



SUBJECT: Review of the Department of Political Science Undergraduate Program

DATE: February 20, 2012

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Per UC San Diego Academic Senate policy, a faculty committee was convened on February 16-17, 2012, by the Associate Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Education to review the undergraduate program offered by the Department of Political Science. The committee met with subsets of department leadership, faculty, staff, and students during the process. In addition to these interviews, our committee was furnished with the department's previous review assessment, the department's response, the department's self-study prior to this review, and numerous statistical data and survey instruments (e.g., UCUES, post-baccalaureate surveys, college surveys) covering various aspects of undergraduate experience, curriculum, and course evaluations over the last 7 years.

The primary conclusion from the 1998 review was that nothing in the department should be changed, although at the time there was some concern about declining enrollments. This is no longer a concern, as the department has grown to 38 ladder-rank faculty, 1 Lecturer-with-Security-of-Employment, and 12 adjunct faculty, who serve approximately 1300 undergraduate majors and many non-majors from disciplines drawn across UC San Diego. The department revised its curriculum to allow six broad areas of concentration (not required) and eliminated lots of pre-requisites so that the curriculum is widely regarded as one of the most flexible in which to major; the last review found by a margin of 28-3 in a survey that students found the option to concentrate to be "useful in organizing their studies." The previous review also suggested that the department create an "International Studies" program, which it subsequently did, although that program is now housed in the School of International Relations and Pacific Studies (IRPS), which the department formally "spun off" since the last review.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this current review cycle, the committee again recognizes and lauds the highly regarded stature of the department's scholarship, as evidenced by numerous metrics such as various national ranking mechanisms (e.g., *US News and World Report* #7 for the graduate program, *National Research Council* #11 for the graduate program). The faculty are excellent lecturers (with good CAPE evaluations on a course-by-course basis) and leading scholars in political science. In fact, the committee recognizes that the department is known as a national leader in political science scholarship. However, the committee found potential areas of concern initially gleaned from the various surveys of undergraduate satisfaction in their departmental experience, which were validated more strongly during the interviewing process. The committee believes that the department could and should invest more in its undergraduate program to avoid missing an important opportunity to extend its excellence to its broad undergraduate clientele. The committee encourages the department to seriously reconsider the importance of undergraduate education in its overall mission, in order to broaden the stellar reputation the department has built within the political science (and general social science) scholarship community.

## COMMENDATIONS

As mentioned, the committee agrees that the department is a national leader in political science scholarship, as evidenced by peer-reviewed publications, extramural funding, and other forms of critical peer recognition. In general, such recognizance benefits the department, its students and faculty, and UC San Diego as a whole. More specific to the undergraduate experience, a higher-than-average number (compared to Campus) of students self-reported that they obtained very useful writing skills and analytical skills, which certainly well-serve all careers the majors enter upon graduation (and law school in particular, which constitutes the single largest career track for



graduates). The committee lauds the department's commitment to maintaining itself among the elite in political science scholarship and giving its undergraduates strong broad skills in writing and analysis that transmit to practically any career track.

## ISSUES

Most generally stated, the biggest area of concern is “cultural” in that it became clearer during the review that the department doesn't consistently seem to give its undergraduates the same experience that it likely gives its graduate students, or, put in a different way, doesn't consistently place undergraduate education as a high priority. The committee first noted this through some statistical reports where undergraduates expressed dissatisfaction with their experience in the department, primarily manifested through lack of engagement with faculty, dissatisfaction with advising, lack of research opportunities, lack of a cohesive social experience, and/or concern about the relevance of the current curriculum to contemporary issues and society. Some specific examples of these survey-based findings supporting this comment include:

- 44% of survey respondents claimed their satisfaction level with academic advising in the department was ‘neutral’ or ‘dissatisfied’
- 68% of respondents “rarely, never, or only occasionally” talked to an instructor about course materials
- 39% of respondents “rarely or never” engaged an instructor during class
- 76% of respondents “rarely or never” worked with a faculty member beyond coursework
- 70% of respondents “rarely, never, or only occasionally” found any class sufficiently interesting to inspire inquiry beyond minimum course requirements
- 80% of respondents “rarely, never, or only occasionally” made a class presentation
- approximately 95% (averaged over several related questions) of respondents did not participate in paid (non-credit) or unpaid (either volunteer or credit-granting) research or creative activity with a faculty member
- approximately 10% more respondents report a “lack of openness with faculty” when compared to overall Campus average
- the survey respondents reported that their overall social/community experience in the department was lower than Campus average
- college surveys indicating that students not clear on how the methods/techniques learned in POLY 30 really translate into political science in later parts of their curriculum

The committee acknowledges that none of these results by itself, and possibly even taken collectively with rigorous statistical inference treatment, should indicate that the department is failing in its undergraduate education mission. However, they were nonetheless noteworthy enough to support the committee's comment and served as a basis for discussions during the interviews with faculty, staff, and students. Upon completion of those interviews, the committee as a whole was somewhat surprised by what seemed an overall resistance by some faculty to departmental self-assessment on undergraduate issues, the relative inertia in the department to critically examining its undergraduate curriculum, and the strong perception by graduate students serving as teaching assistants (TAs) or Readers that undergraduate teaching is at best a secondary concern or at worst unvalued by the faculty, the latter sentiment of which the TA/Reader model used by the department reinforces. Certain relevant comments from faculty and graduate students from those interviews include:

- “In 20 years, to my recollection, we've had no systematic, comprehensive discussion on undergraduate courses or curriculum” (Faculty member)
- “Our undergraduates probably deserve a more integrated curriculum that shows the relevance of what we do to contemporary events” (Faculty member)



- “We can better serve the undergraduates if we require some career counseling - perhaps a ‘professional development seminar’ or something like that...over and over I hear that they have never talked with anyone about their career options and are mostly lost.” (Faculty member)
- “Faculty see undergraduate teaching as a necessary evil accompanying their research” (TA/Reader)
- “Don’t tell your advisor you want to teach as a career” (TA/Reader)

This general area of concern is further deconstructed as follows, in no particular order of implied importance:

Advising. The department commendably uses the Virtual Advising Center (VAC), which the department’s student affairs advising staff highly praise as an efficient business practice. Staff student affairs officers are available on a walk-up basis to deal with issues not resolved by VAC, and the staff interviewed indicated the VAC has substantially cut down on the student traffic seeking advising. Faculty do not have access to VAC, and in fact, faculty play no role in advising within the department in any formal or even measureable way. This is contrary to the norm at UC San Diego and elsewhere. In particular, it is faculty who serve as the best advisors in assisting students to see the relevance of their chosen undergraduate curricula in empowering post-graduate careers, and this avenue of “face time” between student and faculty member doesn’t seem to exist. The advising staff refer students seeking such advice to the Career Center, which itself is not well-equipped to explain how the undergraduate curriculum empowers political science careers. This gap is best served by more faculty involvement.

Lack of community. Undergraduate students report feeling a lack of community or social cohesion within the major. The committee certainly acknowledges the enrollment is very large in the department, and this naturally poses huge challenges to developing such communities in a sustainable way (either from the top or more organically from the bottom). The department has an excellent Honors program and the Pi Sigma Alpha honor society, but these are not available to all students (nor is this committee suggesting that, as academic achievement-based activities, they should be). There seems to be nothing the department does currently to foster community among the undergraduate majors as a whole.

Lack of research opportunities. The Honors program really exists as the only interaction mechanism through which faculty and undergraduates work together on research topics (and for that matter, have much face time together at all). One faculty member stated that his/her colleagues “should be able to take on more Honors students” and that “doubling the program size would not impose undue hardship on the department.” Some faculty mentioned that undergraduates are not equipped to perform research; the committee believes that the faculty should ensure their curriculum (see next comment) does equip students with both basic research tools in political science and with the ability to “connect the dots” from course to course to see how basic research tools are used in contemporary political science applications.

Curriculum relevance and self-assessment. The two words that came up multiple times in discussion about the undergraduate curriculum were “stagnant” and “musty”. An interesting example was provided by a TA, who said that the 1988 case study of “Baby M” (surrogacy-related case) is still being used as a contemporary example of a biotech-related issue in political science; this is particularly surprising, given San Diego’s (and UC San Diego’s) prominence over the last 10-15 years as hub for biotech research. As quoted above, even faculty acknowledge that no comprehensive review of the curriculum has occurred in a long time, and subsequent interviews determined that there is little to no discussion among the department or sub-field coordinators in assessing the relevance of the curriculum to contemporary events in society or even showing much interest in doing so. The course titles have not been changed in a long time either, although the committee acknowledges that course syllabi—and thus the actual course content—may be evolving more than is readily seen. If this were the case, the committee suggests the department has a marketing problem with regard to selling the relevance of its curriculum to undergraduates.

TA/Reader interaction with undergraduates. The department does not appear to distinguish between TAs and Readers; work packages offered to graduate students include seemingly arbitrary mixtures of TAing and Reading, with job descriptions that seem to be identical for both position types, with the possible exception of leading



discussion sections. As an example, Readers seem to be commonly expected to hold office hours. It should be noted that this potentially puts the department at risk of violating TA/Reader union contracts and/or creating cost-accounting problems. Furthermore, this practice reduces potential face time with faculty further, leading to the kinds of disengagement students have reported; one TA reported that students were more comfortable requesting letters of reference from the TA than the faculty member teaching the course, or asking faculty unrelated to their interests. Furthermore, the TAs reported that time pressures exerted on them to do research, despite being given full TA/Reader work packages and expectations of significant face time with undergraduates, force them into a practice of “fake grading” which results in students not being assessed properly. This is particularly alarming in that such a practice can distort a student’s ability to self-assess, and the student may end up unprepared in his or her career or in graduate school, which ultimately reflects poorly on the department’s reputation. An unintended consequence is that this practice could also “teach” TAs—who themselves are the next generation of political science faculty—that undergraduate education is not important to faculty (as seemingly indicated in one of the TA quotes above).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The committee urges the department to consider the following recommendations related to the points made above.

1. Initiate a process for undergraduate curriculum discussion and self-assessment. The committee suggests that a vibrant discussion within, at minimum, each of the sub-field faculty groups should occur at least annually with recommendations for curriculum changes brought to the full faculty for discussion and/or vote in accordance with department policies on curriculum changes. Such discussions could even be held in a “retreat” format where the faculty group sequesters itself for more focused attention without the distractions of the daily job. A more comprehensive internal review leading to self-assessment of undergraduate learning outcomes might be conducted on larger frequency intervals, e.g., every 3-5 years. The committee suggests that sub-field faculty representatives or the Undergraduate Affairs Committee propose standardized measures (e.g., survey instruments) that can be used to aid the self-assessment.
2. Start a departmental colloquium or seminar series featuring local policymakers, politicians, analysts whose quantitative analysis informs policy, and even department faculty and senior graduate students. This will aid in undergraduates being able to begin to see connections between tools learned in the political science curriculum and practice within the various career fields spanned by political science.
3. Take a critical look at the department’s own “self-marketing” strategy to undergraduates. The committee acknowledges that, given insufficient data for rigorous decision-making, some of the issues with undergraduate uncertainty with the intellectual connections within the political science curriculum, lack of seeing relevancy in some courses, and unsure of how what is learned translates into career use may be alleviated simply by opening better channels of dialogue with the students. The department should critically assess its web page, and ultimately its catalogue copy for archival reasons, and add more descriptive (and enthusiastic, almost self-promotional) verbiage describing what each of the sub-fields of concentration are more carefully and how they relate to various careers that use the tools learned in political science. The advising staff enthusiastically supported this recommendation when discussed in interviews.
4. Take advantage of modern social media and start a department Facebook (or something similar) page. Many other departments, programs, and related research/educational entities at UC San Diego have done this already and have seen tremendous improvement in connection to their students and alumni. Moreover, such a medium allows students to build the very interactive social communities with the political science major that they presently indicate are lacking. The advising staff enthusiastically supported this recommendation when discussed in interviews and would probably even take ownership for starting and moderating the page.



5. In a related way, the department should invest some of its operating funds in jump-starting its student chapter of the American Political Science Association or other relevant professional society that permits campus chapters. These funds could be used for student-faculty social “mixers”, special guest seminars, focused career fairs, or other things of the students’ choice, and the department should commit to supporting the organization’s events. The committee strongly believes that a student population with a strong professional club or similar organization forms a solid basis for community, professional networking, and substantive interaction.

6. Strongly consider ways that faculty can engage undergraduates in an advising capacity. Advising is fundamentally part of the mentoring and educational mission that faculty, as stewards of education, are responsible for. The committee acknowledges that the large size of the major likely prohibits individual one-on-one faculty/student formal advising, but the department could consider forming a rotating sub-set of faculty who dedicate certain times each week to being available for the kind of curriculum-to-career advising that students need; such action can also strongly increase the “face time” between students and faculty that students indicate lacks in the department.

7. Require mandatory TA/Reader training. The committee found that Professor Maureen Feeley’s TA/Reader training course was immensely popular and very successful among TAs and Readers. The department should consider making such a course mandatory for its TA/Readers.

8. Take a critical look at how TA and Reader work packages are constructed to ensure that job descriptions are in compliance with union rules and university policy. Also ensure that workloads are appropriately metered to avoid encouraging TAs and Readers to engage in “fake grading” or any related practice. The combination of recommendations #7 and #8 inevitably will go a long way towards ensuring that graduate students reflect the educational mission of the faculty to the undergraduates in a way that makes them feel more valued and relevant.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the committee is very proud to report that the department continues to be a recognized leader in political science. The faculty are clearly excellent in their teaching and research, and this is recognized at all levels of the university and the political science community. The committee hopes that the tremendous capability in the department can also be channeled to its undergraduate students in a similar way to ensure that the department’s entire clientele benefit from its outstanding reputation.

Respectfully submitted,

Handwritten signature of Michael Todd in black ink.

Michael Todd  
Dept. of Structural Engineering (Chair)

Handwritten signature of Ivan Evans in black ink.

Ivan Evans  
Dept. of Sociology

Handwritten signature of Juliann Allison in black ink.

Juliann Allison  
Dept. of Political Science, UC-R

October 4, 2013

**PROFESSOR PHILLIP ROEDER, Chair**  
**Department of Political Science**

SUBJECT: Undergraduate Program Review for the Department of Political Science

The Undergraduate Council considered the report of the subcommittee charged with reviewing the undergraduate program of the Department of Political Science at its November 9, 2012 meeting. The review subcommittee and the Council recognize the highly regarded stature of the Department and its faculty, and our focus here is to draw attention to recommendations that will strengthen the undergraduate program. The Council's comments on the review subcommittee's recommendations are as follows:

**1. Initiate a process for undergraduate curriculum discussion and self-assessment.**

The review subcommittee recommended that the Department initiate regularized meetings (annually or by special retreat every 3-5 years) to bring faculty together to review the curriculum. The Council fully endorses this recommendation. The Department's response does not address this recommendation specifically, and thus we reiterate it here for your review. This recommendation will be of particular focus at the time of the follow up review in Spring 2014.

The Council recognizes that course development in the Department has kept pace with the faculty interests and leading research topics. Combined with a regular review of the curriculum to ensure that the major requirements remain relevant to the discipline, developing research and theoretical approaches, and to the needs of evolving student demographics, the Department should be able to quickly and effectively address those areas of the curriculum that most need attention. This should not be a burdensome task for the Department, particularly given some of the new strategies the Department discusses in its response (e.g., creating a forum for undergraduates to provide feedback on the curriculum, strategies for expanding research opportunities). We look forward to learning of your progress in this endeavor at the time of the follow up review.

**2. Start a departmental colloquium or seminar series featuring local policymakers, politicians, analysts whose quantitative analysis informs policy, and even department faculty and senior graduate students.**

This recommendation was not addressed in the Department's response. Please be sure to address it at the time of the follow up review.

**3. Take a critical look at the department's own "self-marketing" strategy to undergraduates.**

The subcommittee recommends that the Department review online and printed materials available to students on the discipline and update these texts with expanded descriptions geared towards an undergraduate audience. The Council supports this recommendation. We believe that this will also help in managing student expectations regarding what studying Political Science in a large research university means.

**4. Take advantage of modern social media and start a department Facebook (or something similar) page.**

This was referenced in the Department's response. We look forward to learning of your experience with these new forums at the follow up review.

**5. Invest operational funds to support a student chapter of the American Political Science Association or other professional society.**

We are pleased to see that the Department intends to strengthen its ties to the multiple undergraduate student groups that are of interest to Political Science majors. The Council endorses this plan.

**6. Engage faculty in an advising capacity**

The Council was pleased to learn from the Department's response that faculty regularly advise those students that intend to advance their studies in the discipline. The Council also agrees that staff at Career Services is well equipped to handle the student questions regarding student interests in more professional fields, such as law and business. However, the Council is strongly of the opinion that the faculty of the Department are responsible for advising all majors, not just those students conducting research or with plans to continue their studies in a doctoral program. Student advising is a collaborative effort between department faculty, departmental advisors, and Career Services and other student services units on campus. The Council recommends that the Department further consider how faculty may be better integrated in the advising of all majors.

**7. Require mandatory TA/Reader training & (Recommendation #8) Take a critical look at how TA/Reader work packages are constructed**

The Council supports the Department's immediate solutions to address this issue, namely expanding the TA training course and holding workshops for each of the graduate student instructional support roles. However, we recommend that the Department continue to monitor this issue carefully and assess whether additional departmental involvement is needed.

The Council will conduct its follow up review of the Department in Spring 2014. At that time, our goal is learn about the Department's own locally-initiated strategies for addressing the issues highlighted in the report, and to learn of its progress in implementing the recommendations of the review subcommittee, which the Undergraduate Council fully endorsed. We are certain that the Department and its students will benefit from this dedicated effort, and thank you for your willingness to engage in this process.

Sincerely,



Michael D. Todd, Chair  
2012-13 Undergraduate Council

cc: G. Boss R. Rodriguez  
J. Elman B. Sawrey  
J. Nieh K. Pogliano