent more specific recommendations from either our self-study or the external review, we agree that the next step is a longer meeting or retreat focused solely MAPS. We will schedule such a meeting for the 2024-2025 academic year.

Department Culture

Gender inequities

Both the external review and some of our own faculty (both during and after the site visit) have spoken to some continuing challenges regarding gender inequities in the department. The review puts this well, referencing 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.”

These are complex and long-standing issues that cannot reasonably be addressed in this document. We have agreed to work with the Dean’s office and the Provost to form a plan to address these problems, and remain open to whatever type of resolution or actions this plan might require.

Lecturer involvement

Our review states that “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.” We agree. As a program, we must do better in recognizing their teaching, research, and service. Some items for consideration and improvement include:

- As the review notes, lecturers can feel isolated from the department as many offices are often located in a different building. This is a difficult problem, given realities of space on campus and the limits of the fifth floor of Gordon Hall in terms of either available office space or any communal area for faculty or students. We are open to any suggestions from the College to address this concern.
- The department needs to better support the research efforts of our lecturer colleagues, ranging from better inclusion and communication funding opportunities for conferences or research, to opportunities for lecturers to present their research, to support for those faculty seeking tenure-track employment here or elsewhere (such as providing a practice job talk).
- One roadblock to fuller inclusion by lecturers is that the tenure-track faculty feel uneasy when lecturers undertake service roles for which they are not compensated. Additional financial support from the College could both help mitigate these concerns and compensate lecturers, even partially, for their participation in HIPs or other critical service activities.
- New lecturers could benefit from stronger onboarding by both the department and the College. The University’s faculty orientation is useful but necessarily omits department or college-specific needs or requirements, while lecturer faculty often begin their work without having even met their colleagues. Efforts at the department level could include a handbook for new faculty, a welcome reception for new faculty, or web and video support on commonly faced problems. We would also appreciate advice from the Dean’s office regarding best practices from other departments.
- Finally, a lecturer survey would allow faculty to tell the department, anonymously, their own needs or suggestions for improving inclusion.

Diversity, equality, and inclusion efforts

The reviewers state that the political science program needs to do more in regard to DEI efforts. Some of this discussion, particularly as it relates to faculty concerns, is addressed above.

Between the completion of the self-study and the writing of this reply, the program’s DEI committee has identified tasks for moving DEI efforts forward in pedagogy, several of which dovetail with the review’s suggestions.

- As our PPR and the reviewers note, adding a Race and Politics class to our breadth options (or curricular core) is an important step.
- We are putting together a five-year picture of our programs, examining admission, retention rates, graduation rates, and GPA for our students along cleavages in gender, underrepresented minorities, and Pell Grant status. Good data is the first step to better planning.
- Similar to how we treated POSC 100 (American Government) in our self-study, faculty have suggested addressing catalog descriptions to include DEI materials in our course, similar to how the discipline itself is moving to take greater notice of these elements of political institutions and behavior.
- As the reviewers suggest, we intend to survey existing courses (including elements such as assigned readings, guest lectures, and assessments) to “catalog existing successes” as well as identify areas for improvement in terms of whether our courses currently include appropriate attention to race, ethnicity, gender, and other factors.
- Another roadblock we can address is to provide interested faculty with a database of relevant scholarly works or other relevant and rigorous if they wish to update their courses. Such efforts would be particularly useful for courses such as POSC 100 and POSC 300, with their larger enrollments.
- In POSC 100—which although not a course in the major is by far our biggest point of impact on the student body—we aim to designate a “default” American politics textbook that the committee and program faculty feel pays appropriate attention, for example, to the importance of race in American politics. While we do not believe requiring a single text for faculty use is appropriate given our stance on academic freedom, a default option could be helpful either for faculty new to teaching the course or to faculty interested in changing texts.
- The committee can also suggest or help organize programming which appeals to students, faculty, and members of the community while also advancing DEI goals.

Growth of the major and hiring plans

The reviewers suggest 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.” Once again, they have framed a central tension adroitly. There is broad agreement among our faculty that given our student population and their schedules, flexibility is more important than structure.

Two other comments appear more than once in regard to growing our major: the need for greater coverage in foreign affairs, and for stronger communication and marketing, not only of our HIPs (as described above), but of the program in general as the destination for the study of, discussion on, and programming geared towards politics.

Expanding in foreign affairs versus other priorities

To some extent our size as a department limits the degree to which any particular area of cross-national politics can receive coverage. That said, we have recently hired for Latin American politics, an important need. We also anticipate a potential search in 2025-2026 which could be directed towards cross-national politics. The challenge is balancing this with other needs. As of our most recent student survey, public law was the most requested political science subfield for additional classes, with comparative politics as the second choice. An updated student survey could be useful here, helping us determine not only student demand for our subfields but student preferences for additional coverage within either comparative politics or international relations.

Improved marketing, communication, and campus programming

Our requests here largely mirror the requests made above in reference to our HIPs. The external review references “communication issues that can impede students’ knowledge about opportunities such as minors & concentrations, scholarships, and career paths.” Better use of social media, Discord, or other forms of department to student communication, a more accessible and better organized website, and increased contact with ASI and other high-profile student groups could improve our situation. In areas outside of faculty core competencies, help from the College and University will be essential for our success.

The department can also raise its profile on campus by increasing its public-facing events. In an election cycle, for example, we should be the face of the campus for both media requests and campus programming. Whenever possible, such programming should be institutionalized and routinized (such as the annual Royce Symposium). As we note above, the DEI committee has a role to play here as well.

We again thank the reviewers for their time and efforts, both for the site visit and crafting the external review. We also thank the Dean and Associate Dean for taking the time to read this response, and for working with us to address the challenges ahead and meet our strategic goals.