

Undergraduate Council Program Review of Urban Studies and Planning

July 19, 2013

Overview

The committee found the Urban Studies and Planning (USP) program to be serving its students admirably on limited resources. The students we met with were uniformly complimentary of the faculty and advising, and they generally expressed the view that the program is meeting their needs. The USP faculty and lecturers are by all accounts devoted to the USP students and have been able to maintain a vibrant and respected program, despite working on a shoestring budget and, in the case of the core faculty, often without receiving much support from their home departments. The main issue, as we see it, is that there are no permanent ladder rank faculty FTE in USP, which raises serious concerns about the sustainability of the program, consistency in teaching quality in a program populated by so many visitors, and coordinating the availability and content of courses. USP is a vibrant, successful program in spite of weak institutional commitment from UCSD leadership, but this vibrancy and success is at risk unless program receives its own permanent ladder faculty FTE.

At a time when UCSD is seeking a higher profile in the San Diego region and its many communities, the campus could benefit substantially from a stronger, more established USP program, given its emphasis on regional policy, city planning, and urban design through local civically-engaged scholarship. This type of interdisciplinary pedagogy – rooted in real world issues, problem solving, and solutions – stimulates student learning beyond the classroom. In our view, the USP program is well positioned to build on this success and become a campus-wide resource for other UCSD Programs and Departments striving to foster student learning at the nexus of research and community engagement

Background

Since 2000, USP has attracted an increasing number of students. In 2011-12, USP had 178 undergraduate majors, up from 144 in 2005-2006 and 89 in 2000-2001. Total course enrollments in 2011-12 were 2,049, up from 1,643 in 2005-06 and 1,151 in 2000-01. Budgeted faculty FTE meanwhile stood at 4.0 in 2011-12, up from 1.8 in 2000-01. As measured by undergraduate student/faculty ratios, USP currently has one of the heaviest instructional workloads of any program or department on campus. The weighted student/faculty ratio of 57, as calculated by UCSD Institutional Research, is exceeded only by the Department of Economics (59), the Department of Psychology (63), and the college writing programs.

The primary USP faculty include seven senate faculty members and two non-senate continuing lecturers with PhDs in Urban Planning. These nine faculty members teach the great majority of the core courses, including the required lower-division courses, the foundation courses, and the Senior Sequence. The affiliated USP faculty, including eight senate faculty members and 27 non-senate lecturers and adjunct faculty, contribute substantially to teaching the upper-division electives. Many of the new and popular applied policy and planning courses are taught by

distinguished adjunct faculty with years of practical experience in city and regional policy and planning.

Evaluation of the Undergraduate Program

To prepare this report, the committee met with the USP program chair, Senate faculty members, lecturers, undergraduate students, graduate teaching assistants, undergraduate student affairs officers, the student affairs manager, and the academic business officer.

Our interviews with the undergraduate students were consistent with what the survey data indicated: The students are very satisfied with the program. The dozen or so students we met with were uniformly enthusiastic about their instructors, whom they consider to be dedicated and knowledgeable. They find the required internships to be critical to their education (and future employment) and the capstone senior research sequence to be highly beneficial. The "hands on," community-oriented approach of the program appears to be serving the students (and presumably the community) very well. The academic advising received uniform praise as well. Overall, the committee was impressed by how well the program appears to be serving student needs.

Nonetheless, there were complaints about inconsistent availability of core courses, and there was a desire expressed for more variety in offered courses (e.g., transportation, sustainability, development/real estate). There was also some tension between the theoretical and practical dimensions of the program. Some transfer students with whom we met, for example, came into the program with professional planning or design experience and reported being disappointed by the academic tone of many of the courses, which they perceived as resulting in a lack of connection between their jobs and their studies. Some suggested that there be two tracks with USP, with one more applied and one more academic. Relatedly, some students thought a 1-unit USP overview seminar might be good for all new students so that they get a sense of the various planning sub-fields, even if not every subarea is covered in their subsequent course work.

Other complaints involved the difficulty of enrolling in the popular USP course on geographic information systems (GIS), with the suggestions that either multiple sections be offered or USP students be given enrollment priority. In addition, because the second quarter of their internship is time consuming and they spend a lot of time off campus, the students suggested that meeting just once a week for the companion internship class would be more appropriate during that quarter. These latter criticisms are, in our view, relatively minor, but they do provide obvious, concrete steps for USP to take in order to make a good experience for the students even better.

As happy as the undergraduates are with USP, the graduate student TAs seemed even happier. Because USP is a program, not a department, it does not have its own graduate students to serve as TAs and therefore must recruit them from other departments. The TAs come from a variety of departments, but primarily from political science. The graduate TAs we spoke with were very positive about their experience with USP. Indeed, many TAs told us that they had better experiences with USP than with their home departments (as TAs). Perhaps in part because USP has to actively recruit TAs (i.e., the TAs are not just automatically assigned to USP courses), there seems to be a good fit between the TAs and the program; USP faculty seek out and

repeatedly use TAs who are reliable and have learned the material. The only complaint that the TAs had about the program was that the undergraduate students seemed to have limited perspectives on problems, compared to undergraduate students in the TAs' home departments. For example, some reported that the USP students tended to have more difficulty thinking about costs and incentives when trying to solve problems relative to students in, say, economics or political science.

By all accounts, the core faculty work hard in USP and do a very good job. Political Science Professor Steve Erie was repeatedly singled out as the long time (13 year) academic senate faculty “champion” of the USP. But just as repeatedly the committee heard concerns from many quarters that there is no senate faculty *heir apparent* to replace Professor Erie’s enthusiastic and energetic leadership of the USP when he eventually leaves or retires. Our interviews revealed additional, related frustrations as well. When being reviewed in their home departments, many USP core faculty expressed the view that their contributions to, and performance in, USP does not carry much weight at all in their merit-based evaluations, making service to USP an essentially voluntary and charitable effort. They also reported that lecturers Keith Pezzoli and Mirle Bussell (both of whom hold PhD degrees in urban planning and who were uniformly praised by students, faculty, and staff alike) are forced to do too much of the core teaching. Relatedly, having so much of the program being carried on the shoulders of two lecturers raises obvious concerns about the program’s sustainability, especially when Professor Erie eventually steps down as leader of the USP. As such, the core faculty was strongly in favor of permanent positions for Drs. Pezzoli and Bussell.

Affiliated faculty and lecturers were also concerned about the lack of permanent USP teaching positions. They collectively expressed the view that having permanent core faculty would allow for better coordination among courses and instructors. Currently, that is nearly impossible with the piecemeal approach to curricular planning made necessary by the lack of permanent positions. In addition, and perhaps because the affiliated faculty tend to be practitioners, the USP lecturers as a group suggested that it would be useful for more “class work” to move into the field, and in particular that the program should take advantage of UCSD’s proximity to Mexico.

Conclusions

USP majors are currently well served by the program. The teaching and advising are viewed by USP students as uniformly strong. Nonetheless, USP is in our view an asset that is undervalued by UCSD. The fact that there are no permanent faculty positions attached to the program means that key people described universally as the hearts and souls of the program might leave at any time, which makes curriculum development and course planning and coordination extremely difficult. Students are directly affected by this difficulty in planning and coordination. The core faculty, lecturers, and affiliated faculty have, to their credit, been able to pull things together quite well, but there is no system in place to sustain the program should any of the current key players leave. UCSD creates programs (as opposed to departments) to promote integrative, multi-disciplinary education. While the USP program is multi-disciplinary and by all accounts successful, its programmatic status, and the lack of institutional permanence that entails, may

prove its Achilles Heel. Institutional, in addition to financial, support from the administration is needed to ensure the program's long-term sustainability. Relatedly, leadership succession is crucial, and USP's hands are currently tied. Professor Erie has by all accounts done an excellent job serving as the long time faculty Director of USP, but he reports that he will not be director much longer and sees no succession plan in place. Given his years of dedicated contributions to USP, Dr. Pezzoli was repeatedly suggested as the most obvious candidate to replace Professor Erie as USP Director; but Dr. Pezzoli is not a member of the faculty senate and is therefore ineligible to be director. As a result, the future of the thriving and successful USP is at risk.

Recommendations

1. Provide USP with permanent faculty positions in order to improve the program's sustainability. A first step toward stability would be to appoint Dr. Pezzoli as a Lecturer with Security of Employment (LSOE). It is worth pointing out that the last review of USP 13 years ago highlighted as a priority to give Dr. Pezzoli such an appointment. As expressed by many, and evidenced by his remarkable track record, Dr. Pezzoli's inexhaustible energy has given USP a substantial presence in the San Diego-Tijuana border region. He is the main force behind the community-engaged dimension of USP and is a key ambassador of UCSD's new vision of community-university partnerships. In his 25 years at UCSD, he has brought in millions of dollars in research funding and has guided hundreds of students into regional community-based projects. Support from the administration this time around will make it less likely that Dr. Pezzoli, who everyone agrees is crucial to the future of USP, will leave, and it also allows for the possibility that Dr. Pezzoli can succeed Professor Erie as director. Also important is that additional permanent faculty positions will enable better planning and coordination for courses. Currently, planning and coordination are difficult because of the variation and uncertainty regarding who will be teaching what and when they will do it. Greater stability and predictability will also enable better coordination of the material covered in the different courses. Finally, support from the administration will improve the morale of the core and affiliated faculty who have been working very hard to keep USP together with very little support.

A common way to elevate and strengthen the status of programs in the UC system is to assign a limited number of academic faculty FTE to the program, whereby the programs then jointly recruit senate faculty with traditional academic departments. For example, if two FTE were allocated to the USP program, the director of the program might put up 0.5 FTE to jointly recruit (1) an urban politics scholar from Political Science, (2) an urban economist with economics, (3) an urban design scholar with visual arts, and (4) an environmental analysis scholar with environmental systems. Such a strategy would leverage the scale of urban scholarship on the UCSD campus by using matching FTE to motivate traditional departments to recruit in this area, but without disrupting the departmental focus on academic faculty on campus.

2. Teaching and service contributions to USP benefit the university and these contributions need to be more explicitly acknowledged and appreciated by academic faculty members' home departments. Department chairs and deans need to ensure that faculty who are affiliated with USP are credited in reviews for their programmatic contributions.

3. Better coordination of course offerings and content. Students complained of a dearth of courses offered some academic quarters, and generally desired a broader selection of topics. We believe that having more permanent teaching positions will help with this issue considerably by reducing the current piecemeal approach to course scheduling.

4. The very large number of faculty, and in particular practitioner faculty, teaching with minimal programmatic oversight has to date worked well in terms of student satisfaction, but at a price in terms of rigor and consistency in course content and grading. In particular, we recommend that the program create and enforce general guidelines regarding grading policies. The committee has good reason to believe that grade inflation in USP is hurting UCSD students applying to graduate school because their uniformly high GPAs are not viewed externally as diagnostic of their performance and ability.

5. USP program administrators and advisers need to communicate better to prospective and current students about the nature of the coursework in the program. Some students, despite their best efforts, were unable to get their questions answered about course content before entering the program, and they reported being subsequently disappointed in some aspects of the curriculum. This was mainly the case for students with older, more experienced students with applied interests in planning and design. The USP website could perhaps make clear for students what they will (and will not) learn in the program, and more detailed advising might be called for with new students. The 1-unit overview seminar mentioned above is relevant here, as well.

Before closing, it is important to address the question of whether the USP program should aim to become a department. The committee is mixed with respect to whether this is a good idea. Departmental status would surely bring the USP program the stability it has earned, and when asked, many participants in the review process supported the idea that USP should become a department. While much of the coursework considers policy, planning, and design practice, the current undergraduate major is an academic, and not a professional, degree program. It is also interdisciplinary, which can prove a challenge for recruiting high quality academic faculty with no other disciplinary affiliation (economics, political science, etc.). The coins of the realm in both public policy and urban planning are professional master's degrees, and research-oriented UC departments almost always host PhD programs as well. The question, then, concerns the (1) desire of the UCSD leadership to devote additional resources to improve its scholarly standing in the study of cities and regions, (2) what the markets are for public policy, urban planning, and PhD degrees in urban studies, and (3) whether going toward departmental status would ultimately enhance the strong urban studies and planning undergraduate degree (that often get short-shrift at Berkeley, Irvine, and UCLA which house graduate Public Policy and Urban Planning degree programs). Finally, an important consideration is that a more robust USP is consistent with the Chancellor's mission to integrate UCSD more forcefully into regional problem-solving.

Respectfully submitted,

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April 16, 2014

**PROFESSOR STEVEN ERIE, Director
Urban Studies and Planning Program**

SUBJECT: Undergraduate Program Review for the Urban Studies and Planning Program

Dear Professor Erie,

The Undergraduate Council has discussed the Urban Studies and Planning 2013 Undergraduate Program Review. The Council supports the findings and recommendations of the review subcommittee and appreciates the thoughtful and proactive response from the Program. The Council's comments centered on the following:

- **Faculty Leadership:** The Council was pleased by the allocation of a permanent Lecturer with Security of Employment (LSOE) as it agrees that a faculty appointment is necessary to solidify the leadership of the program. A permanent administrative head will lead to the long-term sustainability of Urban Studies and Planning. The Council acknowledges the challenge of finding a Senate faculty member as director and hopes that the Program will develop a successful partnership with a department.

The Council will conduct its follow-up review of the Program in Spring Quarter 2015. At that time, our goal is to learn about the Program's progress in implementing the recommendations of the program review subcommittee and the Undergraduate Council. The Council extends its thanks to the Program for its engagement in this process and we look forward to the continued discussion.

Sincerely,



James Nieh, Chair
Undergraduate Council

cc: G. Boss K. Pogliano
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