

Outside Evaluation Team Narrative Report

Department of Criminal Justice

Weber State University

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On Friday, February 23, 2024, Dr. Lish Harris, Dr. Rieneke Holman, and Dr. Mark Bigler visited with select students, alumni, community members, and faculty connected with the Weber State University Department of Criminal Justice (CJ). During this visit, we identified the CJ program's strengths, challenges, and weaknesses. In this report, we will detail said strengths, challenges, and weaknesses and provide a few brief recommendations for change. However, before we begin, we would like to note that our overall evaluation experience led all of us to view the program as one of strength within the College and the University.

Strengths

- **The Diversity and Competency of Faculty**

In our opinion, the strongest aspect of the CJ program is the diversity of training and experience represented by the faculty. The program's full-time and adjunct faculty have diverse educational and experiential backgrounds, allowing them to offer students a wide range of courses. It also allows students a range of potential mentors as they progress through the program. In our meetings with students, they all quickly identified the individual attention and care they received from various faculty members. They lauded the range of views and opportunities the faculty provided (i.e., internships, faculty-guided research, study abroad, etc.). In addition, students mentioned the faculty were competent in both content and pedagogy.

- **Collective Online Preparation and Investment**

The faculty of the CJ program have put in significant time and effort to be prepared, effective online instructors. In our meetings with support staff, faculty, and administration, we were impressed by the collective effort of the faculty to leverage university resources and participate in training and certifications to evolve and grow as online educators. The faculty were consistently praised for these efforts.

- Student Preparation

We had the opportunity to meet with current and former students of the CJ program. All of the students felt well-prepared to be successful in their fields of choice. They noted the preparation they received in the classroom and in moments of “unofficial mentoring.” Multiple current students were already in the workforce and spoke of how well their educational experience buttressed their working lives. The alumni we spoke to had glowing things to say about how well they were prepared to enter graduate school or the workforce. Undoubtedly, the students in the CJ program are set up for success in their careers.

- Relationships with Community Partners

The CJ department maintains strong relationships with several community partners. These community partners provide varied opportunities for student involvement, and they stated they design experiences for students based on student preferences. We had the opportunity to meet with some representatives of these partners, who all expressed appreciation for the opportunity to provide internships and work with Weber State CJ students. They all indicated they often hired graduates from the CJ program.

- Department Chair

Dr. Molly Sween was identified as an ambitious, thoughtful, and diligent department chair. She was consistently described as being supportive and approachable. Support staff, faculty, and administrators all spoke highly of her vision and her strong work ethic. The support staff praised her ability to get the faculty to participate in training and certification programs. The faculty felt she worked well with them when they had concerns or needs. The administration praised her leadership and vision.

Challenges

- Shrinking Enrollment

Many CJ programs have experienced a reduction in enrollment over the last half-decade. This reduction has caused consternation, exasperation, and fear among the faculty and staff in the CJ program. In our meeting with faculty, some expressed a desire to work with other institutions (i.e. SLCC) to rebuild the program’s enrollment. Others were frustrated with canceled classes and smaller class sizes. This seemed to be the most palpable challenge for the program.

- Online Program/Courses

The CJ program offers an online baccalaureate degree and an online master's degree. Faculty and students spoke about the challenge of providing quality online instruction, balancing the right number of online and face-to-face classes, ensuring the online programs add to the face-to-face programs rather than replace them, and working to translate high-impact practices. The convenience of the online programs is a strength, but figuring out how to work through all the obstacles online courses and programs provide is a key challenge.

- Increase Internal Support

Throughout our meetings, we heard praise for the dedication, effort, and quality of the faculty. The faculty work hard to foster a healthy educational environment for their students, a stupendous strength of the program. Cultivating this same energy to create a vibrant, warm environment within the department felt challenging. Faculty indicated they tend to work in silos, and there was a distinct feeling of distance between and among the faculty. To the committee, the level of external buy-in was great. However, the internal buy-in and feeling of collegiality need to rise to that same level.

Weaknesses

- Advising

To be clear, the weakness in advising is not due to the CJ program's lack of effort or organization. As a committee, we identified a weakness in institutional support for advising. The faculty felt overburdened and inadequately supported in this endeavor. It is untenable to place the entire burden of major advising on the shoulders of a busy faculty. The students felt knowledgeable about the most important aspects of their collegiate journey but ill-informed about the more nuanced opportunities available to them. The institution (at the college or university level) should explore different advising models to support faculty and students better.

- Site Feedback for Internships

Overall, the internship program is a strength of the CJ program. However, multiple internship site coordinators asked for more interaction with the program. They want more guidance and feedback from the program about how to serve best the students they host as interns. They provided examples such as having more frequent interactions with CJ faculty about student progress, being provided with clear

student outcomes, having access to structured student outcomes, and receiving feedback from the CJ department about how they can better serve students.

- **Connectivity and Collaboration with Other Programs**

The CJ program offers many exciting and valuable opportunities to its students. Connecting and collaborating with other programs across campus will broaden and strengthen these prospects. In our meetings, we heard of numerous connections that could be made relatively easily.

Recommendations for Change

Although we will provide some brief recommendations for change, we will not suggest ways forward for each challenge or weakness we identified in our visit. More importantly, the courses for change the CJ program adopts should be congruent with their own interests and strengths.

- **Explore and Implement New Advising Models**

We suggest exploring a variety of different advising models. These could include expanding the duties of the administrative assistant, building a robust mentorship program with students mentoring each other, hiring a full-time advisor, using new technologies to help guide students, using faculty with canceled classes as advisors, etc. The evolution of advising needs to fit the faculty and students. Most importantly, the institution needs to find ways to support advising in ways it currently does not.

- **Connecting to Other Programs**

In our short time together as a committee, we found potential connections for the CJ program with the Political Science moot court, the chance for collaboration with the MSW program, and a potential partnership with programs in health to create some curriculum in CJ Health. These connections will help assuage fears of a shrinking program by building new bridges between students and the CJ program. Many of these connections would also fortify the balance between online courses and face-to-face opportunities. We are unaware of the majority of these potential collaborations, and some may exist with institutions other than WSU (i.e., SLCC). Still, we strongly encourage the program to find a few and use them to address some of the most significant challenges and weaknesses identified in our report.

- **Increase Interaction with Internship Sites**

The strength of the internship program in CJ is clear. Increasing guidance and feedback with the internship sites and the internship supervisors will reinforce an already hearty program that greatly benefits the student participants.

- Create an Advisory Board

Fostering an environment of internal support is complex. An advisory board composed of some faculty, community members, students, and staff could help in this regard. It could create chances for some faculty to lead, serve, advocate, and steer parts of the program in a meaningful way. A board of invested members could centralize many currently disparate obligations and aid in dividing that labor in a more accommodating way.