

WSU Master of Criminal Justice
Five-year Program Review Committee Report

To: Brad Reynolds, Graduate Director
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Date: February 2, 2021
Subject: 5 Year Review Committee's Report

Overview

The long-standing master of criminal justice (MCJ) program at Weber State University (WSU) has undergone significant changes since conception in 2000. Today, the program serves an increasing number of online graduate students that include mid-career professionals and students with advanced degree goals (e.g., law school or doctoral program). The program currently operates with effort from 8 full-time faculty members and will have a 9th faculty member joining the team in the fall 2021 semester. WSU faculty teach 24 credit hours per year onload (4-4 course load). The MCJ program has experienced growth in applications submitted in the past year and has doubled the number of admitted students since AY 18-19. These upward trends are expected to continue which creates numerous challenges for a program whose appropriated funding has remained relatively stagnant over the past 5 years.

The external review committee, comprised of Anna Kosloski and Blake Nielson, visited the Weber State University MCJ program on February 1st, 2021. The committee interviewed students, faculty, and staff associated with the program. Our report is based upon this site visit. In accordance with Weber State University's external review process, the report details the strengths of the MCJ program, identified challenges within the MCJ program, program weaknesses, and recommendations for the MCJ program moving forward (see Table 1).

Table 1. Weber State University's Evaluation of Standards	
<i>Strengths/Challenges</i>	<i>Standards (as listed in the report guidelines)</i>
Program Strengths	A – Mission Statement C – Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment D – Academic Advising E – Faculty F – Support (Facilities, Equipment, etc.) G – Relationships with External Communities
Program Challenges	B – Curriculum H – Results of Previous Program Reviews
Program Weaknesses	None
Recommendations	Detailed Explanations Below

Program Strengths

The external review identified many areas of strength among the MCJ program and faculty. This section will outline these strengths within the mission statement, student learning outcomes & assessment, faculty, support, and relationships with external communities. While these areas are identified as strengths, this does not mean that faculty should refrain from identifying ways to expand or enhance these elements of the program. The program remains strong because of the way in which the faculty have worked to adapt to the changing demands of the graduate students, enrollment, turnover in faculty, and needs of the community. Continuous reflection and plans for growth will help ensure that these areas continue to perform well.

Mission Statement

The mission of the MCJ program is focused on stressing critical thinking, analytical skills, and effective communication skills through a broad and diverse educational experience that prepares students to lead in their communities. This mission is clear and is well suited to the broader mission of the Criminal Justice program which is focused on providing “the highest quality education” in Utah through “responsive and impactful higher education programs, scholarship, and service to the profession and community.” The mission is also appropriate to the students who are seeking to advance their careers or take the next step towards advanced educational training (e.g., doctoral program or law school). The mission is woven throughout the curriculum of the MCJ program and well captured in the program’s assessment tools.

The external review team found the mission of the MCJ program to be appropriate, clear, and in line with the mission, vision, and core values of Weber State University. There are three tenants of the MCJ program mission that include access, learning, and community. The online nature of the program allows students from diverse backgrounds and any geographic region to participate

in graduate education. This speaks to the university's core values of access and opportunity for all. The support from WSU Online aid in the facilitation of reaching a wide student audience, particularly across Utah. By having students in the graduate program from across Utah but also with a wide range of education and professional experience, the program is encouraging shared inquiry and learning through professional experience. The experience students report interacting with faculty in a fully online environment furthers a sense of community and likely is part of the appeal for undergraduate students at Weber State University increasingly enrolling in the MCJ program after graduation. The program provides evidence of nurturing potential within every individual and illustrates the vision of integrating learning, scholarship, and community.

Overall, the mission of the program was identified as a strength.

Support (Facilities, Equipment, etc.)

The support for the MCJ program in terms of facilities and equipment was identified as a program strength. The criminal justice program is housed in the newly remodeled Lindquist Hall. While the MCJ program is fully online, should students have a need to come to campus, they will have state of the art resources at their disposal. Students also have access to many virtual support resources through the campus.

Stewart Library provides access to contemporary, high-quality scholarly journals specific to criminal justice and related fields (criminology, sociology, social work, psychology, medicine, etc.). Despite increasing journal costs, the Library has been able to identify needed scholarly journals and provide access to leading packages in the field (e.g., Sage, Springer, Taylor & Francis, and Elsevier). The acknowledgement that faculty need to be part of the conversation on which titles are retained and which do not need to be renewed is an important distinction to ensure adequate resources. Stewart Library also has thousands of relevant books in print and multiple streaming video services for instruction. A unique feature for students that Stewart Library offers is the delivery of books to students free of charge within 45 miles of the campus. Such a service is an example prioritizing the needs of students. Additional resources for students include research guides, one-on-one consultation (including virtual meetings) with Librarians, collaborations with Utah Valley University to share resources, and participation with the Interlibrary Loan program. The support and collaboration with Stewart Library is a strength of the MCJ program.

The WSU Online office provides support in both curriculum design and logistics for Canvas, the campus learning platform. The staff in WSU Online indicate they have worked very closely with faculty in the MCJ program. The WSU Online office offers an e-learning certificate program to aid in the design (or redesign) of an online course. The program offers an incentive for faculty who participate with a stipend upon completion and an opportunity for an additional incentive if faculty can demonstrate course improvements while presenting at the WSU Teaching Learning Faculty Symposium. Given the workload that MCJ faculty are

currently carrying, the certificate program and incentive is a source of support and a strength for the faculty. In addition to the certificate, the WSU Online team also provides one-on-one consultation with faculty, workshops, and online training through an introduction to e-learning series.

The criminal justice program also has support from an Administrative Specialist II. While the external review committee did not get a chance to meet with the Administrative Specialist the sentiment shared was that staff support was strong and met the needs of the program. No other formal evaluation of administrative support occurred in the visit. If the MCJ program does continue to grow, this is an area that may need further consideration for strategic planning. **Overall, the support for the MCJ program in terms of facilities and equipment, etc. was identified as a strength.**

Academic Advising

Academic Advising in graduate programs is often decentralized and facilitated among graduate faculty or the program director. At WSU, the MCJ program advising occurs with the program director when initiated by a student on an as-needed basis. Graduate students also reported a lot of informal mentoring by MCJ faculty. As part of the advising process, students also receive electronic communication on important reminders, registration deadlines, and program materials. This **advising strategy was evaluated as adequate**, however, the external reviewers felt this is an area where the MCJ faculty could make minor changes with a potential for positive gains for both students and retention. Please see the Recommendations section for more information.

Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

In 2018, the MCJ program revised the learning outcomes. Today, the MCJ program's measurable goals center around students being able to demonstrate critical analysis skills, research, writing, and evaluation. More specifically the measurable learning outcomes, include students being able to:

- a. Analyze key issues, ideas, and/or concepts affecting the criminal justice system.
- b. Create and/or defend an evidence-based argument regarding criminal justice, law, policies, or procedures.
- c. Model professional-level writing skills in academic and/or non-academic settings.
- d. Design and/or implement empirically valid research related to criminal justice.

These learning outcomes are aligned with the program's mission and meet the expectations of a graduate education. Each learning outcome has clearly identified measures that are tied to specific course assignments in the core and elective courses. The change in the MCJ 6000: Statistics course moving from the core to an elective does not seem to impact the measurable goals negatively. The evidence of the learning objectives presented indicates that students are

meeting and or exceeding these learning objectives on a regular basis. This may be a product of the nature of graduate studies and students motivated to do well (e.g. needing a B- to pass core courses), but the review team also heard examples of how students were using MCJ curriculum in their current professions. For example, one current student talked about being able to conduct research within a CJ agency that this student believed was why he was competitive in the hiring process. Given that these new learning outcomes and assessment methods have only been in place for a few years, the external review team suggests MCJ faculty continue to reflect on the process and refine the assessment as needed. **Overall, the assessment plan seems to be working well, learning outcomes are clear, students are meeting expectations, and assessment was identified as a strength of the program.**

Faculty

The Faculty are a clear strength for the MCJ program. The MCJ faculty include Bruce Bayley, Mark Denniston, Brent Horn (Chair), Heeuk “Dennis” Lee, Brad Reynolds (MCJ Director), Molly Sween, Monica Williams, and McKenzie Wood. An additional tenure-track faculty member will be starting in the fall 2021 semester and may also contribute to the MCJ program. The current faculty areas of expertise cover a range of topics, including the major areas of the criminal justice system (law enforcement, the judicial system, corrections, and forensics), victimology, the intersections of race, gender, and social class, ethics, social control, domestic violence, crime prevention, citizen experience with policing, and armed shooter intervention, etc. Such expertise represents a diverse range of contemporary issues and critical expertise in core areas of the criminal justice field. The MCJ program is encouraged to continue to think about ways to prioritize diversity within the faculty, especially when it comes to race, ethnicity, and gender. This can be challenging given that historically the criminal justice field has been relatively homogenous, but the reviewers felt it should be part of the discussion for future faculty hires. The MCJ program does not currently rely on adjunct faculty for instruction.

The MCJ faculty are participating in the graduate program through a combination of overload and onload courses. While some faculty felt that overloads were manageable, others felt they pulled faculty away from other commitments (e.g., undergraduate instruction, research, and service). The external review team recognizes the appeal of teaching overload(s), but also the need to juggle other commitments, especially for Tenure-Track faculty. Additionally, teaching overloads or teaching in the summer may result in faculty burnout. This is particularly important as the number of applications from AY 18-19 to AY19-20 increased nearly 43% and admitted students doubled from AY 18-19 to AY 19-20. Thus, the faculty/student ratios and course sizes are increasing in the MCJ program. Core MCJ courses are averaging about 20 graduate students which is not reflected well in the *WSU 5 Year Graduate Program Self-Study Report* because elective courses with lower enrollments pull those class size averages down. MCJ faculty are carrying increasingly large class sizes and are frequently taking overloads to meet program demands. This is something that warrants continued conversation with faculty in the MCJ

program and campus administration. Please see the “Additional Recommendations” section for more comments from the external review team on this point.

It is clear from testimonials, student course evaluations, and the site visit that MCJ faculty create positive learning experiences for students. The interactions graduate students have with faculty, especially faculty who are willing to work with MCJ students on research, speak with them outside of class, and mentor them across their time in the MCJ program have a tremendous impact on students. Such interactions at least at the onset are initiated by the graduate students. Which means MCJ students could navigate their degree without many direct interactions with MCJ faculty beyond what occurs in Canvas. It seems some opportunities for students to interact more with faculty (e.g., seminar speaker events) could be valuable for both students and faculty on a limited basis. It is not clear where the growth in program applications is coming from, but it seems if the MCJ program had the resources for growth, pulling from WSU’s undergraduate program has additional potential given the appeal of the MCJ faculty. Faculty desire to teach in the graduate program was also noted in the site visit. Some faculty indicated that at least part of the appeal of working at WSU was the ability to teach graduate students. Thus, the MCJ program may continue to be a strong point of recruitment for high-quality faculty colleagues for the criminal justice program. **Overall, the faculty are a clear strength of the MCJ program.**

Relationships with External Communities

The MCJ program faculty have a wide range of organizations across Utah that they work with regularly, including but not limited to the Ogden Police Department, Utah POST Academy, Utah Board of Juvenile Justice, Weber Metro Crime Scene Unit, Utah State Crime Lab, Davis Sheriff’s Office, and U.S. Probation and Parole in Utah. Other partnerships include South Ogden City, the Korean American Federation of Utah, National Science Olympiad & Utah State Science Olympiad. Strong relationships with community partners provide opportunities for faculty in research and in connecting students with practitioners who are working in the CJ system, local government, or nonprofit organizations. It was clear in the virtual site visit that students valued hearing about the ongoing collaborations among MCJ faculty and external organizations and appreciate the opportunity to hear from CJ professionals in their courses. Such relationships provide value for both faculty and students and these **relationships with external communities is considered a strength of the program.**

Program Challenges

Every program needs to make periodic adjustments to keep engaged in contemporary issues, stay up to date new research in the field, and respond to the needs of students and the broader communities they serve. The external reviewers thought of the heading “Program Challenges” more as areas in need of discussion. Therefore, these should not be considered as fatal flaws but rather as areas of growth that need continued discussion among the MCJ faculty and likely need to occur in conjunction with campus leadership to have a sense of available resources.

Curriculum

While WSU is accredited through the Northwest Council of Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), the field of criminal justice does not have a standard accrediting body as is common in other fields (e.g., Nursing, Business, Public Administration). The Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) the leading organization in the field of criminal justice, stopped accrediting programs in 2018. Yet, it is not uncommon to consider the ACJS curriculum standards as the model in the field of criminal justice. Based on ACJS standards, graduate programs in criminal justice should include curriculum on the administration of justice, corrections, theory, law, law enforcement and research methods. While WSU's MCJ program is not modeled off the ACJS curriculum (nor does it need to be), the course options do reflect these guiding principles. This makes WSU's MCJ program competitive with other MCJ programs across the United States.

The 36-credit hour degree requires graduate students complete *MCJ 6100: Contemporary Criminal Justice*, *MCJ 6110: Research Methods in Criminal Justice*, and *MCJ 6120: Theories of Crime and Criminal Delinquency*. Since the WSU Five-Year Graduate Program Review Self-Study for MCJ was published and the February 2021 site visit, the MCJ 6000 Criminal Statistics course was removed as a core course. Thus, MCJ students complete a total of 9 credit hours of core curriculum and then select from 27 hours of elective credits. Elective courses in the MCJ program include a range of options, including but not limited to *MCJ 6150: Diversity Issues in Criminal Justice*, *MCJ 6180: Contemporary Legal Issues*, *MCJ 6210: Judicial Administration*, *MCJ 6220: Seminar in Contemporary Law Enforcement*, *MCJ 6230: Seminar in Contemporary Corrections*, and *MCJ 6130: Law and Social Control*. The range of course options allow students to tailor the curriculum based on their professional or educational interests. Students found the courses and expertise to also be a strength of the program. They appreciated the wide range of elective options that the reviewers also felt were a strength of the program.

The reason the external review team felt that the curriculum is adequate but is undergoing a period of growth. The MCJ program seems to be drawing three groups of students. First, the mid-career professionals who want to earn a master's degree to advance in their current profession within the CJ system. Second, the graduate student that wants to develop skills, especially in research and statistics and go on to an advanced degree such as law school or a doctoral program. Finally, we heard in the site visit that some MCJ students are graduating from their undergraduate and moving into the MCJ program. It appears that these groups may have slightly different curricular needs. For example, in meeting with students we found that the change to *MCJ 6000: Statistics* was disappointing to some current students. Additionally, we heard student interest in the option for the thesis or a culminating experience. As faculty shared with the review team such coursework may not be what mid-career professionals are needing in their graduate education. While we do not disagree, a culminating experience is common across graduate programs in criminal justice. We heard about the e-portfolio that other WSU graduate programs use, and this seems like a reasonable final product for MCJ students, especially those not looking to advance in their educational goals. For those looking to go on to a doctoral

program, a thesis is the standard example of work that they may need to submit in their application process. The option to complete a thesis would be ideal for these students.

Our observation of the competing student interests and suggestion of adding a culminating experience for MCJ students comes in acknowledgement with the current staffing challenges the program faces. This is why discussions among the MCJ faculty for managing growth and potentially identifying tracks for their student body is warranted (please see “Recommendations for Change” for more details).

Results of Previous Program Reviews

There were 7 recommendations in the 2015-2016 program review for the MCJ program. In many of these areas progress has been made. Recommendation 1 was to explore if online graduate students differ from traditional graduate students and how to maintain academic rigor of the program. The faculty have held discussions on this over the past year and value the need to ensure rigor in the online format. This is likely an ongoing process and requires continual understanding of the students (e.g., their experience, career goals, etc.) in the MCJ program. Recommendation 2 was focused on matching the curriculum with the audience in the online graduate program. The faculty decision to focus on the traditional criminal justice curriculum is appropriate. The learning outcomes focused on critical thinking, research, evaluation, and writing are appropriate and are aligned with the curriculum. Recommendation 3 was focused on making the curriculum more interactive. The external review team acknowledges the changes that were made through the faculty participation in the e-learning certificate and partnership with WSU Online to conduct course assessments. Recommendation 4 suggested a reclassification and additional compensation for the Administrative Specialist. This change occurred moving the Administrative Specialist from a level I to a level II. Recommendations 5-7 are focused on the morale, incentive structure, and longevity of the MCJ program in the Department of Criminal Justice. The external review team was surprised to see that no action has been taken on these items outside of a vote to delay the discussion.

Recommendation 5 was to address faculty feelings about teaching in the MCJ program. No action has been taken on this since the 2015-2016 assessment. It was clear in the site visit that there are still mixed feelings about teaching in the MCJ program. While no faculty member seemed to think that things were the same as they were during the 2015-2016 program review, there were varying levels of involvement with MCJ students. Some faculty reached out to graduate students, pulled them into research projects, encouraged them to participate in conferences, and engaged in regular informal mentoring. Others felt more disconnected from the graduate students and hence did not seem to have the same compelling desire to teach in the MCJ program on a regular basis.

Recommendation 6 in the 2015-2016 program review as to consider offering incentives for teaching in the graduate program. The current Self Study indicates no action has been taken on this recommendation. Faculty who teach in the MCJ program as an overload are compensated for the additional course and faculty who teach in the graduate program can receive an additional

\$750 for professional development each year. There are still some inequities that are frustrating faculty. For example, faculty who teach an elective in the MCJ program and have a class of 10 students versus faculty who teach a core course and have a class size with a minimum of 20 students. It seems that trying to find a balance of not requiring faculty to have too many new course preps for the MCJ program while also rotating who is teaching core courses is needed in the program. Finding ways to incentivize teaching is difficult because of limited resources but should continue to be part of the discussion among the MCJ faculty.

Recommendation 7 was for faculty to assess in 24 months whether they wanted the MCJ program to continue at WSU. The faculty voted in spring 2018 to table the discussion for a later time. To the reviewers' knowledge that discussion has not occurred, however, the sentiment from the faculty was that things did seem better than the discussions they were having in 2015-2016. Today, it seems the discussion that is needed is how to manage the MCJ program's growth, current staffing needs, and identify needed resources. These are not quick conversations at a regular standing faculty meeting. The MCJ faculty need to really sit down and engage in strategic, long-term planning for the MCJ program.

The challenges of the MCJ program are not unique to graduate education. They are largely a result of growth outpacing resources. These challenges do warrant discussion, and thoughtful planning or the points raised in Recommendations 5-7 will continue to go unaddressed. When the newest faculty member begins in the fall 2021 semester, the MCJ faculty should make strategic planning around these issues a priority.

Areas Where the Program Did Not Meet the Standards and Why

The review team did not find any areas where the MCJ program was not meeting the minimum standards in their program.

Recommendations for Change

Recommendation 1: Our first recommendation would be around curriculum. We learned by meeting with groups throughout the day that your students could be lumped into three groups (Practitioners, aspiring academics and students that are just looking to continue their education). We would recommend perhaps making formal or informal emphasis areas for each of the three areas that would recommend exactly which classes to take based on the individual student needs.

Recommendation 2: We would recommend the program considers a formal advising schedule that you agree on (i.e. once a year) to help students understand which of classes and/or emphasis areas would be based on their individual needs. In addition to helping students map out courses and have opportunities to ask questions about the degree program, this may provide the MCJ faculty with more insights into the long-term goals of the program. Given the possible wider range of student career/educational interests than the program has historically experienced, this

seems like a useful way to take stalk of who is in the program. It may also help with retention and ensure more students entering the program reach graduation.

Recommendation 3: We found throughout the day that there was support for the program, but concerns of growth and class sizes were weighing on the faculty's minds. We recommend strategy meetings with faculty and perhaps administration for an action plan of growth for the program and how it can be supported or these meetings could find the right number of applicants that could be admitted into the program each year under the current resources. Continuing to advocate for more support from campus administration will also be important for this expected upward trend in applications for the MCJ program. If WSU wants to maintain the level of growth of the MCJ program, more resources (i.e. faculty lines) will be needed in the long-term.

Recommendation 4: As part of recommendation 3 we feel the program should consider both teaching assistants and graduate assistants. Teaching assistants could help with the class size issues for some of the larger courses. Throughout the day we saw that there has been a shift where more of the students do desire to go for more graduate school which could be great for graduate assistants. We recognize that this recommendation could be contingent on funding.

Recommendation 5: The external review team supports the MCJ action plan to consider pulling a small pool of qualified lecturers with advanced degrees to teach adjunct in the MCJ program. A clear strength of the program is the MCJ faculty and their professional and educational expertise, however, having a limited number of adjuncts to teach a few elective courses on rotation in the MCJ program may help with staffing needs.

Recommendation 6: As part of recommendation 3 the program may want to consider cross listing or establishing curricular partnerships for courses in related disciplines. For example, *MCJ 6000 Statistics* or *MCJ 6110: Research Methods* may be able to be taught by someone in Sociology or Psychology. A social science field will be able to explain key concepts in a similar and related manner and pulling in MCJ students may be advantageous to another program (especially if their enrollment is not growing as quickly as MCJ). Cross listing the course could allow for rotation between departments that could aid both programs. While this would not work for many criminal justice topics, it may be appropriate for methods and statistics.

Additional Recommendations

Additional Recommendations are separated from the previous "Recommendations for Change" section because they required direct support from WSU. While the recommendations in the section above need to begin in criminal justice with the MCJ faculty.

Additional Recommendation 1: While faculty expressed appreciation in getting a choice in teaching summer or fall/spring semester overloads, the external review team does not see overloads as a primary mechanism for staffing the MCJ program as a sustainable model. The MCJ program faculty need to have more conversations about staffing in the graduate degree.

Additionally, the external reviewers recommend criminal justice and MCJ program leaders advocate for additional resources (e.g. faculty lines) for the program. The upward growth trend in individuals seeking graduate education is likely to continue and if WSU wants the MCJ program to be able to engage in *manageable* growth additional resources are needed. Should criminal justice receive an additional faculty line, considerations around the faculty member teaching 1-2 courses onload in the MCJ program in the job description may be part of the staffing solution.

Additional Recommendation #2: The faculty and program director for the MCJ program need alumni data. The university should help programs collect data to track where alumni are working and if their degree helped them obtain or advance within the criminal justice or related field. Information on alumni going on to doctoral programs or law schools would be helpful in making decisions around curriculum, marketing, and recruitment for the MCJ program.

Summary

The site reviewers would like to thank the WSU assessment team and the Master of Criminal Justice program for the opportunity to learn about and assess their program. This was an extremely valuable experience that has resulted in an increased learning of the dedicated faculty and staff that give students the opportunity to enrich their lives in graduate education within the program. We found a collaborative group of faculty that works hard to meet student needs, university support personal and administrative leaders that are very supportive, and students that were happily engaged in the program. We hope that this review will help be a positive resource to continue to improve the program.