

Political Science

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

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

James Morone, chair (Brown University)
Theodore Hopf (The Ohio State University)
Anne Norton (University of Pennsylvania)
Lisa Wedeen (University of Chicago)

■ Main Issues

The team's overall assessment of the department was enthusiastically positive, in sharp contrast with the previous AQAD review when, in the words of the current team, the department "teetered on the brink of receivership" and, in the words of the earlier team, demonstrated a "paralyzing siege mentality." The current team observed that the department needed five things: "leadership, cooperation, a decision making process, a shared intellectual life, and a hiring plan. A tall order — but, quite remarkably, that is precisely what the political science department managed to find," a process that amounted to "rebooting an entire department."

The key element was development of a consensus plan to rethink the traditional approach to political science, replacing longstanding disciplinary subdivisions with the cross-cutting themes of global forces, governance and institutions, and citizen participation and democracy:

The political science department is doing something quite extraordinary. They have set out to reconfigure — and enliven — the study of politics and political science. ... They've remade the traditional disciplinary subfields into more lively, flexible, cross-cutting areas of inquiry, and they've organized their intellectual community around those areas.

What is more impressive than what they're doing is how they're doing it. The department created a process, got broad buy-in from most of the faculty, and developed a decision making model that reflects academics at its best: long, thoughtful deliberation leading to consensus. And with the plan in place, most of the members of the department have become engaged — even excited — in a common intellectual project that appears to spill into their lectures, seminars, and collective life.

Of course the department is still in the early stages of its effort and ... inevitable challenges lie ahead. But the visiting committee is unanimous in believing that the political science department has started something very special. It has the potential to gain national visibility. It may even have an impact on how the political science discipline views itself.

The team emphasized the importance of the department's plan to take a new approach to political science that was able to drive a two-year hiring plan through which thirteen tenure track faculty and two lecturers came into the department. That hiring, combined with a high level of participation and consensus among existing faculty, resulted in an "*esprit de corps*," and "collaboration has led to more collaboration."

The team found that the "UMass plan" for cross-cutting approaches that draw from the traditional specialties in the field comes at a time when "political science is a discipline that is searching for its direction." Intra-disciplinary conflict over research methods and intellectual focus "has left many political scientists looking for an alternate model," and the UMass approach "feels to the members of the committee like one answer to the disciplinary quest for a fresh approach."

With this strong endorsement, the team identified several challenges facing the department:

- **Branding.** In the view of the team, "already the UMass experiment is becoming known, and appreciated in relatively unexpected corners of the discipline. In fact, we believe that the single most important thing the department can do now is to create a self-conscious *brand*. ... We believe department members ought to spend some time framing their message to the discipline and thinking of ways to publicize the message. ... The resulting attention will help raise the department's visibility, its rankings, and its graduate program."
- **The graduate program.** The team found that "the graduate program poses the department's largest challenge." While the new approach works well in terms of faculty hiring and undergraduate education, "the initiative fits uneasily with the graduate program. ... Graduate students are being trained, inevitably, to go into more traditional departments. All the excitement of rethinking political science poses a tension for graduate students trying to learn the field. Of course, this can be an opportunity if grad students become, as it were, bi-lingual: understanding both the traditional field and the U Mass innovation. But that balance has to be thought through and struck carefully." In addition, the team found that graduate stipends "are simply not competitive with the major universities."
- **The ongoing process.** The collaborative and consensus-driven approach that led to the initiative represents "an excellent process for making decisions," but not all members of the department are fully engaged." To keep moving forward the department must "tend the process."
- **Disciplinary coverage.** A cross-disciplinary approach does not obviate the need for strength in the traditional disciplines. "The department is well aware of the missing pieces of its searches. It only has 3 full time members in the International Relations Subfield. This would be far too few, even in a department half this size. Here is a place where the new approach has to be balanced with traditional sub fields. In an increasingly global environment, the department needs to hire in this subfield and think through its place in the new curriculum."

■ **Response to the Review**

The Department concurred with the team's findings, and reported that it is already engaged in considering ways of "branding" and communicating its new approach. In response to concerns about the graduate program, the Department has begun to address the question of "balance" "through the development of a new comprehensive examination that crosses subdisciplines but perhaps most emphatically through the preservation of the current subdisciplinary structure." Hiring in International Relations was identified as an "essential element." The Dean also

expressed agreement with the team's findings and reported hiring at least one faculty member in International Relations "is the highest priority for the College" when the budget permits. He also expressed strong support for the "branding" initiative, steps to improve the graduate and undergraduate programs, and efforts to encourage the department's momentum.

■ **Student Outcomes Assessment**

The department has defined student learning outcomes in the following areas:

- Being reflective and engaged citizens.
- Problem-solving in the midst of competing values.
- Critical reflection and working with plural perspectives.
- Making clear, sound and compelling arguments based on appropriate evidence in writing and orally.

The department uses a number of direct and indirect assessment tools:

- The Undergraduate Studies Committee recently reviewed course syllabi, and from their findings developed a clarified system of course organization and numbering.
- In Fall 2009, the Undergraduate Studies Committee is studying course evaluation scores and student learning outcomes in classes, presenting findings to faculty, and encouraging faculty to be more explicit in identifying course goals and objectives on their syllabi.
- The department also makes use of institutional instructional benchmarking data (course evaluations, graduating senior exit surveys, departmental NSSE results). Improvements resulting from these assessments include improvements to advising, revision of courses at all levels (reflective the Department's thematic initiative), and renewed commitment to maintaining small classes in the upper division.