

Political Science Program Review

Site visit and evaluation report

18 March 2022

Overview

The Political Science program at Weber State continues to be distinguished by its diverse curriculum and an engaged and collegial faculty who make important contributions to the discipline, community, and campus. Since its last review the department has settled into a new building, retired a respected faculty member, hired a junior colleague, and enjoys a reconfigured relationship with the Olene S. Walker Institute of Politics and Public Service. New campus and classroom routines are emerging as academic life with COVID settles into a new phase. Transitions in program leadership and reorganization of well-established routines that affect all program faculty and students represent key opportunities and challenges ahead for Political Science.

Program strengths

Faculty are happy, productive, and dedicated to their classes and their professional development. The faculty of six continue to develop the curriculum and offer high impact practices in the classroom. They also direct a variety of clubs and extracurricular options for students and collaborate with colleagues around the campus. Faculty reported taking advantage of training opportunities on campus and crediting their colleagues in sharing expertise in the scramble to adjust their teaching to meet COVID protocols. Many also reported unforeseen substantive and curricular benefits to the changes in practice necessitated by Zoom. The faculty attend a variety of professional meetings. By taking full advantage of College and Campus level funding opportunities, they leverage their modest travel budget to maximize their connections to colleagues and shared research communities. The program enjoys support and recognition from the new Dean for their stability, reliable hard work, and dedication to students.

The steady hand of the Chair's leadership, with 12 years of service in that role, is integral to overall program stability and many program routines. Each faculty member credited the chair as key to their quality of work life. Faculty reported being assisted in developing priorities, supported when setting limits, and just overall "protected". Both students and faculty identified his advising work as key elements of their satisfaction with the program. He visits each class to encourage recruitment and advising, monitors student progress, and keeps track of graduation readiness. Only one student we spoke with reported navigating through much of the program with the assistance of a general campus advisor and CATTRACKs, but said once she finally met with the chair, she understood why her fellow students so value his direction.

The Political Science program offers a rich array of courses. As one student noted in our conversations, it was this diversity of courses in the Political Science program that led her to choose Weber from out of state. The most recent hire, a new Comparativist, updated that

subfield's curriculum to reflect her interests and changes in the discipline. Each faculty member contributes to the core Introductory curriculum and adds coursework that are staples in a Political Science education in the lower division area electives. Each has the freedom to develop interesting, advanced offerings. The program learning objectives highlight this curricular diversity and the expansive understanding of the discipline it provides students. The major requirements were reorganized shortly before the last program review; they appear to effectively foster student appreciation of the scope and depth of the discipline. The students we spoke with confirmed this by reporting that they had taken courses they would not have chosen without these breadth requirements and were glad they did.

In the last evaluation, a change in the leadership of The Olene S. Walker Institute was imminent. The recommendation then was that priority in the search for a new Director be given to a Political Scientist. Instead, a reconfiguration of the Institute added a position of Academic Director; a member of the Political Science faculty was appointed to the new role. The connection between the two is a strength of the program and clearly serves students. It also facilitates program and campus connections to the community. However, it comes at a cost of added administrative responsibilities to program faculty and a regular debt of course offerings due to faculty time being reassigned.

Students are satisfied and well served by the strengths noted above. They all reported they enjoyed classes and are challenged in the classroom. They were happy to have returned to campus and most we talked to preferred in-person instruction for classes in their major. However, like the faculty, they noted that some features of the zoom classroom – breakout rooms, in particular – were surprisingly successful. Students praised the engagement opportunities available to them. As we went around the table, they participated in a range of program supported clubs (e.g. Moot Court, Ethics Bowl, Model UN) and one had completed an internship in DC. The group we talked with mirrored the student trajectory noted in the self-study, with a high percentage planning to pursue professional and graduate education after commencement.

Program Challenges and Opportunities

The leadership change associated with Professor Kuehl's sabbatical and return to the faculty is likely to be disruptive, given the stability the chair has fostered among the faculty. Regardless of the new configuration of the program's leadership, this juncture will be an opportunity to reassess program priorities, standard operating procedures, and the division of labor. On the table should be a redistribution of the current chair's repertoire of program routines – from advising to student outreach and faculty and adjunct reviews. Fresh attention to how these things are done and who does them may yield real gains when all program faculty participate.

A recent Chronicle of Higher Education article urged “a pause” before we in higher ed pivot after the “two years of disruption” attributed to COVID: a pause for reflection and re-envisioning our teaching and learning, our classroom practices and departmental goals and routines. We recommend the Political Science program make use of this opportunity, their

leadership change and post-COVID moment, to “pause together” and establish new patterns of communal decision-making. We believe that meeting regularly as a faculty will establish a stronger program community. In addition to unresolved issues like “Who will do advising?” and “Who will observe our adjunct instructors?” the faculty can reflect on how to grow enrollment, re-engage students, and devise procedures to ensure that their priorities are represented to the Dean by the new program leadership. Our hope is that changing up processes like advising and teaching observations will deliver collateral insights and innovations.

Another beneficiary of a pause could come in a renewed reflection upon program curriculum. As we noted earlier, the breadth of the Political Science coursework at Weber is truly remarkable. The major requirements provide students flexibility in chartering their course through the major, but they may also create vulnerabilities. Students generally agreed that some popular courses didn’t come around during their time taking upper division courses. We wondered if some course offerings were too highly specialized; or, perhaps they may be taught without as much consideration of the rest of the program offerings as they could be. From an outside perspective, faculty seemed unusually siloed in both their scholarship and teaching designs. While the self-study includes useful evidence of faculty reflection on syllabi and teaching, these individual ruminations are not equivalent to a shared conversation on program assessment. Clearly, faculty respect one another and their work; but there is rarely evidence of collaboration. Perhaps this is the price of the amount of faculty independence we sensed.

A generous endowment from their retired colleague, Professor T.R. Reddy, will provide the program with a much-needed annual infusion of money for faculty development. We hope this can ease the scramble for resources most faculty reported as their norm. The support will target travel and release time. Internal processes will need to be developed to allocate how to share the bounty; this conversation represents another community building opportunity among program faculty.

Recommendations

We give priority and restate the recommendation in the last review for full faculty attention to assessment. Changes in leadership and the promise of a period of post-COVID recovery suggest that **now** is an ideal moment to make intentional decisions about priorities, develop targets, and gather meaningful data, as determined by the program faculty. We believe attention should be focused on both curriculum and the student experience. New coursework in Comparative, the introduction of new teaching modalities and their attendant pedagogy impacts make this a particularly good moment to engage in a comprehensive assessment of the curriculum *vis a vis* program learning outcomes. It is likely that academic programs are taking stock campus wide. Campus colleagues, institutional research offices, and our professional associations can assist with emerging metrics and best practices.

The leadership change scheduled later this year should coincide with steps to decentralize program responsibilities. Tasks that were previously the purview of the chair might now be shouldered by committees of the program faculty. We are keenly aware that this is asking an

already fully engaged faculty to do more. However, we believe the benefits of this service, focused on your program and students at this critical juncture, will result in great dividends. Given his comprehensive knowledge of the tasks and his colleagues, the outgoing Chair will likely have considerable insight into how to organize this new distribution.

We strongly recommend instituting regular faculty meetings. These should begin as soon as possible to facilitate an orderly transition, establish priorities for the coming year and facilitate communication. There are many routines likely to change hands that might benefit from fresh consideration by the full faculty together in the same room. Faculty in the same space, swap stories and share challenges and learn important pieces of information about students, colleagues, and campus politics and policies. They gain unexpected benefits to their pedagogy and the community grows ever-important social capital and reciprocity norm.

Students who first entered Weber during the last two years have had a very different higher ed journey than those your program will graduate this May. As faculty come together more regularly to re-envision, give careful attention to how the student experience has changed and re-tune priorities and plans accordingly. We recommend capturing as much information as possible from this graduating class to understand this changing experience more fully. This could benefit initiatives designed to increase majors and minors, serve lower performing students, better inform students about career paths and post-graduate study, and maintain better connections with graduates—each of which merit sustained attention. We believe there could be additional side-benefits as well that can't be predicted but could well be reported in a Program Review in the future.

Conclusion

The Political Science program at Weber has a remarkable, dedicated faculty. They are a diverse and expert collective of scholars who are passionate about their work in and out of the classroom. Their contributions to the campus in academic and administrative service are varied and impressive. As we note more than once above, it is a big ask to recommend this group of scholars do more. However, the next year will bring significant transitions to the program and represent a promising opportunity. We are confident that if the Political Science program embraces this occasion as it has the challenges it has faced in the last few years, they will emerge a stronger, more focused faculty community, benefitting students and community into the future.

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