

External Review Report of the Department of Political Science
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External Review Committee

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Executive Summary

The External Review committee met on April 17-18, 2023 with a range of members of the political science community at UVic, as well as with senior administrators in the Faculty of Social Sciences, VPAC, the Faculty of Graduate Studies, and the Office of Research. We met all the full-time professors, except Drs. Cutler and Verdun. As a committee, we were struck by the deep care and commitment of colleagues to deliver high-quality education in a dynamic and challenging budgetary environment. We did hear, however, a sense of frustration expressed by faculty and students about UVic's precarious funding situation, and how this has affected efforts to raise the profile of the unit and to replenish the faculty complement, not to mention its deleterious effects on the recruitment of graduate students.

While our report delves deeper into some of the knotty challenges on the horizon for a department coping with the retirement of well-regarded colleagues and the corresponding teaching and research gaps left in the wake of these departures, we wanted to highlight briefly here some of the key challenges that we think require more sustained reflection than others. They include: undergraduate and graduate enrolment; graduate funding; departmental climate; and Indigenization. Some of the issues we are raising in our report were also noted in the 2016 external review. But first, here are our key recommendations:

Recommendations

Graduate Programs

1. Address the Graduate Funding Crisis

The standard package for MA and Ph.D. students is not competitive, and it is highly likely that this affects recruitment, especially at the Ph.D. level. Beyond faculty being encouraged to apply for and use their research funding to support meritorious students, the Faculty of Graduate Studies, with line faculties, must develop a strategy that gives departments a reasonable shot at recruiting strong graduate students. There is no magical dollar figure here, but it might begin with a tuition waiver for students to avoid a situation in which students with TAs or RAs have to use these funds to cover their tuition. The Department did indeed have its graduate funding reduced, and while we appreciated FGS Dean Hicks' clarification that the decrease in funding was "technically correct" but a "misrepresentation of the funding picture", we were not convinced that the funding picture for graduate studies is a rosy one, nor that it is defensible.

2. Tackle questions about structure/content of MA and Ph.D. programs

Some of the challenges being experienced may be due to a lack of opportunity to reflect on the value of programs that were created under a different set of circumstances. It may be time to reflect anew on, for

instance, the thesis-based MA degree, long a staple of graduate education in North America and popular in Political Science in Victoria. In addition, proponents of doctoral study can no longer assume such programs are preparing graduates for the academic jobs of tomorrow. These jobs exist only for a select few. If the academic job market has undergone such a dramatic overhaul, how can we justify offering programs and professional development opportunities created for a different era?

3. Revise length of MA thesis program

The Department and the University should cease to advertise the MA degree as a one-year program. It is highly unlikely that even the most committed student can complete their mandatory course work and write a 100-page thesis in 12 months. We understand that this one-year timeline is linked to the maximum funding awarded to meritorious MA students, but it is inappropriate to continue to communicate benchmarks that are almost impossible to achieve. The MRP option, on the other hand, can be completed in a one-year period if students complete 3 courses per term in Fall and Spring and devote the remaining four months to the MRP project.

4. Consider offering third track for MA program

While we understand the department only recently introduced an MRP option into the program as a result of a recommendation flowing from the 2016 review, we think it is worthwhile to consider a third option, possibly a designated research paper option or a course-based program (see page 18-19 of the report for further elaboration of these options). Both options would allow students to reasonably complete the program in one year, which addresses our “truth in advertising” concern about the wisdom of advertising the MA as a one-year program when only a tiny fraction of students completes the program in one year. In addition, the Department should consider introducing a new mandatory course, over one year that meets every two weeks, that could be equal parts professionalization and thesis/MRP prep. It could be a pass/fail course and help to foster a feeling of connectedness for all MA students.

5. Revise comprehensive exam process

The comprehensive exam process has been the subject of prolonged reflection, but there remain outstanding concerns that we think can be addressed in short order. We highlight three: a) the exam format was changed recently to include in-person and take home components. We were informed, however, that there are plans to suspend this COVID-era policy and return to in-person only. Failing a compelling rationale for this, we recommend the Department continue to offer a take-home component; b) reading lists for each sub-field are vastly inconsistent in terms of the sheer volume. It is reasonable to have some variation (e.g.: more articles versus books) but the disparities seem unjustified. The failure to harmonize this across sub fields has led to speculation that some subfields are more rigorous than others. This kind of talk has no place in a serious doctoral program. Colleagues should compose reading lists that are similar in size and scope; c) The Department should also consider what justifies its decision to have students complete exams in two major fields, rather than the typical major and minor field. We were not presented with a sound rationale for this decision.

6. Support creation of public policy stream under current MA structure or develop professional MA in public policy with critical focus.

Developing a public policy stream in the current MA program or a new, professional MA degree in public policy can assist the department in attracting students who are looking for an option that merges solid

public policy training coupled with the cultivation of “critical” skills for apprehending the evolving complexity of public policy. The Department has a strong reputation and interest in supporting students with writing and critique. Moreover, the expertise of colleagues in matters related to equity, among others, will be highly coveted by students. The creation of a professional MA will require additional faculty resources, and should not be considered unless these resources are forthcoming. This program can be distinct from Public Administration by its critical focus, as it can draw on the expertise of faculty who do policy relevant research, including applied political theory.

7. Evaluate the Global Challenges stream as part of the MA program.

The program appeared to have tepid support as an option for MA students. We understand that its creation grew out of a suggestion made in the previous report; we simply think colleagues should review the structure of the program and associated resources and student interest before continuing to offer a stream that has few takers.

UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

8. Revisit the place of quantitative methods in political science education.

We appreciate that there are strong feelings about the role and prominence of quantitative methods in the social sciences, including in Political Science. While many U.S. political science departments have a cult-like devotion to all things quantitative, such is not the case in many Canadian political science departments, and we do not fear that there is any risk in this occurring here. While the department tilts heavily toward qualitative approaches, we think students can benefit from quantitative methods training, if only to appreciate the assumptions that undergird some political and economic arguments. Although we did not discern a common position in this regard across the sub-fields, we think the Department should explore the possibility of allocating a position for someone who specializes in methods, and leave the sub-field open. That new colleague can divide their teaching between sub-field specific courses and methods classes.

9. Review bank of existing courses as well as titles and descriptions.

We were pleased to learn about a new first year course on racism to be offered by leading critical race scholar Dr. Rita Dhamoon, and urge the Department to give serious thought to creating similar courses (or revising current ones) that can draw in students from across the Faculty and University. Not only would this begin to address any enrolment concerns, it would also help to solidify the Department’s place as a leader in tackling complex social problems. Expertise in the field of climate change and environment is another area of strength.

10. Introduce Strategic Enrolment Management for Political Science.

We would recommend the Department adopt a data-driven approach to course planning and enrolment management. This would involve a review of enrolment patterns, identification of courses that consistently under-enrol, have high drop rates, and have unmet demand. This allows for determining the appropriate mix of courses, their sizes, and curricular development towards a target of maximum enrolments. (We address this in greater detail on page 7-8 of this report.)

11. Strengthen communication with undergrad and graduate students.

Graduate and undergraduate students alike identified less-than-desirable communication channels in which they might raise concerns with faculty members. While they enjoy formal representation in the Department assembly, they did not perceive that venue as an effective one for airing their concerns. We encourage the unit to ensure students have regularized access to decision makers (the chair, graduate advisor, and undergraduate advisor). While the COVID-19 pandemic may have frustrated efforts to connect, it is vital to ensure that students feel like they belong to the department, not “dismissed”, to use their words, or considered an afterthought.

12. Develop better online presence to highlight Departmental strengths.

While there are myriad bureaucratic hurdles in trying to manage a University or Departmental website, we urge the Department to use the website to showcase the strength and exciting work of its faculty members and students. One possibility that would require limited resources is to enlist a tech-savvy graduate student as an RA to conduct short video interviews with graduate students and faculty members about their research. These can be uploaded onto the website and other social media platforms. In the case of graduate students, the Department can seek some financial support for this initiative from FGS or the Faculty of Social Sciences. These videos can be used as recruitment tools on the Department’s website and at Open House events.

13. Provide more opportunities for inter-Faculty collaboration.

We heard much about exciting collaborations between researchers in the Department with partner institutions in Canada, North America and beyond, but less about what is happening in the University itself. Given funding challenges, the Department could advocate for joint appointments where possible, to capitalize on opportunities to prioritize hiring in burgeoning fields of interest and study. For instance, the departure of Colin Bennett has left a noticeable gap in US Politics; could the Department and Faculty of Social Sciences work to create a joint appointment in US Politics with another department such as History, Sociology, etc.? For a Department, a full appointment is, admittedly, ideal. But in the face of limited resources, a joint appointment might respond to pressing needs.

14. Deepen Indigenization Efforts.

There are a number of initiatives underway to recruit Indigenous faculty, senior administrators, not to mention undergraduate and graduate students. The abrupt cancellation of a Political Science position to recruit an Indigenous colleague, however, has led some to question this commitment to Indigeneity, made all the more problematic given the burgeoning interest in Indigenous politics among potential students and the outstretched capacity of the Department to deliver courses and graduate supervision with only one (junior) Indigenous tenure-track professor. We urge the University to revive this recently cancelled position, and expand efforts to recruit Indigenous graduate and undergraduate students. Indigenous faculty are already asked to do more, whether it comes to graduate supervision, mentoring, or service work. The hiring of Indigenous faculty members is a key retention strategy for current Indigenous faculty.