COMMITTEE PROCESS

This Academic Program Review Committee (APRC) Report is based on the following source material:

1. Department of Political Science Self Study Report to APRC; September 2008
2. External Reviewers’ Report on the Political Science Graduate Program: November 2008
3. Re APRC Interview with Department Chair, James Martel and Dean Joel Kassiola; April 2009
4. Response to APRC Interview Questions; May 2009
5. Guidelines for the Sixth Cycle of Academic Program Review
6. The APRC customary evaluative procedures.

These sources were employed to construct an integrated view of the Political Science Graduate Program’s present strengths, aspirations, and possibilities for future development.

REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The Political Science Department has existed as an independent department since the mid 1960s, when the graduate program in political was created. The program is divided into three subgroups: American politics, comparative politics, and political theory. The program aims to provide students with both a basic foundation in these three disciplines and instruction in special topics and various issues pertaining to these fields. Currently, there are approximately 400 undergraduate majors, 62 graduate students, and an FTEF of 11.8.

The Master of Arts in Political Science is designed for students who wish to proceed to further post-graduate study in Ph.D. work or in law, as well as those who seek to terminate their study with the M.A. Students find employment with political staffs or other agencies involved in the development of public policy, journalism, and community action.
UNIVERSITY STANDARDS

The Political Science graduate program meets the university standards for admissions, for the number of courses offered each semester, and for the number of graduates over a five year period. However, no adequate Level 1 writing assessment has been implemented. Because there is no adequate pre-admission Level 1 writing evaluation process, students who need writing help are not identified early enough to help prepare them for the culminating experience.

The existing approach to assessing Level 1 writing competency appears ineffective, and the self-study reports an inconsistent application of the established standards. The program uses a 3.25 GPA as an indicator of sufficient writing quality. However, any GPA no matter how high is not an adequate guarantor of quality writing. Indeed, the self-study itself states, “Many faculty have found our students to be woefully unprepared for writing…: (Self-Study, Appendix E, page 2). If the Level 1 assessment were effective, writing quality should not be a problem. APRC recommends the program develop an effective, systematic and consistent admissions process, including a pre-admission Level 1 writing evaluation process.

CURRICULUM

A major issue noted in the self-study, the external reviewers report, and the fifth cycle program review centers on the disjuncture between the Political Science and International relations curricula. The fifth cycle report recommended that the Political Science Department explore requiring all graduate students to take one or two courses in comparative politics and/or IR. The Department has not addressed this recommendation yet (Self-Study, page 3). As the external reviewers point out, “A truncation of the department’s administrative structure should not create a truncation of the academic degree. If Political Science had a conventional accreditation structure, we doubt that an M.A. degree which lacked an international relations component would pass muster” (External Reviewer’s Report, page 2). The M.A. in Political Science almost anywhere in the country implies the opportunity for preparation in the discipline’s four major subfields: American, theory, comparative, and international relations.

Historically, the Political Science and IR Departments have cooperated in terms of cross-listing courses and sharing faculty members who have joint appointments. Even so, the rhetoric of cooperation is not firmly grounded in a substantial and significant curriculum that serves the interests of both groups of students. Political science graduates do not receive sufficient training in international relations, and IR graduates may lack the desired level of competence in U.S. foreign affairs. Because these areas are respective strengths in each department, the need for much stronger curricular collaboration is not simply a
matter of sheer advocacy. It is an imperative. The APRC strongly urges that the Department address the curricular disconnect as soon as possible.

The APRC concurs with the external reviewers’ recommendation that the Dean work with the two departments to find an arrangement which would allow students to earn an M.A. in Political Science with International Relations as one of their subfields. It is true that students now can take some elective courses in IR, and they can do a thesis directed by shared appointment faculty, but there is no core Political Science seminar in the subfield of International Relations, and there is no option to undertake a comprehensive exam in International Relations. The external reviewers also note that most M.A. programs in Political Science require three comprehensive exams in lieu of a thesis, while the San Francisco State program only requires two such exams. This is not an issue with a simple solution, but nonetheless it is imperative that the Department find an effective solution as quickly as possible, in order to maintain the integrity of the M.A. degree, from the perspective of the field outside of SF State.

The external reviewers also highlight the opportunity for the department to “discuss whether cooperation with Urban Studies and Public Administration might allow for an even more robust array of options.” (External Reviewer’s report page 3) APRC encourages the Department to explore collaboration with other programs and the Deans office to bring about interdepartmental cooperation, balancing the legitimate curricular needs of students with the varied needs of department faculty and the need to work within significant budgetary constraints.

Another recommendation of the fifth cycle of review was that the Department explore ways to increase the number of, and revise the sequence of graduate seminars. The APRC commends the Department for taking steps recently to address this issue. The Department plans to develop more graduate-level courses in methodology. The Department recently decided to move from 4 unit courses to 3 unit courses in order to increase the number of elective courses that students will complete and to expand the disciplinary coverage of the M.A. program. The APRC commends the Department for its plan to implement this change immediately. The Department also plans to create a capstone course entitled “Practical Political Science,” which would involve working on issues of presenting research, applying for grants, questions of pedagogy, writing resumes and other issues pertinent to its majors. The Department feels that “this capstone class would have the advantage of creating a definite horizon for a cohort so that they would move through the program together, encouraging more timely graduation.” (Self-Study page 3) The APRC agrees with these plans and encourages the Department to follow through with implementing them as early as possible.

The self-study described a new Level 1 writing requirement which calls for samples of all program applicants. APRC recommends the program develop guidelines and an assessment rubric that will ensure consistent evaluation and provide baseline data on student writing skills. Later analysis of writing samples
can then be compared to this initial sample to assess improvement during the program. The program should also consider requiring the GRE Analytic Writing exam to avoid an increase in faculty workload resulting from this new requirement (assessing entry-level writing competency).

**FACULTY**

The Department reports that all faculty teach graduate and undergraduate classes in equal measure, with each faculty member teaching at least one graduate course per year, in general. APRC commends the Department for balancing the teaching load and sharing the academic rewards of teaching graduate students. In fact, as noted by the external reviewers, “there is a new generation of faculty in the Department, and they seem universally enthused about graduate education. They are well trained, highly qualified, and professionally active. The presence of the MA program significantly enhances their research productivity. Furthermore, the MA program is a vital recruiting tool that helped to draw these young faculty to San Francisco State.” (External Reviewer’s report page 1). APRC further commends the Department for creating such an inviting and intellectually invigorating environment for its faculty, both new and veteran.

The APRC commends the Department for the high level of professionalism and civility in the department, as reported by faculty (External Reviewer’s report page 7). However, as is the case with many programs, the faculty pay a high price for the graduate teaching experience, when coupled with significant undergraduate program demands. Faculty workloads are high, and the department has recently lost two outstanding young faculty to institutions where the workload was significantly lower. A continued positive atmosphere, and concomitant significant reform and program improvement may not be sustainable without additional long-term support from both the Dean and the University.

Looking at the data presented in the self-study and the external reviewer’s report, it seems clear that the program faculty is overloaded when both graduate and undergraduate programs are considered. Inevitably, significant faculty overload at the undergraduate level has some impact on the graduate program as well. Though faculty may not be overtly complaining to the College Dean (APRC interview), the APRC recommends the College and program find ways to lessen faculty workload (especially at the undergraduate level) so that the long-term negative impacts of faculty overload can be avoided or at least mitigated. Even though faculty may choose to accept undergraduate overload because they enjoy and value teaching graduate students, allowing widespread, long-term overload is not sustainable and should not be allowed to continue.

The APRC commends the Department for its effective strategic hiring plan currently in place. The committee agrees with the external reviewers in supporting the replacement of faculty who have retired or resigned. The Department plans for faculty hires in urban politics, Latin America and in Africa, which the APRC and external reviewers both feel are very appropriate.
A remaining recommendation from the fifth cycle of program review is for the Department to explore ways to support faculty professional development. Though the Department reports discussing this issue, the APRC recommends creating a strategic plan that includes supporting faculty professional development explicitly. Especially with the need to support energetic young junior faculty, and in light of the current budgetary restrictions, this issue can not be left to solve itself. We commend the College of BSS for finding creative ways to support the scholarly efforts of senior faculty as well as junior faculty (APRC interview). APRC encourages the program and College to continue to find creative ways to support the scholarly work of all program faculty.

STUDENTS

The self-study report displays data that show a relatively low number of graduates in the program, an average of 8.3 per year, from AY 2001-2002 through AY 2007-2008. (Self-study, page 18, Table 4.2) While the self-study also reports that new enrollments over the same time frame average almost 28 per year. (Self-study, page 12, Table 3.1) This means that fewer than half of students who begin the program eventually finish it. The external reviewers report notes that “…relatively few students who write a thesis or attempt the comprehensive exams ultimately fail, so it appears that the majority of students who initially enroll in the program never get to the point where they submit a thesis or attempt the exams.” (External Reviewer’s report, page 3) Causes to explore include ineffective admissions standards or enforcement, a general lack of graduate student funding, and a lack of student purpose or drive. Other factors that may surface during discussions with graduate students should also be collected and considered. The APRC recommends the Department take immediate steps to assess, fully understand, and address this issue.

ADVISING

One of the fifth cycle recommendations was to improve and expand student advising to include career advising. The Department reports several efforts to address this suggestion, but admits that not much progress has been made or reported in the Self-Study. APRC concurs with department’s recommendation to establish formal exit interviews of graduates. These interviews can help the program assess its efforts to improve student advising.

Improving faculty-student advising can vastly improve the overall student experience, and potentially increase the graduation rate as well. As reported by the external reviewers, “the graduate students overwhelmingly desire more regular advising contact, and we suspect that more formal and frequent advising might help a greater number of students complete the program” (External Reviewer’s report, page 4. Though many students do seek out faculty and develop excellent advising relationships, even these students may benefit from a more formal structure. APRC recommends developing a mandatory advising system,
including assignment of an advisor from the time of enrollment (even admission, perhaps) so that students are never left to founder without adequate faculty direction. Faculty advisers ought to be required to contact each advisee at least once per semester, so that student progress can be accurately assessed and potential problems can be resolved quickly, before a student simply disappears. This process would require some additional record keeping, but need not be onerous. Other channels of communication, such as the department webpage and graduate student listserv can also be used to support the advising function, both formally and informally. The program should explore advising resources from the BSS general advising office and the Graduate Studies Office (student workshops to address general processes).

APRC commends the program for its plan to implement a mentoring program for incoming students. We recommend that the program develop a specific plan for initiating and evaluating the effectiveness of this program as it begins. An area of special concern is the issue of faculty workload. New technologies, such as a system similar to the Webvising system used by BSS in the past, may make this process more efficient, limiting the impact on faculty workload, leading to a more effective student advising and mentorship experience.

ALUMNI

Another Fifth Cycle recommendation was to rebuild the departmental chapter of the Alumni Association. The Department has also begun addressing this issue, but only in the past year. The APRC recommends continuing and increasing efforts to engage alumni at all levels, especially since active alumni can become a valuable resource for student career advising. The Department reports that it has begun outreach to undergraduate alumni, and is planning to engage in similar efforts with graduate alumni. APRC recommends including a plan for these efforts in the overall strategic planning effort for the Department.

STUDENTS

Another Fifth Cycle recommendation was to increase faculty-student interaction in departmental governance decisions. The department reports that they are discussing this issue. APRC recommends that the Department make specific plans to engage students in appropriate departmental governance decisions. Clearly, not all decisions would benefit from student participation, but it seems like a natural setting for students to apply some of what they are learning in the program as they experience the political nature of department decision-making.

The APRC commends the Department for success in increasing student research endeavors and participation in faculty research. The Department has implemented both a faculty lecture series and a research assistantship program (Self-Study, page 4). In addition, the Department is applying for a research assistantship and is actively working to seek grants, scholarships, fellowships, and other external funding to support student activities. APRC recommends including these efforts
in overall program strategic planning efforts.

RESOURCES

A substantial issue highlighted by the external reviewers was that of inadequate record-keeping. “There are no data on how many students opt to do a thesis and how many opt for the comprehensive examinations as a culminating experience. And of those who opt for the examinations, there are no data that indicate the areas in which they test. The department also does not retain copies of completed comprehensive examinations. This data and material are easy to gather and retain and are essential for assessment, program review, and curricular development” (External Reviewer’s report, page 6). APRC concurs with this assessment and recommends the Department develop a plan for record keeping (what to track, what to retain, and how to use the data) as part of its strategic planning and assessment efforts.

The Department recommends an additional half time AOC position. The external reviewers also recommend that some staff time be committed to data gathering and communication with current and former graduate students. It is possible that the solution recommended by the Department (Self-Study, page 7) is workable: An additional one half AOC position could work full time for Urban Studies, and the current full time AOC would only work for Political Science; the work of the existing half time administrative assistant could be split between the two programs. Based on the substantial need for better record keeping overall and student/alumni tracking in particular, APRC agrees that additional support service is needed, and recommends the Department work with the Dean to provide necessary administrative support. APRC suggests that the Department require exams to be submitted electronically, if not done already, so documents could be easily stored.

Finally, APRC fully supports the recommendation of the Department and external reviewers for release time for the Department’s graduate coordinator and for full support for the additional faculty lines being requested, two more comparativists, one in Latin American politics and one in African politics. Besides helping to meet the curricular needs, additional resources such as these will also help meet the need for additional student advising, alumni tracking, and a strategic approach to reducing program attrition.

ASSESSMENT

Although the Department has moved forward with assessment at the undergraduate level, assessment of the graduate program is still in its infancy. The Department recommends implementing assessment tools for graduate courses based on the ones that they have created for the undergraduate major. The department has established a process for assessment that depends upon the review of randomly selected papers from its core courses against a rubric that it has developed in coordination with the University’s assessment office. (Self-study,
Unfortunately, this assessment process has not yet been fully implemented and is not effectively used. (External Reviewers’ report, page 8)

Even more importantly, the external reviewers note that this assessment process, even if implemented, only will provide the Department with information about its core seminars; it will not provide an assessment of the program as a whole. APRC concurs with the external reviewers in recommending that the Department use the comprehensive examinations as the primary assessment data. A selection of these examinations can be read by the faculty as a whole following a rubric that would assess according to the goals of the program, perhaps the same rubric that the department already has developed. A follow-on faculty-wide discussion of the results of such a reading could generate suggestions about what is lacking and what should be improved in the curriculum.

APRC and the external reviewers recommend that the Department revise its procedure for evaluating the culminating experience. Currently, two members of the Department read and evaluate each M.A. thesis, but only one member of the Department reads and evaluates each comprehensive examination. Standard procedure in most graduate departments seems to be that comprehensive examinations are read and evaluated by at least two faculty members, with a 3rd reader for split decisions. Therefore, APRC recommends that at least two Political Science faculty read and assess each comprehensive examination. In addition, as noted in various places in both the self-study and external reviewers’ report, APRC recommends that the Department retain copies of completed comprehensive examinations as a record of historical student achievement and program performance data.

APRC commends the program for developing and beginning to use the evaluation rubric developed by program faculty to assess program outcomes. APRC recommends that the program develop a comprehensive assessment approach that covers all areas of planned evaluation – writing development during the program, culminating experience, and overall program outcomes. This plan should include specific strategies for analyzing the data and utilizing results to improve the program.

**STRATEGIC PLANNING**

There is little evidence of comprehensive strategic planning for the graduate program overall. In light of the significant challenges that already exist and the increasing stress from dwindling resources, a strategic plan that outlines program vision, goals and strategies to achieve those goals would be very useful to the faculty as they make difficult decisions and allocate scarce resources. APRC strongly recommends that the Department develop a comprehensive strategic plan to address the issues raised in the Self-Study, External Reviewer's Report, this report, and any other issues not otherwise mentioned in these reports. This plan should provide program goals, general guidance, and specific steps that can be taken to achieve overall goals.
CONCLUSION

While the study of political science is integral to the SF State curriculum, the current structure of political science faculty dispersed in different colleges and departments in the University, and the program’s truncation from International Relations, have created unique and considerable challenges. This loose and independent network of political scientists has attractions and positive outcomes, but some level of coordination is required among these different units if synergies for the Political Science Department are to be realized. The Self-Study Report has noted this unique structure and has been responsive to many of the recommendations provided by the fifth cycle review. Moreover, the department head, James Martel, in an interview with the APRC, expressed a strong intent to cooperate with other departments, specifically International Relations, to provide a total and compelling program for students.

In this report, APRC has commended the Department for its responsiveness and for activities that include its review of the curriculum and faculty workload, the high level of professionalism and civility, its strategic hiring plan, its attempt to improve student advising, its efforts in securing student resources, and its process in developing an evaluation rubric. The APRC also reaffirms its support of Dean Joel Kassiola’s efforts in strengthening ties with International Relations, and in improving coordination and collaboration with other departments in response to suggestions from the external reviewers.

For the department to maintain and sustain the integrity of its program in the future, however, it should address issues relating to curricular-integration, student preparation, program-advising, outcome assessment, strategic planning, outreach activities with alumni, and faculty/student resources. While several recommendations are proposed in this report, the APRC views three areas that particularly warrant attention in the short term:

- An integration of International Relations into its curricular-offerings. An evaluation by the External Reviewers underscores the need for such integration; otherwise, they report that the Department would not be accredited in a traditional accreditation-review. This is a serious problem that is shared by the APRC. While there are ongoing talks of addressing this problem with an expanded set of questions in the comprehensive examination, the APRC does not regard this as a long term resolution, not until students are adequately prepared for International Relations with solid coursework. Accordingly, the APRC recommends that the Dean continue to work with the two departments (Political Science and International Relations) to develop an arrangement which would allow students to earn an MA in Political Science with International Relations as one of their subfields.
- A closer examination of the causes and solutions to student attrition. This was noted by the external reviewers and the APRC. The Department should immediately examine its admission requirements, program-advising, the sequence of course-offerings, its examination preparation activities for students, its career-advising, and the impact of culminating student experiences as these might relate to the causes of this high attrition rate.

- A closer review of its Level I and II Writing Requirements. The APRC has noted inconsistencies in the application of University requirements and standards; specifically, in some cases, it was noted that the application of standards has been arbitrary. The severity of this problem is reflected in inadequate writing skills by students in their comprehensive examinations and final theses. Attention to this problem is warranted as poor writing preparation might be a primary cause of high student attrition.

Given the opportunity to act on the recommendations made in this report, APRC believes that the Program will be poised for continued success.