

Political Science

A department in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences offering the B.A., M.A., and Ph.D..

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

Rogers M. Smith, chair (Yale University)
Amrita Basu (Amherst College)
Matthew Holden, Jr. (University of Virginia)
Nancy S. Love (Pennsylvania State University)

■ Executive Summary

The visiting team found a department with substantial strengths but also several important choices to make. Moreover, the team recognized that the Department approaches these choices in a difficult environment: “the university’s financial circumstances and fluctuating top-level leadership pose serious problems for the department that threaten to foster a paralyzing ‘siege mentality’ within it.” Nonetheless, the team found that “with strong administrative leadership and creative use of existing resources” the Department has an opportunity to maintain and enhance its strength.

The Department’s current strengths include “longstanding scholarly visibility in public policy and administration, public law, political theory, Latin American politics, and international relations”; its hosting of the journal *Polity*; collaborations with a number of University and Five College partners; a productive working relationship with the Dean; and a commitment to quality in undergraduate instruction (reflected recently in a re-shaping of the undergraduate curriculum). The team also noted an effort to begin restructuring the graduate program. And, despite “quite substantial challenges,” the team found that “this is not ... a department whose members are profoundly divided, deeply demoralized, or destructively alienated, despite the real resource problems they face.”

The “seminal problem” facing the Department involves anxiety and some competition among the sub-fields regarding future faculty replacements, and a corresponding tendency toward “reproducing old structures” when thinking about future hiring. In the team’s view, the Department’s faculty are weighted more heavily toward American politics, and away from comparative politics, than would be expected or desirable. The team therefore called on the Department to establish a five-year hiring plan that would directly address the question of balance and provide a clear understanding of future expectations.

In terms of curricula, the team expressed the view that, despite recent attention and improvement, more could still be done to strengthen the undergraduate program. In particular, the team pointed to internships and advising as opportunities for further improvement. The graduate program was the object of several concerns. First, the team noted the “surprisingly large” size of the graduate program, and wondered whether this might be driven in part by a perceived need for graduate teaching assistants. Second, the team observed a lack of consistency across sub-fields in terms of comprehensive exam expectations, and a too little interaction across sub-fields in terms of committee membership and research emphases.

Observing that “no consequence of the department’s current circumstances is more serious than their impact on junior faculty,” the team was concerned to discover uncertainty over

tenure and promotion expectations with respect to both the Department and the University as a whole. Moreover, some junior faculty reported “a very uneven pattern of receiving intellectual and collegial support and clear communications from senior faculty.”

Noting the University’s ongoing financial limitations, the team expressed concern over “a certain lack of entrepreneurial energy.” In particular, the team encouraged greater interaction with the Center for Public Policy and Administration and other units with shared interests, and more aggressive efforts to secure external research funding and alumni support.

Finally, the team found that resolution of some of these concerns is made more difficult by “lack of an effective mechanism for coordinating decision making,” especially in terms of communicating clear expectations for tenure and promotion.

With these findings in mind, the team offered a number of recommendations: develop a “conscious strategy for using ... new hires,” perhaps emphasizing themes rather than sub-fields; “discuss, determine, and clarify [the] criteria for promotion”; find some means of achieving better coordination among its committees; promote cross-cutting activities; revisit the presumption that undergraduate enrollments should return to previous levels, and focus on additional ways of strengthening the undergraduate experience; appraise the graduate program “thoroughly and honestly,” and consider introducing a statistics requirement and clearer and more consistent curricular requirements; provide greater support to faculty seeking grants; and encourage “socially valuable” outreach activities — especially in conjunction with other campus units — “that can win more public and legislative support in a generally adverse political climate.” An overarching recommendation was to “increase collaboration in all regards between the political science department and other university departments and programs.”

Student Outcomes Assessment. The Department did not detail, and the visiting team did not discuss, specific learning outcomes or assessment strategies. Recent work by the Department in reviewing the undergraduate curriculum, however, laid a strong foundation for a focus on outcomes, and it is expected that outcomes assessment will be an important part of the ongoing discussion of the undergraduate program.

Action Plan. The Department, with the support of the Dean, developed an initial action plan in response to the team’s findings and recommendations. A more detailed response will be discussed at an all-day retreat for that purpose in October.

- In terms of the relationships among sub-fields, the Budget and Planning Committee was charged to develop, in advance of the retreat, “a framework for discussion of team teaching, cross-listing courses” and related matters. An ad hoc committee will begin the discussion of “the organization of knowledge within the Department at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.”
- A thorough assessment of the graduate program, already planned, will occur during the 2001-02 academic year. The assessment will address all issues raised by the team.
- The recent changes to the undergraduate program will be revisited in light of the team’s findings.
- The Department will review and reconsider its personnel policies, especially those regarding expectations for merit, promotion and tenure.
- A colloquium series on globalization, co-sponsored with the Center for Public Policy and Administration, has been planned for 2001-02, and the Department will plan further collaborative activities.