

External Review Report of Gender Studies Department

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External Review Committee

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Executive Summary

The Department of Gender Studies at the University of Victoria has a venerable history as a national leader in Women's and Gender Studies in Canada. It has evolved and adapted with the shifts and tides of a fast-changing discipline since its early days as a program, and then since 1995 a Department. Today, the Department continues to offer strong, relevant undergraduate programs (Honours, Major, and Minor) that make a disproportionate (to the Department's size) contribution to the Faculty's and University's strategic goals and priorities concerning Indigenization, equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization. The expertise, care and concern of the faculty members in the unit, and the Department's mission to "actively pursue social justice" in its work with "an ethics of care and accountability," create a first-rate student experience. Students report a positive learning experience, a sense of belonging, and an opportunity for community amongst like-minded people.

At the same time, in recent years, particularly leading up to, during, and since the pandemic, the Department has faced a number of challenges. These circumstances have put pressures on its resources and capacity, and put it in a state of "catch-up" that is not conducive to the development of strategic vision and planning that was tradition until then, with the Department routinely undertaking ongoing five-year plans (see self-study, section 3.2, p. 15). The challenges are as follows:

- Since the conclusion of Laura Parisi's term as Chair in 2020, the Department has had four different Chairs/Acting Chairs (Thea Cacchioni, Chair, 2021; Laura Parisi, Acting Chair, January to June 2022; Sikata Banerjee, Acting Chair, 2022-23; Gillian Calder [Law], Acting Chair, 2023-24). Even on its own, such quick turnover in leadership is bound to be an obstacle to planning and stability, regardless of how dedicated each person is to the role. It also meant less continuity in the mentoring of new junior faculty and lost momentum in the process of rebuilding trust and community that was begun in October 2021 at a meeting themed, "Creating a Culture of Care, Accountability and Reciprocal Safety as a Way of Overcoming Disconnection and Advancing Decolonization."
- The pandemic itself, during which lockdowns normalized working from home, was a challenge for us all. For this small Department, the pandemic and the lack of stable leadership combined

to deplete the sense of intellectual community within the Department in a way that they only started to overcome when Acting Chair, Gillian Calder, forced the situation by having in-person meetings to write the self-study for this review. The pandemic also made the onboarding of junior faculty hired to start in 2020 difficult because the usual in-person activities did not take place. It seems from our meetings that absence from campus established itself firmly as the new normal for faculty colleagues in the Department during the pandemic and has continued to the present day. Under these conditions it is very difficult for new members to feel integrated into the life of the Department.

- A number of retirements, departures, and leaves of various kinds (from health to leaves of absence to pursue other projects), and the secondment of senior faculty member Annalee Lepp to the role of Dean, have all affected the faculty complement. The complement has fallen far short of the ideal steady-state of 8, to (by our calculation) 5.5 (that number includes the incoming Chair, Davina Bhandar, hired externally, and Jamie Sewell, who is on a two-year contract). This loss of capacity has been accompanied by enrollment growth at the level of courses and programs, increasing the pressure on instructors. From meetings with the instructors, we learned of a high level of exhaustion and frustration, and the widely-shared feeling that, though they adore their students, they feel overworked and believe that, from an equity perspective, they are doing more than colleagues in other Departments.

The arrival of a new Chair is always a moment of opportunity for a Department, and we encourage the Department and the Faculty to offer sincere support to the incoming Chair in order to ensure the success, not just of her, but of the unit as a whole. The raw materials for this are already present, and we hope that our recommendations will help to focus on the work of the Chair and the Department for the next few years so that it may continue to offer exceptional programming to its students, to increase its reach by attracting new students to its courses and its programs, and to re-establish a sense of vitality and community among colleagues and staff for which all members feel accountable and in which all feel invested.

Recommendations

1. Work together as a Department, with support from the Dean's Office, to welcome and support the new Chair, Davina Bhandar, during her onboarding and beyond to ensure her success. [Accountability: Department]
2. Create a permanent Undergraduate Chair/Advisor role within the Department. [Accountability: Department]
3. When replacing some of the faculty lost to retirements and departures, hire as a cohort of at least two, ideally three, young scholars from interdisciplinary backgrounds. [Accountability:

Faculty and Department for the hiring]

4. Develop a process for maintaining data on graduates and keeping in touch with alumni in order to support outreach and recruitment efforts through data-driven information about career paths, alumni profiles on the website, and alumni as ambassadors. [Accountability: Department]
5. Increase enrollment caps in some of the well-subscribed classes in order to meet the threshold for TA support and also to make the best of the new enrollment-based funding model. [Accountability: Department]
6. Devote adequate resources to mentorship. [Accountability: University, Faculty, Department]
7. Develop a social media strategy for recruitment and outreach. [Accountability: Department]
8. Provide more University-wide support for faculty research projects and programs. [Accountability: University]