

Response to the External Review for Department of American Studies at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

Introduction

The American Studies Department has deliberated over the APR process and the external review of our Department. In group discussions and in individual meetings with the Department Chair, faculty have provided thoughtful reactions to the APR process and the external review. We conclude this process with some dissatisfaction with both the external review and the process. In general, the APR process asked us to compile required information into a template that demonstrates that we comply with assessment mandates of our accreditors. The external review, however, was a different sort of assessment that sought to evaluate the research quality and the “climate” within the department. Unfortunately, the self-study required of the APR process did not always address the external reviewers’ demands to assess quality. Hence, we are left feeling that the external review is shaped by an overemphasis on individual grievances – many of them now old – among a group of students that have been addressed and insufficient examples of scholarly and research excellence in the department. And to be fair to the external reviewers, the self study process mandated in the APR is not primarily concerned with quality measures, but rather with compliance with accreditation. Our response to this self study will therefore map our way moving forward, while recognizing that the external review is not a full, nor always accurate, assessment of our labor and the quality of our department.

Undergraduates

The external review team commends the department for its undergraduate program and its success in educating a diverse cohort of students. There are few recommended changes to our program, with the exception of creating more flexibility among our course schedule. This is a difficult recommendation to respond to because we do offer several courses in the late afternoon and evening, even as the instructional funds available to teach evening and weekend courses have been cut by the University.

Beyond the suggestions of the external reviewers, the department has also undertaken a thorough review of our general education Student Learning Outcomes (SLO’s) in an effort to foster consistency across different sections of the same course.

Graduates

The external review team met with 19 of the 60 graduate students in our department during a one-hour meeting. This was the schedule recommended by the University’s APR team. Based on this meeting, the review team commended the

department for attracting a diverse graduate students cohort in terms of age, sexuality, race, and class.

The review team suggested that graduate students wanted more mentoring and a better sense of how the coursework led to a dissertation. As the review team was well aware, prior to their visit, the American Studies faculty had already entirely revised the graduate curriculum to address these concerns. We had already submitted paperwork to require three courses in the graduate program that lead students to develop a successful dissertation prospectus. We have also completely revised our admissions process so that we have a smaller, better funded cohort that we can more successfully mentor and fund. We remain interested in our curriculum in the question “what is American Studies” and would suggest that every graduate program ought to be focused on training its students to know something about the intellectual history of the discipline.

Much of the report on our graduate program has little to do with our curriculum and the many professionalization programs we document in our self study, and much more to do with unsubstantiated folklore about the mistreatment of some students. Like all American Studies departments, including the ones from which our faculty attended at Minnesota, Yale, and NYU, there are grievances between faculty and students. Students want to be part of the department in ways that many faculty feel can overstep the boundaries of departmental governance. We are addressing these matters by reinvigorating the relationship of the graduate director to the graduate student organization and by seeking greater representation on the graduate student organization.

We cannot address here claims about racism, sexism and homophobia – we aren’t aware of formal grievances, with the exception of one a few years ago that was reported to OEO and dismissed due to lack of evidence. OEO determined that there was bad judgment, but no evidence of sexual harassment. As a means to proactively address these concerns of our students, we have brought OEO into the faculty meeting to remind everyone of the law and procedures. We have made more clear and revised our grievance procedures so that students know where and how to address concerns they have. And we have made OEO training part of the graduate student orientation. We want to reiterate that we take these accusations seriously, but we also feel that there are several rumors about faculty conduct that are unsubstantiated and damaging to our department.

The review also expressed concerns about our job placement statistics. This concern is largely due to the fact that we didn’t provide any statistics about placement and therefore the review teams’ assessment of placement rates is not based on any data or facts. Our students do well on the job market, both in academia and in other intellectual jobs. As an action item, we plan to better document where our graduate students have landed jobs, and would note that we have a student population that views our graduate program not only as a route toward a tenure-track job, but also as a route toward careers outside academia.

In sum, we are disappointed that rumors and accusations about the climate in our department dominates the evaluation of our graduate program. There is no adequate way to address the accusations, except to say that we are redoubling our efforts to build community and to enact policies and procedures that enable full participation from each member of our community.

Faculty

The external reviewers' assessment of our faculty is based on looking at CV's and a one-hour meeting with the entire faculty. This was the amount of information and contact required of the APR process. Again, measuring quality was not a mandate of the APR process, but was clearly the motive of the review team. Based on their contact with the faculty, the external review team claimed, "We would rank them as an emerging and still young program with a potentially bright future scholarly profile. However, when compared to the leading programs in American Studies, it cannot be said that UNM's is a yet first tier program."

Because this assessment is not based on data, but on a brief impressions, it's difficult to respond to this assessment. The judgment of the reviewers is not supported by the National Research Council who evaluated graduate programs in American Studies based on data like faculty publications. In that assessment, the American Studies department at UNM came out fairly well. We recognize that we don't have the reputation that comes with elite, wealthy private schools, but we also think that we are making important interventions into American Studies that older programs in our field are only now beginning to consider. Again, the APR process did not ask us to make a case about our ranking in the field, and therefore we didn't provide information to, nor arrange individual meetings with faculty for the reviewers that would enable them to provide anything more than an opinion.

Staff

We completely agree that our staff member, Sandy Rodrigue, is excellent and should be supported. The only material resources we asked of our University is they consider adding a 50% graduate advisor staff position to our Department in order to alleviate the burden currently placed on Sandy Rodrigue. This request is outstanding and remains unmet.

Program Concerns/Recommendations

The external review notes that, the "There is strong buy-in by faculty and graduate students of the intellectual vision of the department. We note that the department is in the midst of incorporating many changes, and while we applaud the intellectual direction work is taking, we also believe this is a moment of transition to new ways of thinking about the field and structuring the curriculum that demand careful and sustained attention."

We feel that the department is already conceptualizing a shared vision for our department. We have formed research clusters that are bringing faculty within the department and abroad together around a shared research agenda. We have also fundamentally reconfigured our admissions policy and funding practice to align with a commitment to mentorship. We have also revised our curriculum around a shared vision for how to mentor PHD students to successful job placement.

As stated previously, we regret that concerns about departmental climate were so prominently featured in our external review. In fact, we think the climate in our department, while at one time may have been strained, is actually quite good at the moment. We are trying to model a healthy climate in the department by having faculty model the sort of academic engagement we hope to foster. We also provide regular meetings with graduate students so that they know how and why decisions are made.

Our new curriculum promises to help us better mentor graduate students and it will accelerate time-to-degree for PHD students, making them more competitive in an academic job market.