Political Science Department Academic Program Review
External Team Report

Introduction

The external review team made its on-site visit from Sunday, April 14 through Tuesday April 16, 2013. The team was composed of the following members.

Dr. Pamela Camerra-Rowe, Kenyon College
Dr. David J. Edwards, University of Tennessee-Chattanooga
Dr. Christopher Fox, James Madison University
Mr. Sean Lowry, Congressional Research Service
Dr. L. Marvin Overby, University of Missouri
Ms. Bridgette Walsh, Department of Homeland Security

Areas of Strength

The team was impressed with JMU’s Political Science Department. It has a devoted faculty dedicated to providing students with a broad education. The department offers a wide array of courses in all of the discipline’s subfields and important internship opportunities. The undergraduate International Affairs (INTA) curriculum is particularly noteworthy because of its interdisciplinary nature and rigor. The department also contributes significantly to the university’s general education curriculum.

The department’s faculty is young, diverse, collegial, energetic, and clearly committed to teaching, advising, service, and community outreach, as evidenced by several college and university awards, teaching evaluations, and accolades from students and from faculty across the university. The faculty has also increased its level of scholarly activity since the last review, which is commendable at a teaching university.
In addition, the department has been a good steward of its resources, serving many students, connecting with the community in many ways, and strengthening and deepening its relationships with alumni.

**Areas of Challenge**

We have identified several causes for concern in the department. While not all of these can properly be labeled “weaknesses,” in our view they represent areas that might profit from faculty, staff, and administrative consideration. We subdivide this discussion into two sections: general (*i.e.*, non-curricular) and resource and curricular matters.

**General Issues**

We are in unanimous agreement with the department’s self-study that the on-going salary freeze at the university represents the greatest threat to the department and its programs. While we understand that this issue requires remedies that come from beyond the department’s jurisdiction, we would add our voices to the chorus of those testifying to the enervating effects of such fiscal strains. Salary compression in the department is severe by disciplinary standards and the inversions are marked. We heard credible claims of eroding morale and fears of attrition from virtually every faculty member who met with us. While solutions to the systemic salary issue may remain elusive for the foreseeable future, creative measures to address inversion and compression (and, more generally, to shore up faculty morale) would seem to be a matter of highest priority.

We are also in unanimous agreement with the self-study that classroom space issues represent a significant challenge to the department. JMU’s recent construction programs have emphasized priorities other than conventional classroom space. In an era of
expanding enrollments, this has predictably led to significant shortages, especially in large (150+ person) and medium (40-75 person) sized classrooms. In turn, this has pinched the department’s offerings by limiting its ability to capitalize on economies of scale in certain classes.

Third, despite significant growth in the department’s graduate programs (particularly the MPA program, which has tripled in student size over the past seven years), university support for graduate assistantships has remained static at five. This number represents a significant under-investment in the current program. This is a problem most importantly because it limits graduate student support to faculty in research and teaching, and because it hampers the program’s recruitment efforts.

Finally, although sometimes overlooked in academic program reviews, staff support is a juncture where student, faculty, and administrative demands all meet. With its expanded faculty, multiple programs, and large numbers of majors and minors, the department’s staff appears over-stretched, under-compensated (with similar salary compression concerns to those seen among the faculty), and poorly stationed (in a large, open-office format that makes concentration difficult). A halving of work-study support in recent years has exacerbated these problems.

**Resource and Curricular Issues**

We are apprehensive that in an environment of variably constrained resources, the department is trying to do too much, perhaps to the detriment of its core missions. We note five concerns in particular.
1. The department seems to be at the limit of what it can do with its resources, it has ambitions to do more, and it is likely that enrollments will increase as the university continues to grow. This presents obvious issues of **insufficient resources**.

2. The department may be trying to support **too many degree programs**. With its five programs, the department outstrips the number found in any of the departments represented by the faculty members on the external team (i.e., Computer Science at JMU supports three programs; the Departments of Political Science at the University of Missouri, the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga, and Kenyon College support three, two, and one respectively). Program administration is never costless, either in terms of explicit resources or foregone opportunities.

3. Some of these issues may be seen in the difficulties that the department has experienced in developing and offering **capstone courses** across three different undergraduate majors. Such courses are, by nature, resource intensive, and they tend to restrict other offerings that would be available to larger classes of students. Staffing capstones across three different majors seems to exacerbate these problems.

4. Support for a large (and growing) INTA major seems to divert some faculty resources away from the core political science major. One implication that particularly concerned some members of the team is that **political science (POSC) majors are not required to take core courses in all disciplinary subfields**, presumably due to issues staffing the requisite classes in comparative politics and international relations.

5. Interviews with students (and some faculty) indicated a concern with **content overlap in certain courses** (we heard of instances, in particular, in budgeting and finance within public administration and in the theory subfield in political science). In a
resource-strained environment and in a department stretched to near capacity, such overlaps suggest a need for better curriculum coordination.

**Recommendations**

**University/College-Wide Level Recommendations**

1. *Address Salary Compression and Inversion*—The team cannot emphasize strongly enough the need for the university to address the inversion and compression that has occurred in faculty salaries as a result of salary freezes in place since 2007.

2. *Provide Sufficient Mid-size and Large Classrooms*—With increasing enrollments, the department will need to increase the size of some of its courses; otherwise, it will have to offer two or more sections of a course. The university needs several 100-200 student lecture halls and 40-75 student classrooms.

3. *Provide More Work-Study Students for the Department*—More work-study students could relieve some of the burden on the department’s two administrative assistants. This would allow the administrative assistants to spend more time on scheduling, hiring and other important departmental administrative tasks.

4. *Better Market the European Union M.A. Program*—One of the biggest challenges for the M.A. Program in European Union Policy Studies is attracting sufficient students. We recommend that the university expand the marketing of this program and its unique features to both JMU and non-JMU students. We suggest that the university send out brochures or emails to the chairs of undergraduate institutions and the listserves of professional organizations such as the European Union Studies Association.
5. Make Clear to Faculty the Priorities of the University—JMU’s administration seems to provide mixed messages to the faculty regarding the importance of teaching and scholarship. Several administrators said that the university is not going to move into the ranks of a major research university, yet faculty suggested that research expectations have increased. The administration should make clear that undergraduate teaching excellence remains the primary focus of the university. It should consider research broadly and encourage research that informs teaching.

Department Recommendations

The team is very impressed with the department and as such does not recommend major changes to the program. Instead, we outline various options that the department may consider to address enrollment pressures and the changing interests and needs of students in a more global and competitive environment.

1. Take Steps to Decrease Enrollment Pressures and Free-Up Resources—The possible reasons for the enrollment pressures are multifaceted: the department’s decision to move to a 3-2 load; the large increase in INTA majors and POSC minors; and the service commitments of the faculty. We recommend that the department discuss various ways of addressing this problem including:

   • Restrict or eliminate minors in the department.

   • Restrict the number of majors through a GPA and/or prerequisite requirement.

The team was particularly supportive of introducing an economics prerequisite for the major since students can take macroeconomics as a general education course.
• *Merge degree programs and avoid new degree programs.* Most colleges and universities offer degrees in POSC and occasionally also international relations at the undergraduate level. Having five degree programs increases administrative costs, creates course duplication, and contributes to the inability of POSC majors to enroll in some courses. Given the current enrollment constraints, particularly in international relations and comparative courses, we suggest considering merging some programs. We also recommend against adding new degree programs in Humanitarian Affairs and in Diplomacy, which would only further stretch the resources of the international relations and comparative faculty. Instead, we suggest adding interdisciplinary concentrations in Humanitarian Affairs, Diplomacy, or Public Policy rather than separate majors. This could also be done for the INTA program. Students could major in political science with a concentration in an interdisciplinary subject of their choice.

2. *Review the Curriculum*—We suggest the department discuss some of the following options during its upcoming curricular review:

• *Revisit the goals and purpose of the capstone seminar and discuss whether this is the best means of servicing all majors.* It may be more fruitful to require research papers in upper level classes as opposed to a capstone requirement. Alternatively, the department could offer a capstone research seminar to some students and allow others to take two upper level courses or have an internship. The department might also consider lifting the major specifications for each seminar to allow the students more liberty in choosing their capstone focus and better align with their future career goals.
• **Strengthen the POSC major by requiring students to take courses in all four subfields:** political theory, American politics, international relations and comparative politics. For example, the department could require students to take one introductory course in each subfield, the research methods course, one upper level course in American politics, one upper level course in comparative politics OR international relations, and then the choice of a second upper level course in one of the four subfields based on the student’s interests.

• **Combine some courses and better sequence courses.** For example, in the M.P.A. program, we suggest merging the budgeting and finance courses or allowing one to serve as an elective. The department might also want to consider adding more prerequisites to ensure a progressive curriculum and to ensure that students have learned foundational concepts and skills before registering for upper-level courses.

• **Explore on-line teaching through experiments in summer courses and the Roanoke program.** Students, particularly at the graduate level, are increasingly willing to pay a premium for the convenience of on-line learning. Offering such courses may be a way for the department to increase its income levels and allow students to continue their education while pursuing internships and job opportunities in the summer.

3. **Other Suggestions**

• **Consider a program of internal sabbaticals.** Teaching faculty need time to recharge their batteries and to pursue intellectual pursuits. A one-semester sabbatical every six or seven years might be more useful than a 3-2 load for some
faculty members. The department should consider either providing this as an alternative to a 3-2 load or modifying the 3-2 load to a 3-3 load to accommodate semester leaves.

- **Explore the possibility of creating a permanent JMU Washington Center.** We believe that such a center would have numerous advantages. It would increase the visibility of the university, provide a venue for alumni events, and respond to the increasing demand for the Washington semester. It would also contribute to fundraising and co-curricular efforts in the department. We encourage the department to explore the financial viability of this project and partner with other programs and offices across the campus to make this viable.

- **Consider hiring a second, dedicated undergraduate advisor for the large numbers of majors.** This would relieve the administrative staff of advising and would allow faculty to focus on advising related to their specific courses. This second advisor could also provide professional and career advice. Students were eager to gain some additional guidance on the kinds of courses to take during their four years to best prepare them for various professions.

- **No recommendation regarding the establishment of a separate College of Public and International Affairs within the university.** Some members of the team were persuaded that a separate college would be a good idea because it would increase the coherence, visibility, and fundraising ability of the POSC, Justice Studies, INTA and MPA programs. At the same time, other members raised concerns over the cost and additional administrative layer of a separate college, as well as the further fracturing of the social sciences and humanities.
• Focus more on qualitative assessment through senior exit interviews and senior and alumni surveys, which often produce much better and more specific ideas for reform than a pre-test/post-test model.

• Increase the number of graduate assistants for the MPA program. We believe this is justified given the increase in enrollments. The team did not agree that graduate assistants were necessarily appropriate for the EU program since it is a one-year professional program that is housed abroad. However, the team recommends exploring whether the EU program could roll the cost of graduate assistants into its tuition to offer a few assistantships.

• Consider ways of increasing co-curricular activities and professional development opportunities for students by inviting more alumni to campus to speak and/or by setting up externship possibilities where students can shadow alumni for a week during semester breaks.

The members of the external review team thank the department and administration for welcoming us to the university. We enjoyed our visit very much. Our conversations with faculty and staff were wide-ranging and fruitful and the students’ enthusiasm for the department was evident. We learned a lot that will benefit our own thinking about curricular and institutional issues. We hope this review will be useful to the department and the university.