



COLLEGE OF ARTS, HUMANITIES, AND SOCIAL
SCIENCES

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TO: Sarah Shin, Associate Provost for Academic Affairs

FROM: Kimberly R. Moffitt, Interim Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences *krm*

RE: Academic Program Review, Department of Africana Studies (AFST)

I have carefully reviewed the Self-Study for the Academic Program Review of the Department of Africana Studies (AFST) and the report of the External Reviewers. The Self-Study highlights the Department's strengths and challenges, and the report of the External Reviewers provides an insightful analysis and offers recommendations for how AFST might move forward. I want to begin this report by stating my commitment to the Department and its role as an essential program at a public research university who bolsters a diverse student body. The presence of this disciplinary field and its course offerings are important not simply for number of majors or minors, though those numbers should increase, but also for the opportunity to enrich and broaden our understanding of our society by exposing students to knowledge rarely afforded in their educational journey prior to arriving at UMBC.

Enrollment Data

To provide context for the External Reviewers' report, I offer this data on enrollment in the Department:

Student numbers: Posted IRADS data for Fall 2020 indicate that the Department had 14 total majors (primary and additional plans) and 22 minors. The number of majors represents a roughly 133% increase since Fall 2018 (F18=6, F19=7). The number of minors has increased by 46% over the same time period. Overall, the Department has seen growth in its majors and minors during the last three years since its Year Three Review (YTR).

Student-faculty ratios: As stated in Fall 2019 REX reports, the student-faculty ratio (SFR) for FTE students was 14.5 for full-time faculty, as against 18.0 for CAHSS; it was 11.6 for FTE faculty, as against 14.5 for CAHSS; and it was 19.3 for tenured/tenure-track FTE faculty, as against 25.0 for CAHSS.

External Reviewers' Evaluation

In their brief summary the External Reviewers provide historical context of the Department, a description of its engagement with UMBC stakeholders, and a statement of the documents reviewed for this APR. They also acknowledge important aspects of AFST's endeavors that are worthy of noting:

- "Department goals are aligned with the strategic plan of the University and its contributions to the overall mission of UMBC...[for example] the Department of Africana Studies' annual W. E. B. DuBois lecture [which] is the College's longest ongoing Distinguished Lecture Series."
- "Students...were laudatory about their UMBC's Africana Studies' experience. They highlighted faculty's commitment to mentoring, fostering critical thinking as well as helping them develop a strong sense of self and community."
- "Since 2017-2018 academic year, the Africana Studies faculty has undertaken several initiatives 'Model' African Union; Taste of Africa; altering the DuBois lecturer format to extend its reach and impact across the UMBC campus..."

I will add that the recent initiatives of the Department are showing potential for continued success which speaks to efforts made to address concerns in the last APR. Additionally, the recognition of engagement of students in the classroom, formally and informally, appears consistent from one APR to the next. The faculty has centered its commitment to students and mentoring that has served them well as a Department.

The External Reviewers also identify several areas as "findings" with recommendations for each that I will address. It should be noted that several of the recommendations are not distinct from one another and, in fact, tend to overlap one another in an effort to highlight important curricula shifts and connections with additional stakeholders.

Elevate the Community Involvement concentration.

The report refers to this concentration as "an unmined jewel for the Department and College." They encourage AFST to capitalize on this opportunity in light of the current social and political climate of the United States.

Response: The External Reviewer report from the 2013 APR raised this point as well. The Department was encouraged to consider this curriculum enhancement as it formulated its strategic plan. With the shift in the College's commitment to community-engaged scholarship and social justice initiatives, the timeliness of this concentration does seem most apt. Such a concentration would provide opportunities for students to learn how to be engaged citizens in the society in which they will live and lead. The Department should spend considerable time on articulating the structure and operation of this concentration if it envisions it as core to the Department's mission. It cannot be done in isolation and must include a review of the entire curriculum to ensure its place in the Department. This is an important opportunity for the faculty to solidify its presence and contributions to the College, University, and its students.

Maximize available resources.

Given current and impending budgetary constraints due largely to the COVID-19 public health crisis, it was suggested that the Department seek ways to exercise use of all resources “to achieve optimal efficiency and effectiveness.” This recommendation addressed the need for the faculty to “make tough decisions” on departmental foci areas and course enrollment sizes. The External Reviewers also stressed the need to utilize its current adjunct and affiliate faculty more, while also considering ways to grow the members of the affiliate faculty in order to provide greater course offerings to students. This was also seen as a means of “fostering an intellectual community among the faculty who engage in the Africana Studies enterprise at UMBC.”

Response: This recommendation requires the Department to think about its strategic goals and address curricula changes that match the expertise in the Department, as well as the expectations of the students. I concur that while the African Diaspora should be explored fully as an intellectual exercise, the current resources of the Department do not lend itself for such reach. A focus should be placed on the faculty expertise and its growing commitment to the Community Involvement concentration to solidify its identity and student programming. At the same time, the Department can reflect on whether increasing class sizes (above 30 students) will bolster the program visibility. I suspect by re-focusing efforts on areas of strength, it will continue to draw students to the Department; but consideration of increasing introductory courses to attract larger numbers of students should also be made to support increased visibility across the campus.

While in agreement with the need to engage adjunct faculty and members of the affiliate faculty, this should not be done in isolation. This requires more than a consideration of increasing the number of courses to cross-list with other departments/programs. There must be a strategic process in place to enhance the Department’s work. AFST could create opportunities to gather affiliate faculty, specifically, in committee form, to assist with programming efforts and student initiatives. This should not alter the governance structure of AFST, but garner additional resources to further develop ideas and plans to enhance programming.

Strengthen the relationship between the Department and students.

As noted by the External Reviewers, students “serve as effective ambassadors and advocates of the academic unit.” To that end, students should be utilized by the Department to ensure its goal of a “vibrant and robust Africana Studies Department.” Additionally, a focus on assessment measures could “prove beneficial to this endeavor.”

Response: This is seen as an immediate step for the Department as a result of the thoughtful feedback provided by students. For a Department of its size, AFST should seek ways to involve its Africana Studies Council of Majors in much of its programming. This organization, as well as other interested students are resources that can aid in coordinating and promoting community events, gatherings, and opportunities for the Department. (This is also true for the affiliate faculty members, as noted above).

It was also observed that students were not certain of the specific learning outcomes for upper-division courses in the Department. As work ensues on the strategic planning for the Department, there will be a need to elicit the assistance of the Center for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (formerly Faculty Development Center) to support the continued development of assessment measures within the curriculum.

Acquire adequate Departmental facilities.

It was declared that many Africana Studies departments “often assume some of the roles of Student Services for students of African descent.” However, it did not appear that the Department had sufficient space for such interactions at this time. This was a sentiment echoed by both AFST faculty and students alike.

Response: This is a reasonable request but in the short run the Department will have to work within its physical constraints. Because of the limited space on the 5th floor of the Fine Arts building, there is currently no other space to access for some of these activities. I concur, however, that the ability to foster a community requires a communal space. This space should be available for both informal and formal interactions. At this time, it remains possible to schedule other University spaces for such gatherings and to coordinate with the Department of American Studies for more frequent conference room use.

Enhance linkages between the Department and the broader community in Baltimore.

Noting the early architects of the discipline who envisioned cross-collaborations between the academy and the community, the External Reviewers raised concern that the Department lacks “a strong presence in the broader Baltimore community.” It was also purported that external funding opportunities may avail themselves to the Department with increased external relationships.

Response: This recommendation reads as confirmation for the work necessary around the Community Involvement concentration, as addressed above. The only avenue to ensure the success of that concentration is to create greater community linkages beyond the walls of UMBC. Additionally, this initiative aligns well with the College’s goal to foster community-engaged scholarship, teaching, and collaborations with the broader Baltimore community. It would provide key opportunities for faculty (e.g., research) and students (e.g., internships and social networks). This, then, requires the Department to determine what is feasible to strive toward in accomplishing this important goal. And this should be done in concert with the principles established for engaging community partners in thoughtful and meaningful ways to make certain this work is mutually beneficial to all parties involved.

Allocation of critical resources.

A recommendation was made for a faculty hire to replace the position in Africana literature that was vacated Summer 2020. Additionally, the Department was encouraged to hire “a tenure-track faculty member with expertise to staff courses comprising the Community Involvement concentration.” The University’s Postdoctoral Fellows for Faculty Diversity program was noted as a possible avenue for securing other faculty hires.

Response: It is not possible to commit to such a hiring plan, at once, in view of recent budgetary challenges associated with the COVID-19 public health crisis. Moreover, while the Department has seen growth in enrollment and majors since its last APR, it is still necessary to carefully plan, based in part on this APR, how to continue that growth which will impact faculty hiring (and the foci areas in which to hire). The Department currently has one professor, one assistant professor, and one lecturer, along with a number of adjunct faculty members. (Note: the distribution of faculty was incorrectly listed in the External Reviewers' report). In many respects, based on the number of majors, this number of faculty should suffice. However, once the Department makes decisions about its curricula shifts, consideration can be explored to convert part-time expenditures to a lecturer position. This would assist the Department in mounting its curriculum, as well as address impending faculty losses.

Conclusion

The Africana Studies Department at UMBC celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. This is a notable accomplishment that should be appropriately acknowledged and celebrated. AFST was one of the early interdisciplinary programs created at UMBC to support the inclusive mission of the University, while also giving guidance and mentorship to its growing Black student population. I see this timely APR as a moment of opportunity for the Department to contemplate its future. There are several recommendations made in this report that all revolve around considerations of the Department's curriculum. It is my hope that there is effort toward strategically planning the Department's path and the means in which to achieve it. As that work is done, other aspects of the recommendations will also become paramount (e.g., faculty hiring and external linkages to community). In the meantime, as noted by the External Reviewers, finding ways to create cross-discipline connections with other Departments and Programs for affiliate faculty and cultivating additional programming may be useful in producing a vibrant and productive program. I am excited about the possibilities, and I look forward to working with the Department in the next phase of this process.

cc: Gloria Chuku, Chair, Africana Studies