

Social Thought and Political Economy

An interdisciplinary degree program in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences offering the B.A. in Social Thought and Political Economy.

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

Philip Green, chair (The New School)
Barbara Harlow (University of Texas, Austin)
Adolph Reed (University of Pennsylvania)

■ Main Issues

The visiting team observed that the Social Thought and Political Economy (STPEC) program is a “thirty-year-old ‘experiment’ that has long passed the experimental stage, and [has] a track record of tangible accomplishment, with a national reputation that ... attracts students from around the country.” The team found program students and alumni to be “articulate, informed, and strikingly reflective,” and was impressed that more than half of the program’s students are enrolled in the honors program. The “community-building quality” of the program was seen as a special strength. With respect to the students, the team’s “only question has to do with its notable lack of diversity — a concern expressed also by the Director and the majors.”

Because it is a “major without a discipline, the question obviously has to be raised whether it has enough structure to it.” While the team found the curriculum to be “eclectic” and “very demanding,” its reliance on a wide range of courses from across the Five Colleges “might also be considered a potential weakness, that is, a decenteredness and sometime lack of focus that may occasionally make for difficulty in coordinating an individual student’s progress toward a degree.” The team observed that the students themselves have been discussing this issue, and that it should be addressed by the program. Notwithstanding that concern, the team was “very impressed by the curriculum’s strengths, most notably the core curriculum — the junior and senior seminars; the internship program with its mandatory community service component; and the student-taught colloquia.” In addition, given that the current director is expected to retire within the next few years, a replacement is “unlikely to have the Five College faculty contacts that she has nurtured and developed over many years. The major challenge of the future will therefore be to find a director who can sustain and extend these Five College ties.”

To date, however, faculty commitment and contributions have been good, and the program “seems very definitely to be meeting the standards of both substantive content and pedagogical principles.” The team noted the “intelligent use” that is made of non-faculty instructors from the area, and found that “the student-taught colloquia also seem for the most part to be well-designed.” Support staffing was highlighted as an

important issue, with the single staff member seen as “grossly overworked and undervalued.”

The team made several specific recommendations:

- Overall, “STPEC’s major need, very clearly, is that a transition process be initiated as soon as possible, well before the retirement of Professor Lennox, in order to enhance the program’s continuity, retain historical memory, and manage necessary change.”
- Staffing should be increased to a “satisfactory” level, which would include a half-time director, a full-time associate director, a professional advisor, and an administrative assistant, supplemented (as is now the case) with student employees.
- Where appropriate, new faculty offers should include a six-year commitment of one-eighth time to STPEC, so as to make faculty participation in the program more predictable.
- The university should provide necessary technical support for information technology.

■ **Results of the Review**

The Dean noted the team’s “extremely positive” views of the program. She expressed agreement with the need for succession planning for the current director, and with the need for STPEC to “develop a more robust and diverse core group of faculty who are as committed its current and future structure as the Director.” The Dean reported that she is working closely with the director on this issue. The Dean agreed that the team’s administrative staffing recommendations would be “ideal,” and reported on discussions to regularize allocation of TA funds in a way that might allow some of these funds to be used for staff support positions. Finally, the Dean agreed with the need for better technical support, both in STPEC and across the College, and stated her goal of working toward that end.