

Program Assessment: School of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Florida Atlantic University

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On March 9-12, the external review team visited with faculty, staff and administrators at Florida Atlantic University. The team reviewed the SCCJ Self Study Report, and a number of other documents that were made available. The team met with faculty individually and as a group, and had the opportunity to meet with undergraduate and graduate students. The team also met with the Dean of the College of Design and Social Inquiry, members of her staff, and several members of the central administration.

There are a number of strengths to be reported; that said, the School also faces several challenges. We organize our report under four separate categories: 1) Strengths, 2) Weaknesses, 3) Opportunities and 4) Threats.

Strengths

The most visible strength of the program is the faculty. The SCCJ faculty are committed and care about the well-being of their program, their students and the role of SCCJ at FAU and in the broader university and community contexts. The faculty values teaching and spends a good deal of time and energy advancing the education of their students. Teaching loads are generally consistent with those in research universities, though the number of students in each class has grown considerably in the last several years. This growth has created disparity between the teaching loads of SCCJ faculty, in that they each serve many more students each semester than their colleagues in the other Schools within CDSI. The curriculum is diverse and reflects the current state of knowledge in the field. Two required courses bear particular mention; the UG course on technology and the ethics course. These are unique offerings and reflect the current state of the art in the field of criminal justice. This is an up to date and innovative curriculum.

The recent tenure track faculty who have been hired are strong and these individuals show considerable potential. Two recent beginning Assistant Professors come from strong PhD programs and have solid backgrounds. The two hires for the fall 2014 AY are consistent with this level of quality. This provides considerable optimism for the future of the program, and reflects welcome support from the Dean's Office. The infusion of so many new faculty members with a strong research orientation provides optimism for an improving culture within the School. These new hires point to the continued improvement of the faculty in the future, pending them fulfilling their potential and being retained. The School has two full time instructors who have a high teaching load and serve a large number of students. Both students and tenure track faculty were enthusiastic about the quality of instruction provided by this group. Adjunct faculties are of

high quality and seem to be successfully integrated into the program. This is important as SCCJ depends on these faculty to a great extent to deliver their curriculum.

A second observable strength is in the quality of students. The student body is highly diverse, with roughly equal numbers of men and women, and a large representation of racial and ethnic minorities. In addition, the students have considerable enthusiasm for the program. Most notable in this regard is the student organization, the American Criminal Justice Club (with whom we met). The students began this club largely out of their own initiative. They engage in a number of activities including field trips to criminal justice agencies, sponsoring professional speakers and meeting as a group to help build a culture of support for students. One student offered that they felt lost before joining the club but now feel a part of the team. While there is no counterpart at the graduate level, graduate students spoke in glowing terms of the quality and commitment of the faculty. It is clear that faculty in the SCCJ are doing a lot with a very low resource level to serve their graduate and undergraduate students. Getting this word out more effectively should be a high priority for the future.

An additional strength of the students is their large number. SCCJ is well-known for the large number of students it serves. This means there is a challenge in creating an identity that goes beyond simply being big, and emphasizes the quality of their instruction and students. The students who are employed as Graduate or Teaching Assistants have an extremely positive view of the faculty with whom they work. This has resulted in their desire to further their education beyond the Master's degree. The quality of many of the graduate students is consistent with those at the very best programs in the country. This offers the opportunity for FAU SCCJ faculty to develop a feeder system to PhD programs, both within their College and across the country.

Weaknesses

One of potential weaknesses is the current lack of stability in the upper administration at FAU. Virtually every administrator we met with (other than those in the College of Design and Social Inquiry) was interim or acting. This instability has problematic elements for SCCJ slowing their ability to get their message across to top level administrators and making their case for integration into undergraduate, graduate and external funding initiatives. It is hoped that this will be resolved over the course of the current academic year as a new President appoints his people to fill administrative positions.

The number of new faculty also is a potential source of weakness – and certainly a challenge – for the program. Having five tenure track faculty in their first or second year places a burden on the more advanced faculty for mentoring and providing stability to the program. The Self Study Report identifies nine current tenure track faculty. With the addition of three new Assistant Professors in the fall, five of the twelve (42%) tenure track faculty will be in their first or second year. While the new faculty members are certainly welcome and much needed, they bring challenges for the School and its faculty. Socializing the junior faculty must be an explicit

priority for the next several years. New faculty should be steered away from involvement in writing textbooks, and steered toward publishing in high quality, peer-reviewed journals. Working with appropriate senior faculty can help the new faculty. The School must enjoy a period of stability for the next several years in order to fulfill the considerable potential for its future that the site visit team believes exists. Putting the new chair in place will go a long way toward accomplishing this goal.

Because of the extensive number of required courses and the desire in the School for required courses to be taught by full time faculty, specialty courses at the 300 or 400 level either can't be offered or aren't offered by tenure track faculty. This prohibits tenure track faculty from offering courses in their specific areas of inquiry and expertise.

There are no students (graduate or undergraduate) currently funded on external research proposals. This needs to be addressed. We recommend that the faculty invite an upper echelon administrator from the Office of Sponsored Programs to speak with the SCCJ faculty and that SCCJ faculty actively participate in workshops offered by that office. A modest goal would be to expect every tenure track faculty member to submit at least one external proposal every three or four years. This would serve to integrate a commitment to seeking external funding into the culture of the School. External funding can expand faculty research, as well as integrate graduate and undergraduate students into research more effectively.

Opportunities

We believe that the School is at an important point in its history; indeed it is not hyperbole to say that it is at a crossroads. As a consequence it is important that the entire faculty take advantage of the many opportunities that face them.

The large number of SCCJ students provides the School with a number of opportunities that it is currently not fully exploiting. The first of these is an undergraduate Honors Program. The Dean of Undergraduate Studies identified support for qualified undergraduate students and could provide support for developing an Honors Program within the School. Identifying high quality undergraduate students and offering them the chance to enroll in an upper division Honors section would help to achieve many School, College and University goals. A School level honors program (perhaps affiliating with Alpha Phi Sigma, the national Criminal Justice Honor Society) should be a priority for the School. On a related note, undergraduates should be more involved in the research activities of the faculty. There is also financial support for this through the Dean of Undergraduate Studies whose office offers funding for students to work with faculty on research and compete in poster sessions. We recommend that the School identify a member of the faculty to champion these efforts. This person should be viewed as a good teacher and someone actively engaged with students. It is our understanding that Biology has a particularly strong undergraduate Honors program; consulting with them for advice would be a good first step.

The School has appropriately focused its efforts internally over the past several years, given the growth in student numbers and declining faculty. With the infusion of new faculty, it is now time to look externally, beyond the School and become more engaged in cooperative relationships both in the College and beyond. This includes such things as cross-listed courses that span multiple Schools, proposals for external funding, integrating courses in the PhD programs in Public Affairs and Social work, as well as efforts to work collaboratively with faculty on research that spans multiple disciplines. In short, it is time to move beyond the confines of Criminology and Criminal Justice and be a partner outside of the School.

We learned of the availability of funding at the Graduate College to support student travel and research. We recommend that the Graduate Coordinator meet with Interim Dean Deborah Floyd to become fully aware of these opportunities and exploit them for SCCJ. We also recommend that the School invite someone from the office of Sponsored Research to speak at an upcoming faculty meeting. The School has not been aggressive in pursuing external funding, and it needs to do so. Such funding could provide an infrastructure for supporting student research and advance the research of the faculty.

The School needs to think in a strategic and coordinated fashion about its commitment to Online Education. As things currently stand, the School offers a large number of courses online. An online degree program would require a coordinated strategy, but is within the reach of the School. A successful online program (at the undergraduate and/or graduate level) provides a number of benefits, in addition to expanding the accessibility of the curriculum offerings. It can provide opportunities for graduate students to become engaged in teaching as well as financial support for graduate students and faculty.

The School has the opportunity to create an identity. There should be both a mission and a vision statement that clearly articulates their place in the College, the University, the community and the discipline. These statements should be the product of a collaborative set of discussions among the faculty that pay attention to strategy, values, and opportunities. There are many emerging strengths among the faculty in the School. The faculty should decide where their future strengths will be and hire and develop faculty and students to address those areas. In short, the faculty needs to determine the directions they want to go and how they will get there. This will allow them to communicate to current and future administrators their place in the College and the broader University. As the School thinks in more detail about their mission, they need to consider emphasizing a set of top tier journals where faculty aspire to publish. This will enhance their reputation and provide focus for the new faculty.

Threats

Finding a new Director must remain a high priority for the School, the College and the University. Filling this position with the right person is crucial to the future success of this program. This person must be entrepreneurial, strategic, collaborative and be a good communicator. They must be able to communicate effectively within the university as well as the broader community including the criminal justice community and the academic community. The reputation of the School will rise or fall with its new Director.

The School faces a number of potential retirements among senior faculty in the next several years. This will leave the School with a void in senior faculty leadership. With a recent promotion to full professor (Hinduja) and two possible promotions in the near future, this situation could be rectified. Some thought should be given to the replacement of some of the pending retirements with mid-career faculty who can provide mentoring and assume important School-level administrative responsibilities.

It is unclear at this time what the full impact of the State Colleges offering four year degrees will be. This must be monitored carefully and a strategic plan for distinguishing what is offered at FAU from the degree at the State College. Such points of distinction may include things like an Honors program and undergraduate research. Being proactive about this issue is important; better to have a plan than be caught by surprise.

The College must address the branch campus issue in collaboration with the mission of and vision for the School. It appears that the Jupiter campus will become a STEM-oriented campus. This may mean that other programs would be moving to the Boca Raton campus. A plan that is developed proactively should be identified about the transition of full time faculty to the Boca Raton campus as well as serving the needs of students who currently are in the program at Jupiter. Perhaps the online degree option would allow the students who are presently in the Jupiter program to complete their degrees with FAU without much interruption.

Conclusions

This is a very active program with high potential. There is enthusiasm among the faculty and students and the program appears to be enjoying a higher level of support from administrators than in past years. Despite the demands placed on them by having a large number of undergraduate students and their recent growth, the faculty and staff remain committed to teaching at a high level. We urge the Dean to continue to support the School with resources, particularly as they put the current positions to good use. The stability in the School is a welcome change and should enable them to achieve many of their goals. At this time it is appropriate for SCCJ faculty to consider what their desired target size, both for students at the bachelor's and master's level, as well as faculty should be.

We anticipate that five years hence, the School will have solid leadership and expand their opportunities to communicate and work with FAU administration productively and successfully.