

Academic Program Review External Report of the  
Department of Education Policy Studies

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**Department of Educational Policy Studies in its national context:**

The graduate programs in the Department of Educational Policy Studies (EPS) at the University of Wisconsin enjoys a long and distinguished reputation for its quality research, teaching, and strong commitment to equity, diversity, and social justice. It is nationally well-known and respected for critical scholarship across disciplines, particularly concerning international and comparative education, policy analysis, the history of education, economics in education, and sociology of education. EPS has consistently matched its scholarly commitments with faculty hires and student recruitment that, in our experience, makes it one of the most dynamic departments of its kind, broadly construed. Furthermore, EPS has graduated many new academics who have become leaders themselves, especially in terms of critical scholarship. This is an enduring strength of the Department. EPS may further enhance its legacy as it pursues promising, though challenging new opportunities with the expansion of its undergraduate major, and recalibration of its graduate programs.

The last external review, conducted in 2013, identified six concerns/recommendations.

1. Lack of Consistent Funding for Graduate Students
2. Graduate Students Receive Additional Preparation and Professional Development
3. Faculty Members Were Encouraged to Write More External Grants
4. Junior Faculty Members Needed Mentoring
5. Inequities in Advising Loads Needed to be Addressed
6. Graduate Student Body Needs Diversifying

For the most part, the Department has addressed each of these concerns and has excelled in four main areas —undergraduate education, graduate education, research, and service.

This report speaks to the new opportunities and challenges the Department of Education Policy Studies faces in the years ahead. Four main observations were established from our site visit and review of provided materials.

1. Balancing the Growth of Undergraduate Education to Graduate Education
2. Continuing to Meet the Evolving Needs of Graduate Students
3. Addressing Capacity Needs; and
4. Managing Uncertainties in Leadership and Budgetary Concerns.

A fuller description and recommendations of how best to address each observation is below.

## **Undergraduate Education**

Arguably the largest change to occur in the EPS department in the past decade is the growth of its undergraduate education majors. The faculty are fully invested in the development and expansion of undergraduate education and have modeled their engagements with undergraduate majors after their teaching, mentoring, and advising formulas for graduate students. For example, course offerings are designed similar to post-baccalaureate offerings, advising is adapted from pre-existing graduate programs models, and faculty provide individualized attention to their undergraduate students as if they were already in a doctoral degree program.

The holistic investment EPS faculty has given to nurturing and institutionalizing its new undergraduate degree offering has led to a steady increase in majors. There is great demand for this undergraduate program. The growth has been substantial, approximately a 40% increase every semester since inception. Despite the rapid growth, not much has changed regarding the overall capacity and infrastructure needed to fully operationalize this new degree offering. Dedicated full-time staff and academic professional capacity has not increased to efficiently manage the growth and needs of its new ever-growing student body. Similarly, EPS faculty remain committed to treating and training each undergraduate major as a student in a graduate program. The dedication to this pedagogical approach to undergraduate education is commendable, but beyond unsustainable if the growth continues at its current pace.

Given these data and trends, it is safe to say that EPS is no longer simply a graduate department teaching undergraduate students, but a department serving the needs of both undergraduate majors and doctoral students.

This new reality requires acknowledgement and a new strategic plan. It also necessitates a reconsideration of how the College approaches future resource allocation to the Department. Recurring sustainable resources will be needed to balance the continued growth of the undergraduate major as well as preserve the identity, success, and legacy of its longstanding graduate programs. In addition, clearly defined metrics and outcomes for both the undergraduate and graduate programs should be purposely established and agreed upon by the Department and College. These metrics should establish criteria that determine the growth, fluctuation, outcomes, and resource distribution of both undergraduate and graduate education.

If left unchecked, at its current growth rate, undergraduate education has the potential to permanently disrupt and displace graduate education in EPS. This would be detrimental to not only the legacy of graduate education in the School of Education at Wisconsin, but to the future placement of high value professors and researchers in the academy writ large.

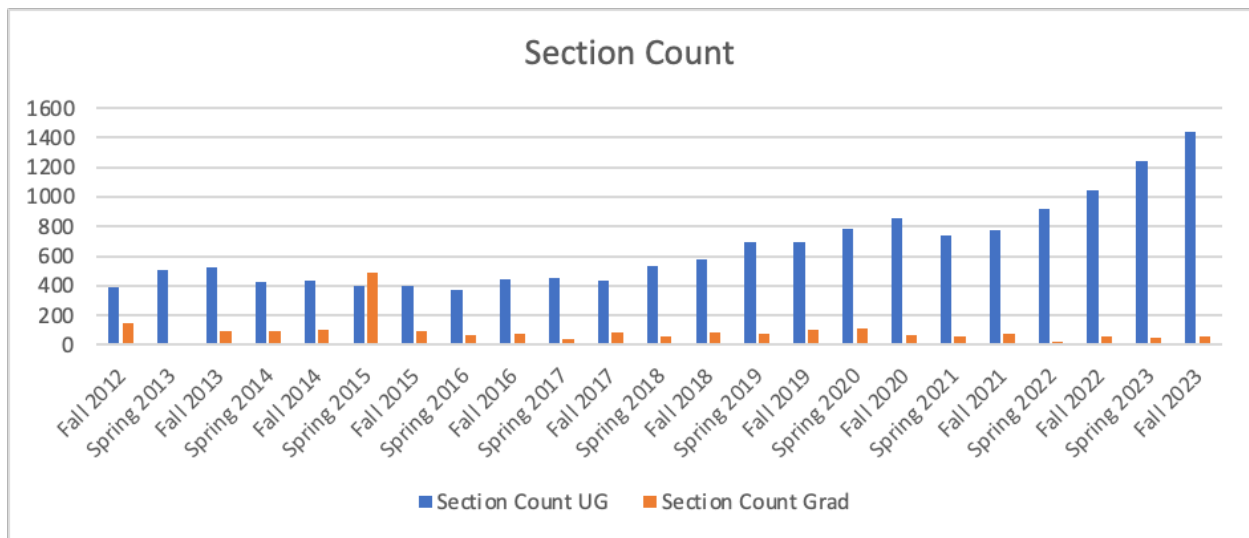
## **Graduate Programs and Students**

Notwithstanding the exponential growth of undergraduate education in the Department, the quality of EPS graduate programs is exceptional. Input from the graduate students we engaged, and data from the self-study report, illustrate that graduate students, overall, are getting an excellent education that positions them well to work in academia, research, and leadership positions. As aforementioned, the Department has responded to considerations raised in the previous review (2013) to enhance its quality by hiring new faculty to teach in critical areas such

as economics of education, quantitative research methods, and education in conflict settings and refugee education. They have also added opportunities for professional development for graduate students, which again addresses one of the recommendations in the previous external review.

The Department’s ability to maintain its high-quality graduate programs, however, needs to be considered in relation to the undergraduate program (major and certificates). Questions raised in the last review about maintaining the quality of the graduate program amidst an increase in undergraduate courses and enrollments are even more salient today. Figure X below shows the increase in the section count of undergraduate and graduate courses since 2012. It illustrates the exponential increase (3x) in undergraduate courses from 2013 to 2023, as well as a small decline in the graduate course sections.

Figure X. Section Count of UG and Graduate Courses 2012-2023



These data reveal the importance of developing sound strategic planning that balances the future degree offerings in the Department.

Between the undergraduate program and doctoral programs is the declining MA program and its enrollment. It was hard for the external review committee to ascertain what was the relationship between the MA program and Ph.D. on a number of levels. Does the MA program help maintain Ph.D. enrollment? Does it generate funds for the Department? What is its future given the tremendous time commitment undergraduate education absorbs in the Department?

In the past few years, the self-study report indicates that the MA has only a couple new students each year, while the Ph.D. programs have remained relatively consistent. There’s a need for the Department to consider whether it can generate funds through an MA program, while holding steady or slightly decreasing undergraduate enrollment. It was noted in our site visit that there was an effort to generate more MA students and 131 funding by EPS faculty in the recent past. A proposal for a new program was submitted, but it was denied.

Still the question remains as to what role does MA enrollment have in a department heavily focused on undergraduate and doctoral training? Similarly, if new MA programs were to be approved, how would EPS balance these new demands with its well-established undergraduate major and doctoral programs?

An important development for graduate students since the last review is guaranteed funding for five years for all doctoral students. The new funding model was well received by doctoral students, particularly the international students we spoke with. It addresses their concerns about funding their education, and creates a more direct pathway for them to complete their degree in a timely manner. The new funding model has also potentially helped diversify student enrollment. This again, was another recommendation from the previous external review. The Department yields a larger percentage of historically underrepresented students and international students today than it did a decade ago.

While beneficial to doctoral students, guaranteed funding is not challenge-free. The requirement places considerable pressure on the Department to continue to expand its undergraduate program, its main source of tuition-driven funding, to support its graduate students and programs. It appears that departmental TAs, graduate research opportunities, and summer employment opportunities for graduate students are disproportionately subsidized/supported by the growth of undergraduate majors/enrollment. In essence, undergraduate education inextricably supports graduate education, so any adverse or dramatic downward changes to undergraduate enrollments directly impacts the future of graduate student support and employment.

Case in point, graduate students serve as the primary instructors for undergraduate courses. This appears to be the primary employment opportunity for EPS graduate students. This suggests that much of a doctoral student's time is devoted to their teaching obligations rather than perhaps working closely with their advisors or faculty on grant proposals, or research, publications, or professional development opportunities.

We observed that there seemed to be considerable variation among doctoral programs with regards to funding as well. We left the site visit unsure of how this impacted graduate students overall. Students in the History and Humanities concentration, for example, spoke about how they received funding from the History Department. We did not know how to process or interpret this information. Whereas, international students, many of whom are primarily in the Comparative, International and Global Studies in Education concentration, spoke about teaching undergraduate students in the first year of entering their graduate program without the fullest of training or professional development. The international students also spoke directly about how the summer months made them particularly vulnerable because they could find employment as regularly as domestic students. The international students needed summer funding and/or employment to help maintain their insurance or to undertake the required field experience.

We did note in the self-report very intentional efforts on the part of the Department to address this aforementioned concern of summer funding—graduate students were eligible for \$5000 of summer funding—but it is unclear as to how fully aware the graduate student body is of this and other opportunities. When we asked about these concerns to faculty, we were informed that the

Department has attempted to offer some summer funding, but sustaining this year-round funding for all students remains a critical consideration.

All in all, students in EPS feel supported academically, socially, and financially, and an ethos of compassion and care is strong throughout the Department. This ethos was particularly critical for retaining and supporting students during the COVID pandemic. Students told us they were grateful for the support from faculty. This ethos can at times, however, place considerable strain on faculty to perform in all their other roles, and junior faculty particularly noted that all the care and support for students can limit the time they have for doing research.

The Department need not compromise this ethos of care, and can alleviate the pressure faculty feel, if additional staff support were available to interface with graduate students around certain financial, emotional, or other academic needs.

### **Capacity Needs**

The growth and vibrancy of the EPS department is evident. To support its current status and future growth there are a number of capacity considerations that bear addressing in the immediate and long term. First, the rapid expansion of the undergraduate program in EPS has been remarkable. The pace of its growth and the excitement around it are palpable, however, it is unclear that sufficient resources have been dedicated to maintain it at its current size, let alone if the plan is to expand it. The staff of EPS received glowing reviews from faculty and students alike, but there is an immediate need to hire more staff for the management of the undergraduate program. This would allow for better distribution of workload, greater specialization, and even the return of staff to their original job responsibilities. The status of the program as bustling is in large part due to very creative engineering and goodwill, but ultimately without resources this will not be sustainable in the near future, if that is not already the case.

Second, with the expansion of the course offerings with EPS's undergraduate program and continued excellence of its PhD program, there is a need for an expansion in available faculty, both tenure stream and teaching faculty. Over the last few years, the department has lost multiple scholars at both the junior and mid-career ranks. It should be noted the majority of those faculty losses were faculty of color and/or women faculty. Replacement lines are not only appropriate for the workload responsibilities, but attention to groups that have been historically underrepresented will maintain and potentially expand diversity among the faculty. The committee made note that a minority of the faculty come from groups such as Latinx and Native communities, these absences should be considered in future planning.

Importantly, the committee noted that the distribution of labor among faculty ranks is varied. In particular, junior and mid-career faculty have been playing a central role in building out master's programs, teaching at the undergraduate level, and running research labs. While excellent for collective department services, this seems to leave gaps in their opportunities to teach classes for PhD students in the classroom. While all faculty members we spoke with were actively mentoring students, many noted the students they mentor were never given the opportunity to take courses with them. This is not only a problem for graduate mentees who did not gain from the subject expertise of their mentor professors in the classroom, but it also means many students

were robbed of the chance of being exposed to new topics, methods and epistemologies which typically can only occur during coursework.

Inconsistencies in Indirect Cost Recovery (ICR) was another concern. Among faculty whose expertise is quantitative, there was evidence that Indirect Cost Recovery (ICR) is not returning to the Department and may be returning to centers. Across conversations with multiple faculty, we heard there was an inconsistency in ICR at the department level. That is, other departments were able to receive ICR for grants where faculty were Principal Investigators, but this is not the case in EPS. Such a discrepancy shifts an individual department's ability to provide not only high quality training, but address its specific needs beyond standard budget allocations.

Another critical capacity issue lies with the lack of a master's program within EPS. The master's program that was developed and led by EPS faculty ultimately did not get approval. As a result, the faculty who worked on this denied proposal felt that their hopes were jettisoned and that already limited valuable resources in the Department were "sunken" without any return on their investment or guidance on how best to proceed.

Clear communication about what may be needed to have the master's program approved, and if there is even a pathway forward, would help faculty and student morale, which were both affected by its premature closure.

### **Leadership and Budgetary Uncertainty**

Finally, concerns regarding leadership and budgetary uncertainty, and how they impacted the Department, were raised during our site visit. At the College level, there is a search for a new Dean and concerns were made about what that meant for the Department. At the campus level, it was reported that there were new expectations regarding undergraduate and graduate enrollment. These expectations have determined the recent past efforts in EPS to expand undergraduate education, and will most likely determine its future as well.

In addition, faculty commented on how the campus had recently implemented a new budget model—responsibility center management (RCM)—that determines resource allocations to the Department. It was acknowledged that RCM adds transparency to the department's budget allocations, but the newness of the model has also altered the way the Department approaches undergraduate and graduate student enrollments, hiring plans, new degree programs, and investment for growth proposals.

At the state-level, downward shifts in state appropriations have also altered the way the Department has had to adjust its graduate programs of education and redirect faculty time, capacity, and resources towards the development of its undergraduate degree offerings.

While change is inevitable, the uncertainty of how this change impacts the budget and decision of EPS was ever-present during our visit. Of particular importance, faculty regardless of rank spoke adversely about how they had to think about and make sure their activities aligned with the budgetary expectations of the college and campus. Constantly worrying about budgetary matters was deeply discomfiting and distracting to them. The faculty who spoke out felt that the

constant worry kept them from conducting the kind of research, teaching, and service commensurate with being a faculty member, particularly at an institution like Wisconsin.

## **Conclusion**

The external review committee believes that the Department of Education Policy Studies is an exemplary model department for the training of doctoral students and applauds its deep intentionality to advance its graduate programs and students while it expands its burgeoning undergraduate degree offerings. The Department's faculty and staff exudes a compassionate ethos of care that is universally respected by its students. There is profound pride to be part of the EPS experience and it is showcased in every facet of the Department's activities: research, teaching, service, and public engagement. We were privileged to witness this firsthand and feel that if the Department continues to expand upon these strengths and cultural capital that it can weather or withstand any uncertainty, change, or challenge.

Still, the committee witnessed some concerns or tensions that required continued deliberation and partners. Below are six recommendations that would strengthen and best position the Department in the years ahead.

## **Recommendations**

- **Develop a Strategic Plan that Balances the Growth of Undergraduate Education and the Preservation of Graduate Education in the Department**
  - What is the ideal number/ratio of undergraduate to graduate students?
  - What recurring resources are needed to develop and sustain this outcome?
  - What are the unintended consequences of new reality?
  - Where do pre-existing or future MA degrees fit within the Department?
- **Continue to Address the Evolving Needs of Graduate Students**
- **Work with College and Campus Leaders to Increase the Department's Recurring Budget to Address the Under-Capacity of Staff and Faculty in the Department**
  - New enrollment growth requires new dedicated staff
  - Additional staff ensures the needs and expectations of students are met
  - Additional staff serves as a preventive retention measure
  - Additional faculty balances the disparate advising and teaching loads
- **Continue to Identify Ways to Protect the Time and Professional Development of Junior and Mid-Career Faculty through Tenure and Promotion**
- **Continue to Encourage Faculty to Write More External Grants**
- **Add Clarity and/or Awareness to College Policies Related to ICR and other Budgetary Resources**