

December 23, 2016

PROFESSOR JOHN MOORE, Provost
John Muir College

SUBJECT: Undergraduate Program Review for Muir College

Dear Provost Moore,

The Undergraduate Council discussed the Muir College 2016 Undergraduate Program Review. The Council supports the findings and recommendations of the review subcommittee and appreciates the thoughtful and proactive response from the College.

The Council will conduct its follow-up review of the College in Winter Quarter 2018. At that time, our goal is to learn about the College's progress in implementing the recommendations of the program review subcommittee. The Council extends its thanks to the College for their engagement in this process and we look forward to the continued discussion.

Sincerely,

Geoffrey Cook, Chair
Undergraduate Council

Attachment

(1) Undergraduate Program Review Report and Response from Muir College

cc: J. Rauch
R. Rodriguez
K. Roy
B. Sawrey
M. Sidney

Review of John Muir College

Committee:

Chair, Sarah Creel, Undergraduate Council, UC San Diego

William Ladusaw, UC Santa Cruz

Nancy Postero, UC San Diego

DESCRIPTION

Muir College, founded in 1967, is headed by Provost John Moore and serves about 4400 undergraduate students. Under Moore are the Dean of Student Affairs, Dean of Academic Affairs, and the Director of the writing program. The DSA handles issues of residential life and co-curricular programming, while the DAA handles academic advising. Despite this technical separation of duties, in practice the two Deans work together closely to handle various student opportunities and (increasingly) student issues that arise. The DAA supervises an Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs, five academic advisors at various levels, and an administrative assistant. The DSA also supervises several additional employees.

Muir, more so than other UC San Diego colleges, asks students to fulfill general education requirements via courses offered by academic departments. The only in-house courses taught by Muir are writing courses: MCWP 40, MCWP 50, and MCWP 125. The remainder of general education requirements consist of four 3-course sequences in the lower division, with each sequence falling under one of three general areas: Social Sciences (1 sequence); Math or Natural Sciences (1); Fine Arts, Foreign Languages, and Humanities (2). A large variety of sequences are offered in each area, and students can also petition sequences to be included. Interestingly, while Muir students and faculty stress the flexibility of these general education requirements as a benefit, Muir students do not appear to complete their degrees any faster than students from other colleges with more regimented requirements.

The committee met on May 20, 2016, from 8 am to 4:30 pm. The charge of the committee was to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the college with respect to its programs and with respect to the broader university context, followed up with recommendations. In the following sections, we outline these strengths and weaknesses, including recommendations as an integral part of the text.

STRENGTHS/WEAKNESSES OF PROGRAMS

Strengths: People. Our interviews with several individuals and groups within Muir College identified a number of strengths. The most prominent strength is the people. DSA Patty Mahaffey and DAA Doug Easterly, whose roles and responsibilities are technically separate, work together seamlessly to improve student academic and non-academic life and to address students confronting challenges in either domain. The academic advisors, supervised by Easterly, and the Assistant Dean of Academic Advising, Gabrielle Yates, take their roles very seriously, and readily offered suggestions for administrative changes that would improve their advising.

The advisors also take seriously their de facto role on the front lines of student mental health issues, which may manifest themselves in an academic advising context. Their comments suggest that they are familiar with the various steps they must take in situations involving distressed students.

We also met with three undergraduates, all second-year students at Muir. All three felt quite positive about their Muir experiences, and viewed Muir as both prestigious (perhaps because it is the most common first choice among student applicants) and socially congenial. When asked what motivated them to select Muir, all three cited the flexibility of general education requirements. Two of the three cited an influential alum or senior student from Muir as an influence on their choice.

Finally, we met with four faculty from the College—two from the Executive Committee and two from the Writing Advisory Committee—and Writing Program Director Carrie Wastal. Three of the committee faculty had had long associations with Muir via previous Provosts (Ledden, Smith), who had mentored them from early in their academic careers. A fourth was newly recruited by current Provost John Moore. Some also cited social benefits (meeting other Muir faculty) as a reason for participating initially. One faculty member said that involvement in Muir provides opportunity to have impacts on undergrads that is not possible at the more bureaucratic university level, and that they find it exciting to have a chance to directly affect the undergraduate experience. Wastal was also quite impressive, having run the writing program for nearly a decade. She expressed enthusiasm for her work, willingness to work with students to generate new topic areas for writing courses, and an appreciation of a variety of modes of evaluating students' experiences in the writing courses.

Strengths: General education requirements. Faculty and students alike reflected that these requirements are quite flexible. We view students' sense of satisfaction with these requirements as a positive. Further, the four-sequences approach is stable, adaptable, and easy to manage because it relies on departments to run and supervise the courses. This is a strength in that the College is not obligated to hire and retain a set of lecturers or teaching professors to run its courses. Students cited as benefits both the flexibility of requirements and also the effect of going into each topic area in depth, which might inspire them to complete a minor or second major. One committee member comments that the general education requirements are as instrumentally useful as the faculty think they are in attracting students to the College.

Weaknesses: General education requirements. While there are many things to like about the college's flexible general education requirements, the committee was struck by the absence of a coherent, inspiring, authentic vision of this aspect of Muir that is communicated to students. This is not to say that we think there couldn't be such a vision—in fact, we heard at least two possibilities articulated by people we interviewed. First, one faculty suggested that the flexibility of courses empowers students to create meaning out of their educational choices. We agree, but also suggest that students need to be told early on that they have both the power and the responsibility to make individual academic choices. One committee member noted that institutions with similar curricular flexibility may require a final essay describing the meaning or coherence of their academic choices. While we do not feel it is our place to suggest requirements, a possible middle ground would be inviting seniors to take part in an essay contest

describing the meaning of their educational choices. This could have the effect of educating first year students that their choices matter, as well as encouraging a discussion among the students about what their education means in practice. A second vision of the general education requirements was articulated by one of the students, who connected it to the John Muir motto *Celebrating the independent spirit*. Thus, a spirit of independent *intellectual* exploration and adventure might represent the Muir vision. We suggest that the Muir faculty and Provost work together to articulate such a vision and consider seriously how to communicate it to students.

A related potential concern, expressed by the DAA, is that many students studiously avoid taking humanities courses. This is possible because many students enter with AP courses they can count against their Muir sequence requirements. The DAA expressed the position that the role of humanities courses is to develop a particular set of reasoning skills, which are different than the skills developed in the sciences or the fine arts. While we do not take a position on this matter, we urge the Provost and executive committee to consider the reasoning behind grouping course sequences by division rather than by some other mode that better reflects the type of learning to be encountered. We also suggest that there be more regular curation of 3-course sequences, both in terms of availability and appropriateness for Muir students. Discussions suggest that the Executive Committee has been actively engaged in assuring that the sequences are still being taught by the departments; however, the College has not inquired into whether the sequences are appropriate and/or beneficial to the students. This is an untapped opportunity, as Muir is in the unique position to influence academic departments to create appropriate course sequences. Once its mission in general education is more clearly articulated, it could work with departments to design course sequences that meet Muir student needs and interests.

Weaknesses: writing program. While the writing program itself is not under the purview of this review, it would be remiss of us not to comment on an advising issue regarding the classes offered by this program. As noted above, Carrie Wastal does an exemplary job. Moreover, one student reflected that the writing courses helped them in their later coursework. These positives notwithstanding, the committee regards it as a weakness that the college does not enforce the expectation that students take the writing sequence before enrolling in upper division courses. Some subset of students appears to delay taking the courses until late in their career. If the goal of the writing courses is to prepare students for college-level writing, then the fact that some students successfully complete most of their coursework before taking the writing sequence undermines the claim that these courses are important to college success. Of course, this may be because certain majors require little writing (though this will not be the case in a workplace, a reality which the students must inevitably confront). It may also be the case that students would have performed better in those classes had they taken the writing courses earlier. We recommend that administrative measures be taken to compel students to take these courses early in their careers, ideally within the first year. Our discussions with students also suggested that this pattern may not be (entirely) a result of student choice, but rather emerges from the obstacles created by the current enrollment system and approaches to offering capacity in these courses. All three students we met with expressed difficulty in enrolling in these courses. We recommend that the College work on better methods to manage course loads so that this does not stand in the way of students' enrollment.

STRENGTHS/WEAKNESSES IN CONTEXT OF CAMPUS

Strengths: cross-college and cross-campus collaboration. Several administrators are working in concert on issues faced by the campus. For example, the Dean of Student Affairs is working on an intercampus Task Force on International Student Experience, which will generate a set of recommendations to improve the experience of international students. These recommendations will go to the Council of Provosts. We applaud Provost Moore and his colleagues for working together with other colleges to address funding issues, rather than an every-college-for-themselves approach. Additionally, we are pleased that consolidation of the management services officer (MSO) to manage all six colleges seems to have worked well.

A further cross-campus effort is a set of first-year experience (FYE) courses, and the equivalent for transfer students, both in early stages. The committee believes that this is a potentially valuable approach, but recommends that these FYE courses be assessed before the next review to see if their stated goals are being met. Perhaps it will be highly successful; perhaps the transfer-student variant will be much more successful; or perhaps the same goals are already accomplished more efficiently through orientation events. We note that the opt-in nature of the courses—students self-select whether to participate or not—makes it somewhat difficult to assess effectiveness.

Weaknesses: perspectives on academic advising campus-wide. When asked if there were any one thing that would improve academic advising, one advisor stated that their primary need was for recognition and valuation of their role in the university. We think this is symptomatic both of incipient burnout due to high workload (see below), and a general tendency at the university level to fail to acknowledge and value the role played by college advising. The two UC San Diego members of the committee came into this review with limited awareness of the role of college academic advising, and were profoundly impressed with these individuals' work on the front lines of student academic and nonacademic life. Were they to suddenly disappear, we would have a major crisis on our hands. We recommend not only that the academic advisors be commended for their valuable work, but also that efforts be made to connect advising staff at academic departments and at colleges in the spirit of fostering appreciation and cooperation. One committee member has had previous success at another institution in arranging "ride-alongs" so that departmental and college advisors can see what the other group does on a daily basis.

Weakness: inability to disqualify students from majors. The Assistant Dean of Academic Advising cited frustration in advising students who insist on doggedly pursuing a major in which they are clearly not going to succeed. The ADAA suggests that if regulations provided the authority to disqualify students from a major, this would be alleviated. The committee sees this as a campus issue, in that there needs to be a campus-wide standard for progress toward a major, and that progress should be readily apparent in advising courseware. The committee is told that the Educational Policy Committee is looking into building a new degree audit system (DARS 2.0) and is exploring whether DARS 2.0 might have this capability. This is a positive step, but we urge EPC not to let the tail wag the dog: the format of the system must be driven by the needs of the university, rather than the university changing its behavior to match the affordances of the system. Thus, we recommend that campus leadership work toward both campus-wide standards for progress toward a major, and advising courseware that facilitates this evaluation.

Weakness: student housing. University-wide, there is a housing shortage, and our undergraduate informants reflected frustration with this state of affairs. We are aware of plans to build new residence halls; we would merely like to reflect to campus the ongoing desire of students to live on-campus. This might be viewed as a positive in that it reflects identification with the university community.

Threats to student success: Students of concern. The number of students of concern at UCSD has risen in the past decade or so (though we do not have exact numbers). It was evident from discussion with the DSA and DAA and with the academic advisors that the level of crisis cases has interfered with aspects of their mission. Staying in crisis mode prevents these workers from their equally important mission of developing co-curricular activities to promote student success. It also seems to preclude a more proactive, preventative approach. Clearly more resources need to be addressed to this concerning issue. We are reassured that Council of Provosts is working this coming Academic Year on formulating a plan for how to best address this issue, including the most mission-critical jobs necessary to ensure student success. We recognize and support this ongoing collaboration, and acknowledge a positive first step in hiring two case workers assigned to students of concern across all the colleges. However, our interviews made it clear that this is not nearly enough, given the numbers of distressed students with which the staff is dealing. We strongly advise the university administration to treat this as an urgent issue and to heed the Council's considered recommendations. One member of the committee recommends a case worker embedded within the college's academic advising to ensure follow up for some students, as students' difficulties often emerge in this setting.

Threats to student success: Unique challenges faced by international students. According to the data we were provided, the proportion of international students in the UC San Diego undergraduate population has increased by roughly 1000% in the last decade, with 20% of the student body now from outside the US. On the one hand, these students tend to perform better academically than California residents, and they add value to our community. On the other hand, they add workload in the advising system that needs to be followed up in the academic system. Various individuals noted challenges posed by and to international students. One such challenge includes misunderstandings of academic integrity. Some connected these challenges specifically to writing courses, while AVC Sawrey reports that most academic-integrity violations by students on visas are *not* in writing courses. Another issue is lack of a sense of belonging—students never feel they fully fit in with UC San Diego culture, and may end up feeling alienated from their own countries. These issues both require the university to work creatively to best educate these students and assure positive student-life experiences. We are heartened at the cross-campus efforts on this matter, and strongly urge the Council of Provosts and other stakeholders to work to address this issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALLEVIATING SHORTCOMINGS

Since our recommendations were embedded in the above writing, we reiterate them in abbreviated form here.

(1) Clarify the vision of Muir’s general education. We recommend that the Muir faculty and Provost work together to refine the vision of Muir College’s general education requirements and that they consider seriously how to communicate these requirements to students. On this matter, we urge the Provost and executive committee to consider the reasoning behind grouping course sequences by division rather than by some other mode.

(2) Curate and generate general education alternatives. We recommend that there be more regular curation of 3-course sequences, both in terms of availability and appropriateness for Muir students. This is an untapped opportunity, as Muir is in the unique position to influence academic departments to create appropriate course sequences.

(3) Front-load writing requirements. We recommend that administrative measures be taken to compel students to take required writing courses within the first year. We recommend that the College work on better methods to manage course loads so that difficulty finding open sections does not stand in the way of students’ enrollment in writing courses.

(4) Assess the effectiveness of FYE courses. We recommend that first-year experience (FYE) courses be assessed before next review to see if their stated goals are being met.

(5) Commend and make visible the work of academic advisors at the university level. We recommend not only that the academic advisors be commended for their valuable work, but also that efforts be made to connect advising staff at academic departments and at colleges in the spirit of fostering appreciation and cooperation.

(6) Facilitate advising with respect to progress towards degree. We recommend that campus leadership work toward both campus-wide standards for progress toward a major, and advising courseware that facilitates this evaluation.

(7) Provide campus-wide resources for students of concern. We strongly advise the university administration to treat the rising numbers of students of concern as an urgent issue and to heed the Council of Provosts’ considered recommendations. One member of the committee recommends a case worker embedded within academic advising, as students’ difficulties often emerge in this setting.

(8) Provide campus-wide resources suited to the unique needs of the now-large international student population. We are heartened at the cross-campus efforts on this matter, and strongly urge the Council of Provosts and other stakeholders to work to address issues faced by our now large international student population.