

To: Andrew Harris, Dean of LCA
Lori Beth Way, Dean Undergraduate Education and Academic Planning
Sophie Clavier, Dean of Graduate Studies
Jennifer Summit, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs
Academic Program and Review Committee

Fr: Nicole Watts, professor and chair, Dept of Political Science

Date: December 17, 2019

Re: PLSI Dept Response to 7th Cycle External Review Report and Recommendations

Political Science department faculty met on 6 December 2019 to discuss the 7th Cycle External Reviewer report of our program. We are grateful to external reviewers Dr. Jane Junn and Dr. Teresa Wright for their thorough and thoughtful evaluation, and we are deeply gratified by the report's recognition of the achievements of our faculty and our program. Overall, we concur wholeheartedly with the report's recommendations to the college/university and with the recommendations to the department.

Reflections on self-study and overall 7th Cycle External Review process

On a personal level, we would like to thank Associate Dean Jane Dewitt for her patience, support, and timely assistance. She did her utmost best to help us every step of the way. We also wish to extend our deep thanks to Dr. Wright and Dr. Junn for agreeing to serve as our reviewers, especially after we were forced to reschedule our initial review because of the fall 2018 fires that caused the closure of SFSU.

This was the first comprehensive self-study of the program (undergraduate and graduate) in at least 15 years. Overall, the department found it useful. Faculty learned a great deal about our department and our program, and the report helped us identify short- and long-term trends in enrollment, hiring, course offerings, research emphases, and student-faculty ratios. While we had at our own initiative already embarked on a process of programmatic assessment through a department-authored survey of our majors and new curriculum committee considerations, writing the self-study further encouraged us to collectively consider our needs, resources, and areas for improvement. Re: the writing of the self-study itself, the authors did encounter substantial challenges in finding accurate and up-to-date data, despite extensive use of the 7th Cycle Review folders on ilearn and use of the CSU Dashboards and the Office of Institutional Analytics. We also often found conflicting (i.e. about the number of majors in our program) or clearly erroneous or misleading information that required multiple email conversations and many hours of labor to resolve.

Department faculty expressed great satisfaction with the external reviewers' visit to campus. All but a couple of our TT/T faculty were able to meet with the external reviewers, and many of our adjunct faculty spoke with them as well. We all found Drs. Wright and Junn to be professional, thoughtful, down-to-earth, and supportive. We appreciated the opportunity to discuss our program with them and to share ideas and learn from two department chairs with such experience and insights.

Response to external reviewer report sections 1.0-3.3

We thank the reviewers for their highly positive evaluation of our program and our faculty. We have recently, as they note (p. 2), “put great effort into program planning and revision,” and we are pleased to learn that the students they met with expressed “great satisfaction” with the program and the knowledge and skills they acquire in our classrooms. We are particularly proud of their commendation of our faculty members’ dedication to the SFSU mission and their characterization of our scholarship as “truly impressive” and “at the level of many UCs and other R1 institutions” (p. 4), something they say (p. 6) is particularly striking given our relatively high teaching load.

Dept response to recommendations for college/university

Department faculty fully agree with the external reviewers’ determination that the department is in “dire need” of additional resources in many areas. The following list highlights areas of particular need, according to the reviewers, with our comments following their recommendation.

Review recommendation: That the department is in “dire need” of at least one tenure-line hire in the very near future and two or more in the not-too-distant future. In particular, they suggest we hire an Americanist with specialization in the politics of race to replace Prof. Robert Smith, who retired two years ago.

Department response: While the department has been able to hire four new TT faculty in the past four years, retiring and FERPing faculty combined with a substantial increase in the number of majors have meant that TT/T faculty are still spread extremely thin. This has become especially apparent in the last couple of years as both department and college have sought to improve advising and outreach to improve student success. We agree with the priority on hiring a new TT faculty member with expertise in the politics of the race, perhaps combined with an American public law focus.

Review recommendation: Additional instructor units for large lecture sections of PLSI 200 as well as hiring of GAs or GTAs, supplemental instruction, or other support.

Department response: Full agreement with the reviewers. PLSI 200 (Intro to American Politics) is a service course. At least 90 percent of the students in this course are not PLSI majors. Many students taking PLSI 200 are ill prepared for this class and need additional support and assistance. In addition, students increasingly want to take this course in an online format that, though convenient for them, poses pedagogical challenges.

The department considered the following options in response to the recommendation:

- 1) Return to offering a 700-person, in-person section of PLSI 200 taught by an experienced and effective instructor who would receive 9 WTUs for the course and support to hire 2-3 GAs. Historic data suggests this would reduce the DFWU rate for PLSI 200 as well as substantially reduce the number of sections we need to offer and free up faculty to teach elsewhere.
- 2) Increase PLSI’s student assistant budget to be able to hire more students to serve as teaching assistants. Currently our allotted budget only permits us to hire 4-5 paid teaching assistants per year, and the only sections of 200 that have teaching assistants are those with around 300 students.

- 3) Offer honoraria and other forms of support for professional development for all faculty (adjunct and TT) teaching sections of PLSI 200.

Reviewer recommendation:

Long term institutional support for Moot Court, including release time for Moot Court Coach Dr. Nick Conway and supplemental funding.

Department response: The department fully agrees on the urgent need for short- and long-term support for SFSU Moot Court. The Moot Court program has expanded dramatically since its establishment by Asst. Prof Nick Conway when he joined our faculty in 2017. In the short time of its existence the team has done extraordinarily well and will be sending students to compete in the National Moot Court tournament in January of 2020—an almost unheard of feat for such a new team. On Nov 20 2019 the department submitted a comprehensive report on Moot Court to the college along with a request for resources to support it. Key among these requests was a request for regular fall semester release time for Moot Court Coach Nick Conway, who every summer and fall spends upwards of 20 unrecompensed days traveling and coaching the team in addition to his regular teaching and advising duties. In addition, we requested administrative support and supplementary funding for when IRA funds prove inadequate, as they thus far have done.

Reviewer recommendation: Continuation of course release to support Undergraduate Advising Coordinator (currently Dr. Marcela Garcia-Castanon).

Department response: We fully agree and hope the college continues to support release time for this important set of advising outreach and graduation efforts. We believe we are already seeing some important shifts in student enrollment patterns and levels of success in courses such as PLSI 300 Scientific Inquiry in Political Science.

Reviewer recommendation: College/university support through a stipend or release time to development of successful online instructors to prepare training and oversight materials to ensure quality in online course offerings.

Department response: Full agreement. On Dec 17 the department chair led a workshop on effective online teaching in political science attended by six faculty who teach online. This was the first such workshop in department history. However, it would be extremely helpful to have development money to help support such endeavors and incentivize additional faculty training in online teaching. Student demand for online courses is extremely high, and PLSI has been something of a pioneer in its online course offerings. However, teaching effectively online requires a substantial investment in time for training (especially in technologies such as advanced PowerPoint and video editing software), and we have never received any additional support for this.

Reviewer recommendation: Support/backing for department empirical analysis of high DFWU rates in some course sections to help better identify causes and develop remedies.

Department response: Full agreement. The university administration (provost, deans, etc.) has in recent months given new attention to courses with high DFWU rates. The department agrees that such courses and sections are cause for concern, and we have already initiated conversations among ourselves over how we might bring these rates down for particular courses and sections (in some cases, there is a wide variation in the failure rate between sections).

However, developing effective solutions to high DFWU rates requires a better understanding of their causes. It is not as simple as changing pedagogy: in some cases there are substantial variations in failure rates in a course taught by the same instructor, for instance. Is there a correlation between high failure rate and the number of hours students work per week, and/or when the class is held, and/or online versus brick and mortar? Are students more successful in courses if they have done other coursework prior? We have faculty within our department trained to gather and systematically analyze this sort of data, but doing so would require far more time than any faculty member can voluntarily contribute. Having a course release for a faculty member to carry out this study would be extremely valuable in helping us devise solutions and increase student success.

Reviewer recommendation: University provide affordable faculty housing to aid in retention and recruitment.

Department response: The department agrees that the lack of affordable faculty housing has become an urgent problem in recruitment and retention, and hopes the university administration will continue and expand its efforts to be able to offer affordable faculty housing to both TT and adjunct faculty.

Department response to reviewer recommendations for the department

The reviewers offered four main suggestions for the department.

1. Reviewer recommendation and department response re: DFWU rates

The reviewers rightly suggest we take action to reduce DFWU rates in affected courses, and – as indicated above—we fully support their recommendation that we conduct a university-supported analysis of DFWU data “to formulate and implement effective strategies” to reduce these rates.

As we wrote in the fall 2019 update memo to the self study, the department has already initiated a number of other important steps we hope will increase student success and better train our majors. These efforts include a proposal (submitted Dec 2019) for a significant revision to the major (especially adding a new Writing for Political Science GWAR class and a Fundamentals of Political Science class for our majors), workshops on integrating research skills into lower-division core classwork, subfield faculty development of common student learning objectives, and workshops on effective practices in online teaching. In addition, we have held many conversations this semester sharing pedagogical insights and steps we might take to increase student success.

2. Reviewer recommendation and department response re: Assessment

As the reviewers noted, we have been engaging in significant self assessment over the past couple of years, but not necessarily describing it as such. We will work to incorporate this language into our analyses to facilitate communication and share information between our department and other university offices and resources.

3. Reviewer recommendation and department response re: PLSI methods training

The reviewers encouraged us to broaden our methods training beyond traditional quantitative methods. We agree it will be beneficial to expand methods training to qualitative, ethnographic and mixed methods and are taking steps to do so with the creation of a new qualitative methods

course proposal that will be submitted in January of 2020. As an explanatory note, for many years the burden of teaching our core methods class (PLSI 300 Scientific Inquiry in Political Science) rested on just a few faculty who struggled to meet the demand. Recent TT hires in our department have finally allowed us to ease the logjam in the teaching of PLSI 300 and to take steps to expand our methods offerings. In addition, we look forward to working with other departments in the new interdisciplinary undergraduate Certificate in Applied Research Methods (proposal being put together spring 2020), which we hope will encourage more students to study a broad array of methods offered through political science.

4. Reviewer recommendation and department response re: MA program enrollment

We agree that taking steps to expand enrollment in our MA program would be beneficial, though we are also cognizant – as they note-- of the university- and national-level trends in MA programs, which wax and wane according to the job market. We are excited about the possibility of offering more GA-ships that not only provide valuable training for our grad students but help offset the cost of tuition. In addition, the department is working on a proposal for a 4+1 MA program that we hope may increase the number of well-prepared MA students.