

**External Review Report**  
7<sup>th</sup> Cycle Program Review  
Department of International Relations  
San Francisco State University

**External Review Visit: October 2-3, 2018**

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## **1.0 Overview of the Program**

The International Relations (IR) department is a critical component of undergraduate and graduate education at SFSU. It is one of the few stand-alone International Relations programs in the United States. The faculty of the program draw on a range of theoretical perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds, to create a unique learning experience for a diverse student body. The program aligns precisely with the mission of SFSU, which seeks to produce “productive, ethical, active citizens with a global perspective.” The IR department captures this global perspective in its diverse faculty, diverse student body, diverse areas of expertise (both substantive and geographical), and in the very nature of the study of international relations.

## **2.0 Program Quality**

We were impressed with the dedication and knowledge that faculty brought to the program. In conversations with the students, we found them to be candid, thoughtful, and confident. The array of courses offered is impressive, and provides a truly global perspective. Faculty have clearly thought deeply about their status as a stand-alone department, and are able to offer convincing rationales for this status. They are also collaborating with other departments when it is effective to do so. Overall, we found the IR program at SFSU to be a high quality program.

## **2.1 Program Planning**

The program’s mission statement, as currently worded, lists the various areas of study offered by the program. However, it does not showcase the goals, strengths, and achievements of the program.

There are three learning goals listed at the BA level. These goals do reflect concerns that are widespread in the IR discipline – e.g., “learning concepts, theories, and methodologies,” as well

as “imparting presentation and research skills.” However, these goals do not reflect outcomes that are actually measurable. For example, one goal is “to develop in each student at least one area of special individual competence in international relations.” To which “areas” are the learning goals referring? What is “individual competence” and how can it be measured? In contrast, the learning goals for the MA Program are more specific and measurable. We suggest that the goals be reworded as ‘learning outcomes.’

We asked for some syllabi to see how course offerings aligned with the department’s learning goals. The syllabi listed course goals, and often had measurable outcomes. Yet, it is not clear how the goals of specific courses align with the program’s learning goals. Moreover, it is not clear how the goals for specific assignments aligned with course goals.

We recommend that the department collaboratively re-think its learning goals, and construct them to reflect measurable outcomes. Course outcomes, for various courses, could be mapped on to the IR program’s learning outcomes. Similarly, instructors could clearly link their evaluation of the students, through assignments or class participation, to course learning outcomes. If this information is provided on the syllabus, it will help students understand the role of assessment. It will also ensure that, across the range of courses being taught over a period, all of the program’s learning outcomes are being met. We suggest using the resources for assessment, provided by the California State University (CSU) system; a useful starting point is [here](#).

With regard to the program itself, the department shows evidence of ongoing engagement in efforts to understand and improve aspects of its program. We were presented with the conclusions of research on student learning with respect to the core sequence (IR 308, 309 (GWAR), and 550 (capstone)) using a longitudinal study of GWAR and capstone papers. The

results of the study show that the pedagogical logic of the sequence demonstrated a payoff: students' writing abilities have shown improvement as they move through the sequence. The GVAR class appears to be serving the purpose of preparing students for more academically challenging capstone (550) papers.

## **2.2 Student Learning and Achievement**

Enrollment, retention, and graduate rates for the IR department have been strong at both the BA and MA level – either consistent with, or improving relative to the college and University levels.

Nevertheless, the department has taken steps to address challenges to student progress and graduation. The department was especially interested in learning if its required sequence (IR 104, 308, 309, 550) was a bottleneck to progress to graduation. They investigated the issue, and the evidence pointed to the fact that requiring the courses in sequence was not a problem. Despite this, the department added two sections of IR 550 to its summer course listings to help improve graduation rates. The department has also added more GE designations to existing IR courses, in order to enable their students to “double-count” courses, helping them to fulfill their graduation requirements faster.

The department engages in several [high impact practices](#), which have been proven to help students learn and achieve. These include internships, writing-intensive courses, community-based learning, and capstone courses. The department's diversity as seen among students, faculty and subject matter contributes to global learning. Each semester, approximately 50 international students are enrolled in the program, according to data provided by the department. The department also has a rich history of involving students in study abroad. They have established

links with a specific program in Pavia, Italy for Master's students. Several undergraduate classes have online sections, which allow students easier access to instruction. We applaud and encourage this practice, and suggest that instructors who are interested in offering online courses receive training and technical support.

Students are encouraged to do internships, and the program has a strong history of placing their MA students in internships both within and outside the Bay Area. We note that the method of disseminating information on internships, particularly for the undergraduate students, is through an email digest sent out to students. However, there are some flaws in this method and students expressed their dissatisfaction with the digest. The department could appoint an instructor as an Internship Coordinator, who would be in charge of internships both for undergraduate and graduate students. Alternatively, it could offer a course called "Internship" which would blend classroom instruction by a faculty member with internship experience. Students would write papers reflecting on their experience (as is done currently in the MA program), and work on resumes, presentation and interview skills, and so on during class meetings. As a possible model for such a course, see the course offered in the Political Science Department at San Jose State University (the link is [here](#)).

An important high impact practice, Model United Nations, was offered in the past. However, this program and Model Arab League are no longer offered because of understaffing, although we understand that Model European Union is still being offered. We recommend that the department bring back these courses – either through a new faculty hire to cover these courses, or by having the next hire take up other courses, freeing a current faculty member to cover Model United Nations/Arab League.

## **2.3 Curriculum**

### **2.3.1 Undergraduate curriculum**

The department has one intro-level GE course, and then a multi-course core that culminates in a capstone seminar, in addition to many electives. The IR department takes pride in providing coverage of a wide variety of geographic areas, theoretical, and methodological approaches. We agree that the breadth of coverage is significant, and the variety of electives serves the students well. While we see a lot of variety in geographical area in courses taught, we note a lack of course offerings in research methodology. This is something that is becoming important in the discipline, and that we think the department should work to cover. In addition, courses with high student demand have not been taught recently due to retirements, movement of faculty to administration, etc. In meeting with students (13 undergraduate and 5 graduate), we noted that there was a high demand for classes that have been lacking due to these problems: particularly courses on international law/diplomacy. We also note that the courses on international security are being affected by the loss of permanent faculty. These are topics that are central to the overall IR discipline, and therefore important courses for the department to offer.

We reviewed the capstone syllabus from the Fall 2018 course. First, it is a very daunting task to write such a long paper (45-60 pages are required). To address this, the course required sections of the paper to be completed at various dates throughout the semester, helping to break up the paper into more manageable parts. Second, there were two workshops where students would read and comment on each other's papers before the professor reviewed them. In spite of this commendable effort by faculty, we understand that this course has a relatively high dropout rate, as many students are unable to complete the required paper within the semester. Helping to deal with this challenge, the department offers several sections of this course throughout the

academic year and in the summer, which allows students who were not able to complete the course the first time to have a chance to do so again without hurting their time to degree. We recommend that the department reconsider whether a paper of this length is the optimal requirement for a capstone course.

We noted that the department is open to collaboration and values integration with the college. Several courses are cross-listed with other departments, including political science and sociology, thus eliminating the risk that these departments are competing for the same students. Several courses are also GE courses. The department is therefore not only serving its own undergraduate students, but also other majors.

### **2.3.2 Graduate curriculum**

The graduate program consists of a variety of core classes and electives. It has two tracks – a professional track (which requires an internship and internship report paper) and an academic track, (which requires a thesis). These papers are to be at least 12,000 words in length (15,000 for non-quantitative theses). The department states in the self-study report that the “Master’s degree program focuses on training our students to be professionals who work in the field of international relations, including government service, the non-profit sector, and international organizations.” If the professional track is the more popular option for students, it would be beneficial to allocate more resources to that track. These resources would include assistance in researching and securing internships, and a modest stipend that would allow students to commit to unpaid internships.

The department conducted a review of the culminating papers of the graduate students to ascertain whether they were serving their pedagogical purpose. In the assessment reflected in the

self-report, the department has largely achieved its goals with the culminating experience papers. On all elements of the rubric, the papers reviewed from 2017 averaged from good to excellent (for the professional track papers) on all elements of the rubric, and from very good to excellent (for the academic track). Weaknesses, however, were also identified, and the department has taken steps to help improve the papers. The Graduate Committee drafted specific guidelines for the students regarding expectations from the paper. The internship coordinator has assigned short essays to provide students the opportunity to reflect on their internship experience prior to the writing stage of the culminating paper. Professional track students are required to take the research design and methods class (academic track students were already required to do so).

In our review of the graduate curriculum, we have observed that some methods courses are offered, but do not dedicate much attention to statistical analyses. The department has recently decided that in addition to their IR 750 research design methods course, the IR 751 course (which does touch on some statistical methods) would be offered once every two years. Upon discussion of this course with faculty, however, we learned that the level of quantitative material covered is minimal. We recommend this course be revised to include a greater focus on quantitative methods – at the very least through discussion of multivariate regression. Quantitative methods are clearly coming to the fore in the IR discipline, and the department needs to keep up with this trend for its students to succeed. Even for students on the professional track, some statistics training opens up many doors, and can help them compete for jobs against students from other universities who have received this type of training. Across the board, the syllabi we have been able to review, clearly work to provide exposure to a multiplicity of *theoretical approaches* to the study of IR. We recommend that the faculty consider exposing students to a variety of *methods* as well – including statistical methods.

## **2.4 Faculty**

The faculty consistently demonstrate a high quality of teaching, and most of them are clearly engaged with the field through their research, participating in conferences and publishing regularly. We commend the faculty for this engagement, which is undertaken along with a heavy teaching load. We also note that the department is not overly reliant on adjunct faculty, and the adjunct faculty member that we met was clearly integrated into the department, and had strong ties to both faculty and students.

However, there is an unequal distribution of teaching and service workload among the faculty (as recognized in the self-report). For example, female faculty teach a larger load in supervisory courses, and do more college and university service. Also, some faculty members offer a wide variety of courses, requiring significant additional preparation time, while other faculty teach a standard rotation. In addition, the graduate coordinator of the MA program does not receive any course reduction for his/her service despite spending many hours in admission of graduate students, working with the students, and for the administrative and curricular development of the program. The unequal distribution of work is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed, but that does not have a simple solution. In section 4.0 we propose some options that the department should consider to alleviate some of these inequity problems.

## **2.5 Resources**

Since the move to the Humanities Building, the department has adequate space for offices and to carry out its mission, and classrooms have become equipped with more up-to-date technologies. Financial resources, however, are lacking. Funds for professional development and hiring graduate student research assistants are extremely limited, often making it difficult for

faculty to carry out the work expected of them. In particular, the two newly-hired faculty members report uncertainty about their ability to continue their research, which requires travel and fieldwork. While funding is always constrained, we recommend that the college and university take into account the particular needs of IR faculty while allocating research and professional development funding. .

Regarding staff, the AOC is very knowledgeable about the rules and procedures at the university, and faculty have expressed appreciation for her efficiency. However, it appears that she is frequently asked to perform additional tasks, going beyond the expectations of her position. We recommend clear communication to faculty members and students regarding the duties of the AOC.

Advising is a key component for student success. Currently, all faculty members are required to be available for advising, by holding office hours, and students are supposed to seek them out. In practice, this has led to a small number of faculty members bearing the burden of advising duties for a variety of reasons. The faculty and students could be better served if there was a designated faculty advisor for undergraduates that would serve for some period (2-years or 2-semesters) in rotation. This faculty member should receive a course reduction for this extra work. Other faculty members can continue advising on academic questions, thus also respecting student choice. The designated advisor would be the point person for administrative questions about course sequencing, substitutions, etc. The creation of such a position would not only help alleviate unequal faculty advising efforts, but would better serve the students, as one or two instructors would be tracking student progress over time. A course release for this designated advisor would allow him/her to dedicate the time and effort needed to learn the relevant systems and policies.

## **2.6 The Program's Conclusions, Plans, and Goals**

Although the department has not agreed on a long-term goal, the medium-term goals include new recruitment—which is sorely needed, and strengthening the resources offered to students. Overall, the program is of high quality and provides a unique experience to students. However, we believe that a few tactical improvements in terms of communication strategies and reframing of program goals would be beneficial.

## **3 Commendations of Strengths and Achievements**

We commend the IR department for its diversity of faculty, substantive material taught and researched, and the diversity and quality of the students they attract. With this diversity, and the very nature of the study of international relations, the department helps to provide the “global perspective” that is espoused in the university’s mission statement.

We believe a strength of the department is its “stand-alone” status which, as we learned in our in-person meetings on campus, in-and-of-itself attracts both students and faculty. Being in a stand-alone department means that faculty members come from a number of disciplines, thus bringing a breadth of expertise to the department that it would otherwise not have. The multidisciplinary IR department members can each branch out and use IR theory to study a wide variety of issues – social movements, state security, international law, the environment, international political economy, and many others.

We also commend the department for its excellence in teaching. We met with 18 students (13 undergraduate and 5 graduate students) in an informal environment without the presence of any faculty members, so the students could speak freely. We were left with the impression that students perceive faculty to be highly dedicated, knowledgeable, and approachable. Several

students explicitly expressed appreciation for personalized guidance and mentorship by individual professors.

#### **4 Recommendations and Strategies for Program Improvement**

First, one of the biggest issues we believe the department faces is inequity in teaching and service efforts. While there is no perfect solution to this problem, we put forth proposals that we recommend the department consider. (1) Regarding inequity in the advising of MA theses, the bulk of the work has clearly fallen upon a few. We recognize that much of this is due to student choice, so imposition of chairs for thesis committees is not advisable. One possible compromise solution would be to allow students to choose their primary thesis chair, while the second member would be assigned in such a way as to more equally divide supervisory responsibilities. The student would still be able to work most closely with their chosen chair, but the ‘second member’ assignments could be divided equally among faculty. (2) Regarding inequity in advising, the bulk of the work has fallen upon a few, and in conversations during our campus visit, we learned that some faculty are more knowledgeable and involved than others. This is not an unusual state of affairs, as different faculty members may be more or less interested in advising depending on their schedules, temperaments, and training. We recommend that the department create a pool of designated advisors, who would receive training (such as university workshops) and a course reduction. They would hold extended office hours and become familiar with not only SFSU policies, but also internships, graduate school requirements, and career opportunities.

Second, we recommend that the IR department be provided increased funds to hire graduate student research assistants. Doing so would help solve two problems simultaneously: (1) it would aid in the faculty's ability to conduct their research, and (2) it would help provide a type of income for graduate students, who currently receive little to no financial support in pursuit of their degree (the latter being a problem which the IR department has identified as one that often leads students to pursue their MA at other institutions that do provide financial support).

Third, the department is in sore need of faculty members who can teach courses that were offered in the past and attracted many students. These include courses in international security, and in international law/diplomacy. A fast-approaching retirement of the specialist in international environmental policy also needs to be taken into account. While the previous review recommended gender/feminism and environmental politics as areas of focus, we recommend hiring in core areas of the discipline, such as security and international law. This is not incompatible with the previous recommendation. By advertising a position for a specialist in international environmental policy, with an emphasis on international law, negotiations and diplomacy, the department could achieve multiple goals. Similarly, it could advertise for an international security position, with preference given to research that brings a gender perspective to bear on security issues. The department should also consider using the new recruitment to attract a scholar who can teach quantitative methods courses.

Fourth, while this was not explicitly addressed in the self-report, we would like to comment on the culminating papers that the undergraduate and graduate students are asked to write. We believe that the culminating paper requirements at both the undergraduate and graduate level are not in line with the reality of the discipline post-graduation. Academic

journals are allowing fewer and fewer words in their publications (as low as 9,000 and even lower), and the norm for writing in professional settings is even shorter, where memos and white papers are the main method of written communication. We see the intrinsic value of doing a “big” research project, but we recommend that the department consider requiring the students to construct their research and writing, in a way that is more in line with what they will be required to do in the future. In particular, we recommend requiring multiple smaller (20-30 page) papers instead of the very long page/word requirements currently in place for the undergraduate capstone and graduate culminating papers. Requiring a greater number of shorter papers could: (1) lessen the stress of writing a very long paper (an issue identified in the self-report as a difficulty faced in the undergraduate capstone course), (2) shorten the time such a long paper can take (an issue identified in the self-report which causes MA students in the academic track to sometimes need more time to complete the requirement), and, most importantly (3) prepare the students for the type of writing they will be expected to do post-graduation. Learning to write concisely and efficiently is a skill, and that could be taught and fostered by the department by requiring a greater number of shorter papers in these culminating experiences.

Finally, we would like to offer a few suggestions regarding communication. We recommend that the department provide additional information on their website: (1) provide students with a tentative list of course offerings for a couple consecutive semesters, thus aiding them in planning their course selection, (2) upload past and present syllabi of courses, giving students tools to choose courses that they are interested in, (3) provide detailed roadmaps of recommended sequencing of courses for timely graduation. Another improvement to the website would be to expand the information provided in the bios of faculty members to include more information about their academic interests and professional experience. In meeting with the

students, many expressed that there were faculty that they realized they could have approached for help with certain things, given the faculty member's expertise, but just simply did not know that expertise existed.

This focus on communication can also be extended to faculty members. While we observed a collegial environment, it could be improved by semi-regular meetings of the instructors. These could be social occasions, workshops dealing with specific student issues—such as writing, or research colloquia where faculty present work in progress. This practice would be especially beneficial to the faculty who have joined the department in recent years.

Finally, we encourage communication with alumni. We recommend that the department make use of an alumni database (and any information provided from the college/university level) by encouraging alumni to visit the department. Our understanding from our meetings is that many alumni remain close, and could attend such an event. For example, they could host an annual social event to which the alumni are invited, allowing students to make connections. We recommend the department consider using “Linked-In” as a resource. It is widely used in the professional community, and could help to link current students and alumni. This would allow alumni to provide important resources as possible sources of information about internships and jobs for students as well as fellow alumni. Eventually, alumni could be a source for department funding, such as scholarships.