

External evaluation report Fitchburg State University criminal justice degree programs

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This report summarizes my observations and recommendations following my opportunity to review the Criminal Justice program Self-Study dated March 8, 2020 and meetings via Zoom on October 13 and October 15 with Provost Cardelle, Dean Barricelli, Behavioral Sciences Department Chair Shane, Police Program Academy Director Lane, Graduate Dean Copper-Glenz, Library Dean Dremer, Library liaison to the Behavioral Science Department Asher Jackson, the fulltime faculty teaching courses in the criminal justice program, and available students enrolled in the BS CJ major, Police Program, and the MS Criminal Justice program.

Since the inception of the program in 2000, the criminal justice degree program has been housed in the Behavioral Sciences Department housed in the School of Arts and Sciences. The criminal justice program has numerous strengths. The mission and goals of the criminal justice program are clearly and thoughtfully aligned with the mission and goals of the University. Enrollments in the BS Criminal Justice degree program and the Police Program are robust. There are currently over 400 criminal justice majors enrolled in the BS Criminal Justice degree and Police Program. The Police Program, established in 2015, is recognized as the first of its kind establishing a police academy with police certification granting authority within a University. The Police Program has provided a quality branding opportunity which is essential for the current competitive student recruitment environment for criminal justice education. While the Police Program has higher rates of attrition than the BS CJ program, it would be expected given the nature and duration of the commitment as well as individual changes for students in career aspirations accompanying personal growth, maturation, and knowledge. The

criminal justice program is staffed with qualified, productive, and caring faculty members with a broad range of experiences and areas of specialization. The BS Criminal Justice program received Police Career Incentive Pay Program (Quinn Bill) approval by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education in 2004 and 2009. In 2009, requirements for Quinn Bill eligibility for police officers changed dramatically, effectively ending new eligibility after 2009. The program has an established record of curricular decisions, staffing, and program procedures using the Quinn Bill and Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences standards.

The Criminal Justice Self-Study included a library report dated 2017. In the 2017 report, it was noted that the serials collection holdings for criminal justice were insufficient for graduate students. This earlier report was updated with a more recent data and discussions with Library Dean Dremer and Associate Librarian Asher Jackson and describe a positive situation. In addition to the 'traditional' library instruction, librarians are accessible to faculty and students through various formats to include Zoom, chat, email, phone, and embedded mediums in specific course Blackboard sites. Library staff are expanding efforts to make course material more accessible to students through OER and controlled digital lending and print reserves for classes. Faculty and students have access to ProQuest CJ which has 625 full text titles, of which 449 are scholarly and 134 are trade journals. The Behavioral Sciences Department has a liaison in the library, but it was emphasized that a team-based approach to information fluency and resource acquisition is utilized.

Recommendations

1. Formation of a Criminal Justice Department

Based on meetings with the faculty teaching in the criminal justice program, it is clear the unanimous consensus among fulltime faculty teaching criminal justice courses is the formation

of an independent department to house the criminal justice degree programs. Based on the Zoom meetings with members of the department, it would appear there are multiple areas of contention between faculty teaching in the criminal justice program and the Department. Some of the issues center on disparate views of criminal justice students and the nature of police education and training. Other issues are more pragmatic and concern scheduling, professional autonomy, and recognition of area of specialization among faculty. Some of the issues predate the arrival of the newer faculty in the department and are likely not aired in the Self-Study or Zoom meetings. It would appear the issues are beyond the point of reconciliation.

With the formation of the criminal justice department, the Police Program Director should meet regularly with the Criminal Justice Department but should keep the current reporting structure and continue to report to the Dean. Regular communication with the department should assist in advising students in the Police Program, identifying at-risk students, curriculum matters, and assessment for the Police Program. Likewise, this continued reporting structure should assist in facilitating communication between the University and the Police Program. Recognizing the value of the Police Program to the University, administration should take an active role in identifying and securing suitable classroom space to conduct academy training both during summer session and continuing through the brief overlap period between fall classes and the completion of the police academy program.

The formation of a Criminal Justice Department should strengthen the visibility and identity of the program by reducing website layers to the outside community as well as potential students. It is likely to provide a boost for the morale of faculty teaching in the criminal justice area. The organizational structure of criminal justice department in a School within the University may present some questions. The Behavioral Science Department is housed in the

School of Arts and Sciences. Criminal Justice at Fitchburg State University is a professional preparation program. The proposed new Department may have more in common with Business Administration, Education, Exercise and Sports Science, and Nursing which are housed in other Schools in terms of external accreditation and professional preparation. Alternatively, faculty teaching courses in criminal justice approach the study of criminal justice from a broad liberal arts background, and numerous cognate courses are similarly housed in the School of Arts and Sciences. These factors should provide sufficient incentive to keep the criminal justice inside the School of Arts and Sciences.

The new Department structure would require administrative support as well as alternative assignment release for the department chair. The impact of forming a new department and adjunct teaching assignments should be negligible since contractual limits on the amount of part-time faculty are University-wide and exempt releases based on alternative professional assignmentsⁱ.

2. Advising coordinator assignment

It may be worthwhile to pursue the creation of an advising coordinator in criminal justice. The current ratio of criminal justice undergraduate majors to fulltime faculty teaching in criminal justice is 59:1. The MSCA day collective bargaining agreement identifies 30 advisees as the maximum advising load without workload adjustments. It would be worthwhile to explore the creation of an advising assignment within criminal justice with an accompanying course release for alternative work assignment. The purpose of the position would be to keep advising within the criminal justice faculty but also to keep advising loads reasonable. The advising assignment should identify benchmark measures to evaluate its effectiveness. For instance, success focusing on contacts with students, spring/fall registration completion, and retention. The faculty member

should confirm first-year first-semester course schedule prior to the start of the semester, monitor and encourage attendance during the first 6 weeks of classes (focusing on first year courses), and connections with university resources. It would be worthwhile to identify the retention rate for criminal justice students based on high school GPA. If there is a difference, this group of students could most benefit from targeted advising.

In the present configuration of the Behavioral Science Department, the Department chairperson has the responsibility to assign student advising loads to faculty in the department in a fair and equitable basis. In an effort to reduce the overall advising loads of faculty teaching in criminal justice, some criminal justice majors are currently advised by faculty in the Behavioral Science Department who teach in areas outside of criminal justice. While it does help alleviate some stress on the overall faculty advising load, it is not without drawbacks for both students and faculty. In Zoom meetings with students, they volunteered their observations on this aspect of advising. Students commented that occasionally faculty members may question their choice of major and future career plans in law enforcement. While faculty teaching in other academic disciplines may be versed in curriculum, they may be at a disadvantage for career advising and professional mentoring. The formation of a new academic department will most likely exacerbate the problem of advising loads for faculty in criminal justice.

3. Advising Blackboard course page

The timing of the Zoom meetings for the review coincided with advising weeks at Fitchburg State University. Faculty shared their thoughts on the advising load and the negative aspects associated with conducting much of the work remotely due to Covid-19 restrictions. I would recommend the creation of a Blackboard course page to assist with the organization of information for both faculty and students. Faculty will still have advising loads and would still

meet with students regarding personal growth, advising, career planning, and course selection. The Blackboard course site would house information such as: FAQ guide for students & faculty (such as general education requirements), a LibGuide to assist with course registration (Asher Jackson should be able to assist with creating and updating this LibGuide), internship information (information about eligibility, list of past and potential agencies, process of applying, and opportunities), study tip resources, schedule building resources, and career information. A major downside of this initiative would be maintaining an accurate list of declared majors with access to the course site.

4. Assessment

The criminal justice program should work with the Institutional Research office to develop a robust assessment plan for the BS Criminal Justice degree program. A comprehensive assessment plan would assist in meeting ACJS indicators I-B.e.ⁱⁱ and I-B.f.ⁱⁱⁱ The current emphasis using course grades provides limited utility^{iv}. Student learning objectives can be mapped to specific courses in the curriculum. Embedded assessments can be used to measure progress towards specific program objectives and skills^v. It may be worthwhile to conduct an analysis of transcripts of recent graduates to determine the extent to which students are taking courses in the recommended sequence and timing. Institutional Research may be able to assist in identifying specific curricular issues, one specific example would be grades in required courses associated with retention. As the Police Academy produces more graduates based on the new revised academy requirements, data on comprehensive exams can be compared to other academies in the Commonwealth which would provide useful data when examining the quantity and quality of officers produced.

The Criminal Justice degree programs have tried unsuccessfully to drop MATH 1700 Applied Statistics as a requirement for the University's general education program and to allow students the opportunity to select any Math course to fulfill the requirement. Assessment data would be useful in evaluating the utility of the MATH 1700 for criminal justice majors. In addition, both the Mathematics Department and criminal justice program would benefit from an examination of the grades and F/Withdrawal distribution difference, if any, across majors.

There are 30 credits of required courses in the BS Criminal Justice major. For clarity and consistency, I recommend deleting the heading of required/non-core courses and list all 10 courses as required and maintaining the ACJS standard for staffing required courses^{vi}.

5. Rollout of Institute for Social, Community, and Criminal Justice

The program's Self-Study and interviews with the criminal justice faculty emphasized the importance of the proposed Institute for Social, Community, and Criminal Justice for the long-term vitality of the program. The proposed Institute offers numerous potential benefits such as applied faculty scholarship, internship opportunities, high impact learning assignments at both the graduate and undergraduate level, and significant community partner benefits focusing on evaluation research and training. Much of the activities would be supported through external funding and would require a significant level of commitment from the University administration. The Criminal Justice program should work with develop an internal MOU regarding indirect costs associated with grant funding and Institute support prior to an aggressive pursuit of external funding. While grant funding and sponsored programs are beyond my area of expertise, I would recommend careful consideration of indirect costs, permanency (from FSU's perspective) of grant funded positions, faculty workload expectations (percentage/time allocations to teaching, advising, scholarship, and service), and any potential negative impact on the undergraduate

criminal justice experience. It would be critical to identify and rank priorities of activities for the criminal justice faculty.

6. Course rotation for electives

The undergraduate criminal justice degree programs offer a wide range of elective courses. The BS CJ degree program requires students to complete 15 elective credits in CJ or other designated courses. There are over 20 courses in CJ and other disciplines listed as elective offerings. Students may benefit from additional detail in the catalog (and on the program website: Course Rotation Cycle (PDF)) for schedule planning. Courses listed as being offered every two years should include a designated semester to be offered such as Fall odd years or Spring even years. It may be in the best interest of the program's faculty to reduce either, through combination or deletion, the number of electives required and the number of electives offered. At 45 credits, there is room to further reduce the overall credit requirement for the BS Criminal Justice degree to 42 credits^{vii}. The reduction of electives would reduce some pressure to offer each elective within the required cycle for NECHE accreditation (see standard 9.22)^{viii} as well as for faculty preparing a specialized topic on an infrequent basis. The benefit would be the greatest for newer faculty who are developing their required course area of specialization, advising, scholarship, and service commitments. Elective courses could also be bundled together to offer concentrations in corrections or juvenile justice which would be an appeal for CJ students interested in career fields other than law enforcement.

7. Articulation agreements

The criminal justice program and Fitchburg State University would benefit from the creation and dissemination of articulation agreements with community colleges in the Massachusetts system. The articulation agreements should reflect the limited ability to transfer

into the Police Program as well as specific Quinn Bill and ACJS standards^{ix x}. Articulation agreements would assist in formalizing the process of transfer credit from community college programs into the program and Fitchburg State University^{xi}. Articulation agreements would also allow the program to take an active role in evaluating degree credit and would fit within the larger Massachusetts Department of Higher Education MassTransfer A2B initiative.

8. Controlled lifting of ‘major/minor restrictions on Criminal Justice course offerings’

The criminal justice program should consider lifting the major/minor restriction for some criminal justice courses. It would be critical to plan a very limited rollout as to avoid taxing already stretched faculty resources. For example, a limited number of seats in Introduction to Criminal Justice could be made available for a Fall registration but the bulk of seats would be unavailable to be used to hard schedule incoming first-year Criminal Justice students. Another point of entry for non-CJ students could be in targeted electives (considering availability of seats for Police Program electives). The strategic use of prerequisites could be used to limit enrollments outside of the major and minor. There are numerous benefits. Criminal justice topics have a current event appeal to many people and are relevant to many students. Classroom discussions may benefit from the inclusion of students from different majors.

9. MS degree

Professor Acker’s 2018 program review outlined three potential courses of action with regard to the MS Criminal Justice degree. Interestingly, the least recommended option^{xii} has been adopted. The MS degree presents both opportunities and risks. The MS CJ degree environment is highly competitive with degree programs offered by UMass Lowell, Salem State, and Westfield State. There is the possibility that graduate enrollment revenues will fund an additional faculty line in criminal justice. Shifting Police Program requirements from the MS

degree to the BS degree has reduced the need for the full-time, police concentration MS degree. Likewise, at least a portion of a second track of courses for the community justice area would need to be developed to serve a broader range of interests. There is a risk the program would need to offer low-enrolled police track courses. Due to eligibility requirements, the MS program would be ineligible for Quinn Bill certification. The website would need to be updated to reflect the broader scope of the program. For instance, it reads “The Master of Science in Criminal Justice leads to both a master of science in criminal justice and a certificate of completion from the Massachusetts Municipal Police Training Committee (MPTC)”^{xiii}. Counter to ACJS Criminal Justice/Criminology Master’s Degree Program standards, the MS program will likely rely on a cadre of adjunct instructors^{xiv} which may place additional burden on the masters coordinator.

ⁱ Not more than fifteen percent (15%) of the university’s total number of three (3)-credit and four (4)-credit courses and sections shall be taught by part-time employees during an academic year. Not included in the foregoing are courses or sections taught by part-time employees hired to replace unit members on any leave of absence; on reduced teaching loads for the purposes of alternative professional responsibilities, Association release time or any other contractual released time; or any unforeseen emergency (p. 263).

ⁱⁱ I-B.e. Demonstration that students’ mastery of the program’s stated learning objectives and outcomes are formally and systematically assessed prior to completion of the program with documentation of methods and measures utilized [B.1]

ⁱⁱⁱ I-B.f. Indication of where objectives of all criminal justice/criminology programs are taught in curriculum and how they are measured, including the development of critical thinking; communication, technology and computing skills; quantitative reasoning; ethical decision-making; and an understanding of diversity [B.1; B.3; B.6]

^{iv} “their grades represent their success at learning outcomes, and each class has a progressively higher GPA than the one before. Clearly, attrition is one factor, but within classes containing students of varying academic experience, our more experienced students generally show better attainment of learning outcomes.” Self-Study p. 45

^v I-B.q. Evidence that graduates are critical thinkers with effective oral and written communication skills [B.8]

^{vi} C.11 At least two-thirds of the core required courses for the degree are taught by full-time faculty.

^{vii} B.10 All undergraduate programs in criminal justice/criminology are part of a broadly based degree program with a balance of general education, required and elective courses in criminal justice/criminology and in related fields (cognates), and unrestricted electives wherever possible.

^{viii} NECHE Standard 9.22 The institution clearly indicates those programs, courses, services, and personnel not available during a given academic year. It does not list as current any courses not taught for two consecutive years that will not be taught during the third consecutive year.

^{ix} ACJS D.3 Only credit from institutions that are accredited by their regional higher education accrediting body is accepted for transfer into an undergraduate criminal justice/criminology program. No academic credit for criminal justice courses counting in the degree program is awarded by the criminal justice/criminology program for life experience or for military, police academy, or other professional training, except for internship and service learning courses that originated from accredited academic institutions rather than a training academy, the military, or continuing education credits.

^x ACJS D.6 The institution awards degrees only to those students who have earned at least 50 percent of the credit hours in the criminal justice/criminology program through instruction offered by that institution.

^{xi} ACJS D.4 Two-year and four-year colleges and universities enter into articulation and joint admission agreements whenever possible to clarify curricular issues and academic expectations for both parties. These agreements reflect discussion of how best to advise and prepare students at two-year schools who are considering four-year degrees.

^{xii} The third option (c) noted above does not appear to be realistic. Under any circumstances, it would not be prudent to introduce an additional, new M.S. degree program without first carefully assessing anticipated demand and without a firm commitment for new faculty and staff resources from the University.

^{xiii} <https://www.fitchburgstate.edu/academics/programs/criminal-justice-ms>

^{xiv} C.11 At least two-thirds of the core required courses for the degree are taught by full-time faculty.