

# EXTERNAL REVIEW OF THE POLITICAL SCIENCE PROGRAM AT FITCHBURG STATE UNIVERSITY

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## INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM'S SERVICE TO MISSION AND VISION

Fitchburg State University's Political Science (POLS) program is, as the program's self-study clearly demonstrates, a highly efficient and productive contributor to the institution's [mission](#). Evidence presented in the self-study and gathered during my May 13th visit strongly validates the program's commitment "to excellence in teaching and learning"; to a "blend of liberal arts" and pre-professional preparation; to fostering "civic and global responsibility"; to "economic [and] environmental . . . needs" of the local region; and to instilling "dedication to public service" in students.

An overview of programmatic service to the FSU [mission and vision](#) of higher education will be followed by a more detailed examination of execution by the POLS program. This list contains a subset of examples elaborated on in the review. It permits me to highlight, immediately, the admirable work of POLS at Fitchburg State:

- Commitment "to excellence in teaching and learning" manifests itself most clearly in the completion and implementation of the program's learning-outcomes assessment system, which represents "innovative uses of technology . . . across . . . campus to maximize student learning." In addition, the faculty, collectively, are adept at employing the university's learning management system in their courses.
- The "blend of liberal arts" and pre-professional preparation are evident in POLS stewardship of The Washington Center and FSU's REDI (Regional Economic Development Institute); in the program's systematic measurement of skills acquired by majors during their time in the program; and in the students' embrace of applied and experiential learning.
- The program fosters "civic and global responsibility," "public service," and concern for local "economic [and] environmental needs" by way of "curricular innovation and program development." This is evident in the REDI enterprise as well as club and course engagement by students in Model UN and Moot Court. In my discussion with students, I learned of significant service-learning components in their internships.

I do not disagree that the program is at a "critical juncture" (as the self-study puts it) for a fifth full-time, tenure-track faculty member to deliver richer curriculum in U.S. national political institutions. However, the four full-time and two, regular part-time faculty have created a political science program that presently provides a vital service to Fitchburg State's mission and vision.

My visit combined with my review of the self-study established, for me, that an additional political scientist promises significant growth in the program and in productivity for the university. The benefits of boosting investment in POLS cover an expanse far greater than curricular enhancement.

Interviews with senior staff, the EHPS (Department of Economics, History and Political Science) chair, and the POLS faculty and students reinforced that the POLS faculty are extraordinarily productive yet spread thinly by their admirable, expansive service to non-POLS programs and curricula; their devotion to the academic and pre-

professional development of their own minors and minors; and their laborious completion and ongoing implementation of learning-outcomes assessment of majors. Significantly, there is a five-year upswing in demand for the POLS program as reflected in the dramatic increase in minors over that time period. A new hire is can be "critical" in turning them into majors through further development of the undergraduate program. With a new person on board for two years, the POLS faculty can thoroughly study the prospects of a Masters of Public Policy.

The priority of an expanded POLS faculty should go to: 1) expansion of undergraduate curriculum (as described in my review and in the self-study); 2) development of recognized assets in applied and experiential learning; and 3) enhancing their impressive, fruitful outcomes-assessment regimen. Without a new hire, numbers 2 and 3 are profitable areas to explore to a limited degree but these faculty are quite extended as it is with its current obligations, as indicated in the sections to follow.

#### BEYOND THE POLS MAJOR/MINOR

Currently, the program caters to the learning needs of numerous students beyond the POLS majors/minors. These areas of need and demand include the following: extensive commitment to the Liberal Arts and Sciences Curriculum (LA&S); regular administration of social science requirements/electives in Education and Criminal Justice; cumulative demand of interdisciplinary majors/minors (mostly minors, specified in the self-study); experiential and applied learning opportunities (credit and non-credit bearing) for POLS and non-POLS majors (e.g., Moot Court, Model UN, REDI). The POLS program will certainly be of generous service to the university's new Pre-Law Major.

The last three years have seen a dramatic increase in minors, additionally demonstrating the program's broad appeal beyond the major. The reduction in the LA&S requirement appears to have tapped into latent demand for the minor. Though I have no basis for intra-university comparison, Political Science appears to be exemplary at FSU for its conscientious marketing of its services, both curricular and co-curricular, to the general student body. At the very least, the program is striking in its practical service to the university's mission of well-rounded learning in the course of graduation and in preparing students for the workplace and graduate work in a variety of fields (in law, education, politics, government, and social-science related areas).

This sweeping, curricular reach of the faculty across the student body was repeatedly vouched for by the senior staff and EHPS chair during my interviews. However, a simple, mathematical calculation validates that notion as well. Over the past six years, POLS courses enroll about seven to eight times more students than seats that can be filled by POLS-majors/minors alone. For that time period, POLS courses have an average enrollment of 20, which is on par with the [FSU average](#). In addition, there is significant student-body participation in POLS-coordinated, teamwork and experiential efforts (again, e.g., Moot Court, Model UN, REDI). Since the POLS faculty do instruct so many non-majors, they may want to consider assessing learning outcomes that cut across major and non-major students. More on that subject in the following section.

#### PEDAGOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

The POLS program's current means of assessing political-scientific learning is impressive for its role in curricular development; in tracking the intellectual development of majors; and in understanding majors' degree of preparedness for work in graduate school, law school and political-science related fields (in government, teaching, non-profit and private sectors). Following a considerable learning curve, the POLS program is to be commended for fully incorporating Tk20 into its assessment regimen and habituating majors to collect their work through it. Such assessment tools will continue to yield valuable insights into student learning that will serve as a fount for pedagogical innovation.

Assessment-data analysis, rather than more intuitive reflection, is driving curricular reform in major requirements and course sequencing. It is also validating curricular changes already made to the program. The newer requirement of Political Systems in the Modern World (i.e., a comparative politics survey) has led to demonstrated, student gains in political science learning as indicated in the Tk20-generated measures. That Tk20 analysis also points to future directions in methodological instruction (on which I have thoughts later) and the sequencing of such instruction relative to Senior Seminar.

The POLS assessment regimen appears to be a model for other programs, particularly in using Senior Seminar to complete the Tk20 portfolios and provide a uniform point for evaluating progress made towards learning outcomes. My exchanges with the faculty, their department chair and the senior staff all reinforced the remarkable and exemplary advance the POLS program has made in curricular and pedagogical development.

From my conversation with them, I was struck by how adept the POLS faculty are at applying the university's learning management system to their instruction. My sense, though I am speculating, is that their pedagogical incorporation of such technology may have disposed them to make their notable advances in assessment. Regardless, I am extremely impressed with how conscientious the faculty are of the relationship between teaching and learning. A potential, new hire will enter a political science program where accountability for student learning and pedagogical innovation are established norms.

There are some suggestions that I want to offer on outcomes assessment. Before presenting them, I wish to express that none of them should be acted upon, in my opinion, though, without *the addition of a full-time political scientist*. Assessment, alone, is a pedagogical labor amounting to a part-time job for all faculty. I'll proceed with the suggestions.

First, the first three political science outcomes, i.e., "Theory," "Knowledge" and "Reasoning and Argumentation," have enough overlap and similarity to be condensed into one learning outcome with three bulleted attributes. That is purely my take. In essence, I identify two central, learning outcomes among the total attributes of the four current outcomes. One could be labelled "Political Science Theory" and the other, as it currently is labelled and attribute-listed, "Political Science Methodology." The latter should remain as is. Having not been part of the departmental proceedings and deliberations that led to these outcomes, I offer this suggestion as no more than food for thought.

Second, the POLS faculty may want to consider developing one or two non-disciplinary learning outcomes, drawing, for example, from the [AAC&U Liberal Education and America's Promise \(LEAP\) Essential Learning Outcomes](#). Each "essential" outcome already have adaptable rubrics designed to assess learning. Richard Freeland, Massachusetts Commissioner of Higher Education, has referred to LEAP outcomes as central to the state's Vision Project briefly outlined in ["Is College Worth it?"](#). An assessment regimen that integrates two disciplinary with one or two non-disciplinary outcomes could give the faculty a gauge of political science learning and broader, [liberal learning](#) happening in POLS courses.

Third, the POLS faculty might consider broadening the assessment regimen to include all learners (POLS majors and non-POLS majors) in POLS courses using a small, random sample of work drawn from enrolled students. While the POLS program absolutely must retain its major-focused assessment, it seems consistent with FSU's mission for faculty to instill in all POLS-enrolled students habits of mind ["essential for success in a global economy and for informed citizenship,"](#) especially since the program caters to so many non-majors. Whether POLS sticks with its original set of outcomes or changes it, either way, broadening the pool of learners assessed could be worthwhile for the insights that would yield.

Fourth, outcomes assessment can be performed on a broader range of student work. From my understanding, assessed, learning artifacts come (almost?) exclusively from student research papers. I suggest broadening the collection, via Tk20 (or similar applications), to artifacts generated from applied learning [whether teamwork problem-solving (e.g., from Moot Court, Model UN)], experiential learning (e.g., internships), and/or from a greater variety of POLS course work.

Again, the current assessment regimen is impressive on its own, already providing new directions for the faculty to take the POLS program. My recommendations are possible directions to consider, particularly if someone new comes on board.

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

### Classroom

The POLS majors I interviewed were grateful for the variety of courses they can take; for the creativity of work assigned by faculty; the personal, classroom interaction; and the devoted advising and mentoring they receive. This group is extremely bright, highly focused, ambitious, and well spoken. I find merit, alone, in this discriminating bunch speaking with such high regard of the POLS faculty while expressing such pride in the program. These conscientious students appeared to be very well-versed in the needs and interests of their fellow political science majors and minors and, in that respect, provided useful observations on the actual and potential draw of the program.

Political science students clearly converse extensively with each other on their experiences in the program's facets. One thing that rings through is their admiration for all the full-time and part-time faculty. As one noted, with the other three nodding in assent, "They are the best teachers and the nicest people." That is an important programmatic feature indicative of expectations to which colleagues hold each other.

Following my interview with senior staff and the department chair, my conversation with the students yielded sharp insights into the strengths of the POLS program and into directions for possible improvement. Again, though, I could not help but come back to the critical need and undoubted payoff of adding that fifth full-timer. This program is as efficiently run as it can be and, therefore, expectations on improvements should be appropriately modest.

The students have unanimously high praise for courses that call on the specializations of the faculty. They are classrooms highlights in the majors' tenure at FSU. They eagerly offered vivid detail on work that fascinated them and on the high expectations set by instructors. For instance, they recalled fondly a project to create and govern their own town while having to do a lot of "book learning," something I highlight because of this interest in simulation and application. Term papers, they noted, tapped into their interest in producing their own scholarly work. They relish the level of discussion and detailed exploration of subjects of daily classroom activity in the higher-level, more topical courses. My sense (from my visit, not just the student interviews) is that Political Science at FSU functions like an honors program in that the majors wear the program's reputation for academic rigor and engagement as a badge of honor.

They were enthusiastic at the mention of a full-fledged rotation of offerings in American institutions, featuring judicial politics, Congress, bureaucracy and presidency. My sense, from the visit, particularly with these students, is that these courses will draw into the major from the growing pool of POLS minors, the program's interdisciplinary minors, the Pre-Law Major, and FSU students, generally. These four students immediately connected that curricular prospect to their internship and Moot Court experiences.

## Applied Learning

Learning done through teamwork and problem-solving has made an indelible impression on the students (again, using the interview as an indicator). Their experiences in Model UN and Moot Court have instilled in them a great deal of knowledge of case law, international law and world politics. The course version of Moot Court appears to be more developed than that of Model UN. My sense was that longer, deeper preparation is done for the former, giving Moot Court students more knowledge to apply in competition. The credit-bearing version of Model UN, relative to Moot Court, is more of a “work in progress” (a phrase one of its students expressed), understandably, as it is in its trial run. This group was excited about the potential development of that course as it continues running sections in the future.

The students appear to relish their time spent in these applied learning settings. During my exchanges with the group, the impact of these experiences was palpable as they were discussing with me potential careers in law, politics, civil service and foreign service. Additionally, the appeal to the broader student body is there given the club participation outside the for-credit courses. Not only might there be strong demand for this type of course credit, but the incentives of grades will enrich the learning and raise the competition performance of the students. This type of programming and awards received in these competitions have internal and external market value. Continued development of, emphasis on, and expansion of these applied-learning opportunities present a promising, innovative direction for political-scientific education for minors, majors and the general student body. Plus, they obviously complement the proposed direction in American political institutions.

## Experiential Learning

By creating an internship coordinator position, one that can rotate annually among the POLS faculty, I see great potential in the area of experiential learning, particularly internships and volunteer work. Again, though, this is work that requires additional full-time faculty. An internship coordinator can be very useful for helping shepherd the program’s efforts in this area along lines suggested below. The four current faculty are spread too thinly to develop this kind of position and, therefore, to adequately consider these suggestions.

When I brought up the subject of internships, REDI (Regional Economic Development Initiative) did not come up in conversation. In the self-study, I found that to be a potentially productive means for experiential learning, but I was not clear on how many students, POLS or not, take advantage of the opportunity. Also, I was not clear on the kind of work performed in REDI internships but it appears to have promise for experiential learning. (I had a question on this subject but it was one of a few that went unasked through the day due to time constraints.)

A POLS internship coordinator might develop procedures to formally document some work performed in non-credit internships. Some of these students, for no course credit, have worked on election and issue campaigns; in state-legislative offices; and in other civil-service and non-profit roles. One holds an elected position on a town board for which he receives a small stipend. One does paid work in a law office. Whether volunteer or paid, these are opportunities for making non-credited experiential learning in POLS more systematic.

Formal documentation, even merely recording workplaces and employers, can help the POLS program add to its “database” on internships. That database can serve various functions: 1) help the POLS program develop its own internship/employment network; 2) provide material for assessment and, in the senior seminar, for career reflection; 3) assist students in detailing, in resumes and on interviews, prior work experience; and 4) provide examples for future majors.

The POLS program might consider an internship requirement equal to one course. Fall or spring credit can be awarded for work performed during fall, spring or even during the summer to save students money needed for summer credit. Students earning fall/spring credit for summer experience can, during fall/spring, develop or complete a portfolio or other follow-up work. (A student mentioned a summer “internship” she did for no course credit since that meant no additional funds from her pocket. We have the same situation in my program.)

The students, based on my sample, embrace experiential learning, as evident in their initiative to find and develop their own opportunities. Course credit towards the major is an effective means of having them formally and attentively keep track of their activities while helping to develop the POLS program’s internship database. There was a consensus among the four students in wanting the POLS program to have a richer network of internship opportunities that would lessen the need to find one on one’s own. It was uncanny how they exactly echoed the sentiments of my students who wished my political science program had a network beyond our reliance on the Washington Center (TWC). It is noteworthy that Dr. Spero is the university TWC Coordinator. TWC is a proven success in establishing credentials and connections for students.

Having an internship coordinator accompany a new requirement can go a long way towards establishing such a professional network for internships. These days, for instance, faculty receive numerous emailed solicitations for interns. How convenient to forward such communications to a coordinator who can filter for quality, store contacts and descriptions, and provide manageable access for them to students. Career service offices are helpful but may not be sufficient guides for students looking for relevant, workplace experience prior to graduation.

#### MASTERS OF PUBLIC POLICY (MPP)

As I said at the outset, once a new full-time faculty member is in place for approximately two years, this is worth serious exploration. The self-study and my exchanges with the faculty do not yet make clear the internal and external market demand for an MPP program, particularly in contrast to the more commonly offered MPA (Masters of Public Administration) degree. The faculty need to explore whether or not there is an accreditation worth pursuing for the MPP program and, if so, what that would involve. It appears that some courses would double as undergraduate and graduate-level offerings. The benefits and costs of doing that need to be examined more. Should the masters be a pathway (e.g., 4+1) program combining pursuit of the bachelors and masters? Should it be a distinct, graduate degree program? Should it be and can it be both? Proper attention to those questions of design will take considerable time.

As I have noted above, there are many fruitful areas for enrichment and development in undergraduate education that easily justify another full-timer. My thought is that immediate focus on MPP prospects, upon gaining a new hire, rather than a couple of years out, may reduce attention to inviting prospects for enhancement of the undergraduate program.

#### RESEARCH METHODS

Regarding the new methods requirement in the major, the POLS faculty may want to consider going to a four credit course (from the current three), i.e., three classroom credits plus a lab, rather than the stated possibility (in the self-study) of an additional semester in Political Science Research Methods (i.e., a PSRM II). An extra lab hour might be a more optimal use of staffing resources for the time being. During the lab, the instructor can have students compile quantitative data; perform statistical analysis; focus on qualitative data gathering and analysis; and other hands-on activities. Essentially, that lab can focus on methodological approaches and applications.

Beginning with the addition of a lab hour seems to be a proportionate response to what Tk20-portfolio analysis is telling faculty about this area of learning. Keep in mind that this is the first, complete year of Tk20 analysis. There may be too few data points, and this might be too early a stage of assessment, to warrant adding a third semester of research methods. (There are three if one includes the mandatory Applied Statistics).

There are other means to strengthen students' methodological grasp besides adding new courses. The POLS faculty and I discussed, on my raising of the subject, how undergraduate programs run a common risk (in my opinion) that research methods courses become "islands" separated from the rest of the curriculum. That extra lab hour can help bridge that divide (e.g., inviting faculty to present on their scopes and methods). However, the POLS faculty might consider methodological concerns that should (and currently do) cut across all courses. Perhaps those concerns can be incorporated explicitly into the program's methods-related learning outcomes. In other words, students should be and really are learning political science methods from all political science courses, not just those focused on methodology. A slightly more intentional focus by all faculty on methodology in their courses can improve student learning in that area.

## CONCLUSION

If the program is not granted a new hire, it still appears to be well positioned to expand demand for various offerings and increase major enrollment. As it does that, it can continue to press its case for the "American institutions" position. In the meantime, the POLS program remains an essential contributor to the university carrying out its mission and vision.

A fifth faculty member can productively channel the current, substantial burdens borne by the POLS faculty so that they can meet growing and potential demand for an expanded, more broadly appealing curriculum, one with more courses in American political institutions and enhancements in applied/experiential learning. The returns on such investment will be increased enrollment in the major and in POLS courses as well as graduating students even better prepared for graduate school and the workforce. The POLS faculty will offer more variety in each of their specialized areas, teaching to their strengths; further develop proven assets for FSU students and POLS majors/minors; and draw more majors from the expanding pool of POLS minors and current pool of POLS-serviced, interdisciplinary minors.

Down the road, in a couple of years with the new faculty and curricular configuration, the program should thoroughly research the potential of a Masters of Public Policy. Without a new hire, few, new demands should be made on the current POLS faculty. They have, since the last program review, developed and steered an efficient, highly productive course of academic advancement at FSU. Hopefully, this review provides them with food for thought for the future.