

Date: 1 October, 2021
To: Members of the Council Committee on Academic Mission
From: Eldon Soifer, Head, Department of Politics and International Studies
Re: Implementation of recommendations from the External Reviewers Report

Dear Committee Members,

As part of the Academic Unit Review of the Department of Politics and International Studies, we received a report of the external review team, submitted in April, 2020. We are very grateful to our reviewers, Dr. Loleen Berdahl (University of Saskatchewan), Dr. Genevieve Fuji Johnson (Simon Fraser University), and Dr. Lisa Watson (University of Regina), for the time and effort they put into their report. We were gratified that they found us to be “a dynamic, collegial department that is working effectively with its available resources”, but also appreciated their insights about things we might need to do in order to secure our strengths, and make improvements to our programs. What follows will be an outline of some of the steps we have taken to implement their recommendations—notwithstanding the challenges imposed by Covid, which essentially coincided with the arrival of the External Reviewers’ report.

One of the major recommendations of the External Reviewers, geared toward the Faculty and the University, was that the Department hire a senior PAIS female faculty member (see pp.13-14, and cf. p.3. See also Recommendation 10, p.11)). Our Department was in complete agreement with this recommendation, and were pleased that, when the departure of Dr. Jim Farney for a position at the Johnson Shoyama School of Public Policy opened up a position, the Faculty of Arts and the University allowed us to fill it with a targeted call for a senior, female scholar. We are delighted that we were thereby able to hire Dr. Emily Grafton, who became a member of this Department as of July, 2021. Dr. Grafton (formerly the Executive Lead, Indigenization, and Indigenous Research Lead at the University of Regina) brings with her a wide array of skills, useful experiences, and an impressive research record, and we believe she will be an excellent person to fill the role, suggested by the External Reviewers, of providing “leadership and mentorship to junior women” (pp.13-14).

The External Reviewers’ recommendations aimed specifically at the Department were divided into “short term”, “medium term”, and “long term” actions, and we believe we have made considerable progress in addressing these recommendations.

The first three short term recommendations overlap to a considerable extent, so they will be addressed together. First of all, we were advised to undertake a “curriculum refresh” (Recommendation 2, p.8). This was to include a streamlining of the number of class offerings, and “demystifying” the titles and descriptions of several of our courses. In response to this recommendation, the Department established a working group to examine the curriculum. This working group decided to focus on the Political Science side of the Department, since the International Studies program had undergone an overhaul more recently. The changes proposed by this committee were approved by the Department in September, 2021, and they have been sent to the Faculty’s Academic Program Development Committee for approval. These

changes included the deletion of a total of twenty-two (22) courses, and significant changes to the titles and/or descriptions of a further fourteen (14) courses. The committee also recommended the creation of thirteen (13) new courses, largely in support of other recommendations from the External Reviewers. For example, in addressing recommendation 1 (p.8) concerning the expansion of gender programming, beside some reworking of the existing course “Women in Politics”, (now renamed “Gender in Canadian Politics”), the Department seeks to add a course entitled “Feminist Political Thought”. The new proposed course on “Indigenous Women and Politics” also seeks to increase the gender programming within the department, but also addresses wider goals of promoting diversity. Other proposed courses that are expected to further this goal include “The Politics of Diversity in the 21st Century,” “Decolonial, Anticolonial and Postcolonial Thought”, and “Erasure and Resurgence: Indigenous Peoples and Canadian Settler Colonialism”. In addition, a further working group has been established to consider changes to the International Studies program to enhance gender programming. The Department has also had some worthwhile discussions about embedding questions of gender and diversity into existing curriculum (see recommendation 1, p.8). Furthermore, in accordance with recommendation 3 (p.9), the Department has agreed to engage in ongoing strategic planning. We had one meeting in regard to this in 2021, and have agreed to have another in January, 2022.

One of the other short term recommendations was that the Department expand its engagement with the Centre of Continuing Education (Recommendation 4, p.9). The Department has discussed this, but is not ready to proceed with such a commitment at this time. For one thing, the Report notes that the Department had already increased its engagement with CCE (p.9), and we in fact do quite a bit of our teaching through this option (40% of class offerings in Fall, 2021, for example). There is also some uncertainty about whether the intent of this recommendation was primarily about increasing revenue, or about “using this as an opportunity to draw non-majors into taking political science and international studies elective classes” p.9). If the latter, the Department is not convinced this is an effective way to achieve this goal. The Department intends to give this recommendation further consideration, but has not made it a priority in implementing the External Reviewers’ recommendations.

Another short term recommendation from the External Reviewers was to make some changes to the governmental structure of the Department, by considering things such as the creation of departmental committees and the appointment of an Assistant Department Head (Recommendation 5, p.9). This recommendation arose at least in part from a perception that the Department depended too heavily on the very capable leadership of Dr. Jim Farney (see p.7). It is safe to say that the Department no longer relies as heavily on Dr. Farney, since Dr. Farney moved to a different position (Director of the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy) as of January, 2021, and is no longer part of this Department. Given the fact that, as the External Reviewers noted, “the PAIS faculty are disproportionately junior in rank” (p.3), this led to a decision to bring in an External Department Head to fill the role (Dr. Eldon Soifer, from Philosophy and Classics). Coupled with the loss of the Department’s designated support person, the presence of a new and external Head led to a considerable degree of disruption with regard to the Department’s governmental structure, and day-to-day operations. In light of this, and of the fact that the Department’s small size (only five tenure-track members, plus an external head) makes it often seem more efficient to work as a “committee of the whole”, the Department has not taken concrete action on further reworking the governance structure in this period. However, the Department will give further consideration to taking such action in due course.

The External Reviewers’ final Recommendation for short term action is to improve communication with students (Recommendation 6, p.10). The Department accepts this recommendation, and is happy that there has indeed been an

improvement in communication since the Report. The Department's student society, UR POLIS, has been reconstituted, and is running well as a conduit for information. UR POLIS has also organized a number of events in the past year, such as a "Women in Politics" panel, with some very distinguished panelists, a "Drop-in Election Debrief", and a Panel on "Gender Equity in the 2021 Canadian Federal Election". The Department has also appointed a faculty advisor to UR POLIS to facilitate on-going communications, which are also strengthened by the inclusion of a report from UR POLIS as a standard item on the agenda of Department meetings.

The attempt to improve communications with students is also connected with a number of middle term actions recommended by the External Reviewers, such as building a sense of identity through events, investing time in branding, and finding ways of attracting undeclared students within Arts (Recommendations 12, 13, and 14, pp.11-12), and the long term action of finding ways to attract international students (Recommendation 17, p.13). The Department is in general agreement with these recommendations, though there has been some concern about how to differentiate between "attracting students" and unduly encouraging students to leave other programs. The Department has incorporated discussion of ways in which to promote these goals into the Department's strategic planning sessions. Despite the hindrance of Covid, some of these ideas have been acted on already (e.g. the organization of events that can help build identity), but the Department intends to take further actions along these lines in the next few years.

Another middle term recommendation from the External Reviewers was to establish multi-year scheduling (Recommendation 9, p.11). The Department accepts this as a goal, and has tried developing a rotating two-year schedule, but has found that the small size of the Department makes it vulnerable to disruption of these sorts of plans. It is expected that the faculty complement will be more stable in the next few years than it has been in the past few, and that this will make it easier to implement this recommendation. It is worth noting here that it seems likely the Faculty of Arts will also be encouraging Departments to develop such scheduling plans, which will provide the Department with an additional incentive to make this work.

The External Reviewers also recommended that the Department increase congruence across programs and develop PAIS cohort classes (Recommendations 7 and 8, pp.10-11). There has not been consensus within the Department about whether these are ideas to pursue, and it has been noted that congruence is made more difficult by the fact that International Studies is an interdisciplinary program whereas Political Science is not. In any case, the External Reviewers suggested these might be things to consider "once the course offerings have been better rationalized and focused" (p.10), which is a process that is still in progress. Accordingly, the Department will give further consideration to these recommendations in its ongoing strategic planning sessions.

The recommendation to establish targets for both number of majors and overall enrolments (Recommendation 11, p.11) is described as a proposal for a middle term action, and the Department believes that it would have been premature to act on this recommendation in the period since the report was received. In principle, the Department is very willing to set such targets, and to try to expand the numbers of non-majors taking its courses. It is expected that the revisions to the curriculum, and the stabilization of the faculty complement within the Department, will facilitate these goals over the next few years. Accordingly, the Department sees this as a recommendation that has not yet been implemented, but which it accepts as a middle term goal.

The only other two recommendations directed to the Department by the External Reviewers were to expand methodology training (Recommendation 15, pp.12-13) and to strategically focus on explicit career skills training

(Recommendation 16, p.13). The Department has had some discussion about whether or not to accept these as desirable goals. In any case, these are both put forward as recommendations calling for long term action, so the Department has deferred its decision about whether to take steps to implement these recommendations.

In conclusion, it is worth reiterating that the Department is very grateful for the work of the External Reviewers, and that we appreciate the insight of their recommendations. The Department has taken major steps to act on the short term recommendations and some of the others, and has had beneficial discussions concerning the rest, even though the time to implement them has not yet arrived. The Department has also committed to an ongoing series of planning sessions to discuss further implementations, with the next one scheduled for January, 2022. We see this external report as providing useful guidance for this Department for years to come.