



Council for Christian Colleges and Universities

AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM

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MARCH 2012 EVALUATION STUDENT ACADEMIC PROGRAMS COMMISSION



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The American Studies Program (ASP) hosted the entire Student Academic Programs Commission (SAPC) in late March, when the cherry blossoms were in full bloom and the Supreme Court was considering an important piece of federal legislation that brought supporters and detractors to the building steps to share their points of view. The SAPC review team was able to experience the rich learning environment of the city with the staff and the students during the course of our three and a half day visit. The visit included numerous meetings with the ASP staff (as a group and individually); participation in classes on site; meetings with students and site supervisors at selected internships; a debriefing session with a senior official in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security; participation in a shared meal with the students and staff from the ASP and Washington Journalism Center programs; an exceptional evening panel discussion with ASP alums who now live and serve in the DC area; and a group feedback session with current ASP students. Dr. Ken Bussema, vice president for student programs, and Deborah Kim, director for student programs, were present for the full visit. We are very grateful for the work put into an exceptionally well-organized visit and the very comprehensive and well-written program review document.

The members of our evaluation team were:

Mr. Ken Gilson, Biola University (CA)

Dr. Susan Hasseler, Messiah College (PA)

Dr. Robert Herron, Trinity International University (IL)

Dr. Brock Schroeder, Malone University (OH) / Mt. Vernon Nazarene University (OH)

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PROGRAM MISSION AND HISTORY

The American Studies Program has a long and rich history of providing an off-campus living and learning opportunity to CCCU students. Having begun in Fall 1976 and having served over 2,800 students in the past 36 years, the ASP has a particularly strong foundation for a robust and meaningful program. The mission “to bridge CCCU campuses and Washington, DC through intensive professional and academic engagement with leading institutions, professionals, and the local peoples and cultures of the nation’s capital in ways that challenge students to connect biblical faith with public life and vocation” has remained consistent since the origin of the program but the ways in which that mission is accomplished have been changed significantly in the past few years to best meet the needs of students and align with new knowledge about effective pedagogy, assessment, experiential learning and community engagement. Although the program has been around for 36 years, it continues to be dynamic and responsive to the needs of CCCU campuses, the students and the city. This dynamic quality is highly dependent on the current staff, with their deep commitment to create the strongest possible learning experience as well as the support of CCCU institutions, who continue to send their students to this excellent program.

PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

It was clear in this visit that the ASP leadership and staff are highly qualified, both in terms of academic credentials and experience, and they show genuine collegiality and respect for one another. They are open to constructive criticism and are seeking constantly to improve. SAPC commends the ASP leadership and staff for their quiet, determined commitment to do more with less. We also commend them for their respect of past leadership and the legacy of ASP, and for their commitment to build on that while remaining relevant to the culture and responding to the ever-changing and challenging needs of the current students who seek to benefit from ASP. Our *recommendations* include the following:

1. ***Continue to provide robust professional development opportunities for the members of the ASP leadership team.*** Regular professional development opportunities, such as conferences, workshops, mentoring relationships with people in similar roles on campuses and ongoing education, are rejuvenating for individuals but would also yield fresh eyes and new energy to the team as a whole, thus benefiting the program immensely.
2. ***Refocus on regular staff meetings, and risk over-communicating vision, mission, and routine planning.*** As small and close as the ASP team evidently is, we sensed occasional lack of clarity in direction and coordination of efforts.
3. ***Boldly define and claim your own identity as a leadership team.*** We heard from alums of 10, 20, and even 30 years ago, and they spoke very highly of their experiences and of the people who made such a huge difference in their lives. However, we also heard from the current students, and they were just as laudatory of ASP's efforts and their experiences as the alums were of theirs. These students will be alums 10, 20, and even 30 years from now. Leadership and staff should not underestimate the difference they are making in the lives of the students, and claim their own identity.

ACADEMICS/STUDENT LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The ASP provides a varied and academically rigorous set of learning experiences for its students. The combination of classes relating to leadership and vocation and specific tracks (Global Development Enterprise and Public Policy Initiatives), internships, neighborhood engagement and professional mentorship provide a very powerful combination of classroom and experiential learning. The content of the classes is rigorous and meaningful, the pedagogy is engaging and effective and the integration of biblical perspectives in the classes is real and effective. The emphasis on a global development partnership report that is delivered to a real audience in the GDE track is particularly powerful. The students report that they are engaged, challenged and transformed. They spoke to specific readings, speakers and activities that had a powerful impact on their learning and their lives. Appropriate measures are in place to assess student learning, with the connection of their learning to program goals. The staff is to be commended for working very hard on ensuring that all elements of the program are rigorous and meaningful.

The experiential education component of the ASP offers a particularly powerful and transformative opportunity for student learning, according to both student and staff reports. Internships provide an exceptional laboratory for professional skill development and vocational discernment. Internship sites, including congressional offices on Capitol Hill, the U.S. Department of Justice and non-governmental organizations, offer experiences that simply cannot be replicated elsewhere. Student performance and learning are evaluated thoroughly, at both mid-term and final points in the semester, with thoughtful supervision provided by Elizabeth. It appears that partner relationships, as well as student learning, are being nurtured through internships as a result of the quality of student work and the face-to-face contact with the ASP

internship director. Mentoring, though optional, is a highly valued opportunity to ask personal questions about career and personal choices, and to imagine the “next stage of life” for undergraduates. City bus excursions (in their current form) are reviewed highly by students as an activity that lends perspective to their own concerns as they open a door into a realm of life and relationship that many have not experienced before. All of the experiential learning opportunities that form the backbone of the ASP curriculum are selected carefully, with student interest and quality of experience in mind. Some *recommendations* include the following:

1. ***Continue to create coherence within the program.*** While the many different components of the program provide a rich set of experiences for the students, the number of strands and particular requirements can be overwhelming and at times, perhaps, redundant. Rather than looking to add more content, the staff is encouraged to continue to develop academically rigorous and authentic projects that accomplish multiple goals. More is not necessarily better; focus can often strengthen learning.
2. ***Integrate project-based learning into both tracks of the program.*** Develop assignments in the PPI track that include presenting a product to an authentic audience as you are doing in the GDE track.
3. ***Develop more opportunities for students to explicitly connect the different components of the program into a “learning whole” and to process the powerful experiential components of the program.*** The powerful learning that students describe, from multiple sources of experience, means that there is unusual need for debriefing over the course of the semester at ASP. More regular processing of internship and other experiences, through conversation (since much is done already through written work, including journals), holds promise for deeper understanding; more regular conversation also holds great potential for building community. Whether in small groups or as a whole, students value time together and especially time together with faculty. They seem eager for additional opportunity to talk about both the unique opportunities of their DC placements, as well as some of the challenges inherent in thinking well about the application of faith in a context of power.

STUDENT LIFE/LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The ASP staff has developed and maintains a healthy living and learning community in the Dellenback Center. Students enjoy spending time together and benefit from “rubbing shoulders” with fellow students from varied academic, cultural and faith backgrounds. James Kim provides excellent leadership to the student life experience and has made sure that policies and procedures are well-documented and communicated to students. The behavioral expectations and accountability procedures are articulated clearly, health and safety issues and crisis management procedures are addressed appropriately and the facilities are attractive and well maintained. The location of the Dellenback Center allows for the safe use of public transportation and for direct involvement in a diverse and dynamic community. It is a great place for CCCU students to live and learn.

The decision four years ago to co-locate the Washington Journalism Center (WJC) and ASP students at the Dellenback Center has been well executed. Students, faculty and staff report positive interactions among the ASP and WJC students, who share apartments and have a “family night dinner” together once a week. Indeed, students from both programs appear to complement the living and learning experiences of their student colleagues in the other program.

The staff model and shape an atmosphere of appropriate and respectful give-and-take, evident even when students were debating issues about which they are deeply passionate in the group session which we led. For many students, the ASP semester is their first opportunity to live (and

therefore dialogue) with students who hold significantly different perspectives on issues. Facilitating a robust and rigorous exchange of competing ideas, while not disrespecting others in the process, is a delicate balance to maintain. The staff is to be commended for being attentive to this. Our *recommendations* include the following:

1. ***Create additional time and space for students to process their experiences as a group.*** The structure of the ASP semester includes four distinct, yet related curricular components: the vocation and calling course, the track coursework (PPI or GDE), and the internship and community engagement experiences. (Students who choose the optional mentorship have five components to their semester.) For some students, integrating the various components of this rich, yet multi-faceted curriculum comes naturally. For others, making appropriate faith - life connections is harder. While students speak highly of their living and learning experience overall, they expressed a desire—and we observed a need—for them to have additional opportunities throughout the semester to process and integrate the various facets of their semester in DC through structuring conversations designed to help students integrate their 4-5 parallel curricular experiences.
2. ***Provide opportunities to give feedback on program components throughout the experience.*** The conversations described above could also be used to provide feedback to the program faculty and staff on how the logistics of the semester are progressing. Students reported a desire for opportunities to discuss questions and concerns surrounding everything from church attendance and worship to questions about changes to their syllabi. A group format will provide opportunity for students to have these conversations with all their peers, and not just those in their track or apartment.

The ASP staff is best equipped to determine the frequency and structure of these conversations. Regardless of the specific structure, we strongly encourage the program faculty and staff (i.e., Peter, Gerry, Elizabeth, James and Abigail) to participate. It will be important for students to understand that although program instructors are present, the conversation is occurring in a "safe" (non-evaluative) environment. Finally, several students reported that providing ice cream would be an effective attendance motivator.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

The ASP staff has worked hard to develop appropriate assessment of student work and outcomes. The SAPC team found ample evidence that the students were being challenged to read broadly, think critically, write persuasively and to perform professionally at their internship assignments. We visited classrooms, interviewed students individually and collectively, and visited multiple internships. All indications are that the students are having a qualitatively different experience than they might have on a traditional college campus due to the integrated class and experiential program components and that ASP is exceeding their expectations. While there is good student evaluation in place, data for program evaluation is, however, primarily based on exit surveys and student reports rather than a compilation of student performance data. Thus we *recommend* that:

1. ***The ASP staff set up an assessment system in which student performance data is compiled in a way that also allows for evaluation of the program outcomes.*** Much as one zooms out on a map to get a bigger picture, ASP likely has a lot of data that can be aggregated and reformatted to get a picture not only of individual achievement but of program achievement. A streamlined program assessment system might also help the ASP staff determine where there is overlap in current individual student assessment, creating a more manageable assessment program for everyone involved.

PROGRAM STRENGTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

Washington, DC, is a grand village of networkers and the ASP leadership and the staff have done a fine job building connections, drawing on longstanding ASP relationships and cultivating other partners. There is an ethic of care that permeates their efforts to develop a trusting rapport with leaders, organizations and alums: follow-up notes of appreciation, invitations to special events and other courtesies convey the desire of the ASP staff to build relationships and not simply fill mandatory slots with speakers, panelists or internship sites. The collegial spirit is evident in the way that the ASP director and his team have worked with the CCCU office personnel and the Washington Journalism Center staff. Similarly, it is clear that Peter Baker values his peer directors at other Best Semester programs and welcomes their counsel. Among the connections that are particularly highly valued are the links to previous ASP leaders. The staff all speak with gratitude about the heritage of the program, and Peter meets often with Rich Gathro and Jerry Herbert to seek their perspectives and convey his appreciation for the ground that they have cultivated.

Perhaps the foremost challenge of ASP is how to sustain the heritage of the program, build on its strengths and adopt important innovations in response to the changing landscapes of politics, culture and higher education. Compared to previous decades, ASP faces considerably more competition from other DC-centered programs, and CCCU students have far more viable options for off-campus study, not only among Best Semester venues but from their own campuses. Enrollments for the ASP have declined notably over the last decade. As an attempt to bolster enrollments and enrich the curriculum, ASP chose to add a new track of study—Global Development Enterprise—to its longstanding emphasis on public policy, which is well conceived and crafted. This track has rich potential in this particular locale but has not yet fully captured the attention of CCCU students and campuses.

In addition, in the past year BestSemester has been implementing a new customer relations management (CRM) system. The new CRM allows the ASP staff to track the enrollment progress of applicants. This transition has been made, and the CRM is being used effectively. The SAPC wishes to commend the ASP staff on utilizing this software, and additional communication strategies (e.g., Facebook) to connect with prospective students. It is evident that the ASP staff has an intentional system in place to enroll students that will help the student succeed and the program to fulfill its missions and objectives. They are able to track the student through the CRM, they can communicate expectations, and they deliver these expectations. The SAPC team interviewed current students regarding program expectations and objectives. Students were able to clearly articulate the goals and objectives of ASP and the overwhelming sentiment among students was that the program is delivering what they were promised and more. This is a strength on which the staff can build in order to ensure a strong future. In order to promote program strength and sustainability, SAPC offers a few *recommendations*:

1. ***Build a broader set of relationships with CCCU Campuses.*** Recruitment efforts are often a unique collaboration among individual students, BestSemester options and CCCU campuses. Students are far more likely to attend ASP when their home campuses affirm the ASP program as a valuable component of their own majors and curricula. Historically, ASP has flourished because of the loyal support of a relatively few campuses. Political Science faculty on those institutions embraced ASP as an enrichment and a complement to their campus-based study of politics, history or a corollary field. In addition to traditional efforts to market directly to students, the ASP staff need to make a concerted effort in the next few years to fortify their relationships with their traditional campus partners and to cultivate a few more loyalists. An advisory board, panelists for an occasional colloquia, or guest professors (even in short modules) who are drawn from relevant campuses can not only provide ASP some valuable counsel about their curriculum and internship opportunities, but they can also help ASP refine its programs to

insure that they meet the most vital needs of the campuses themselves. Along with emphasizing the benefits of the program to students, the leadership of the CCCU and ASP need to continue to stress how the ASP program benefits the institutions.

2. ***Broaden the recruiting base of the Global Development Enterprise track.*** The Global Development Enterprise track appears to have been envisioned primarily as a means of appealing to economics and business majors. While there are no doubt several business majors drawn to global development, the expanding interest in social entrepreneurship at our institutions is by no means housed exclusively, or even primarily, in business departments. We recommend expanding marketing efforts to students in other disciplines, such as sociology, social work, religious studies, philosophy, etc., as well as the interdisciplinary programs/majors such as sustainability, international development and non-profit studies that are being offered at many CCCU institutions. Building partnerships—through advisory boards, colloquia, campus visits, etc.—with a select few faculty and co-curricular leaders of global development programs could help the ASP reach a wider audience. Chief academic officers can usually direct ASP staff to the two or three key players on their campuses for building these kinds of partnerships.
3. ***Identify and articulate key benefit statements.*** These statements should focus on the key messages that program wishes to communicate to prospective students and to member campuses regarding the benefits that they will gain by participating in ASP. Contemporary thought in customer relations would recommend that ASP focus on the "raving fans" in order to articulate these benefit statements. When interviewing current students and alumni of ASP, SACP overwhelmingly heard that ASP helps students find an identity and career through an intense experience in the dynamic city of Washington, DC. The key benefits appeared to focus on access to Washington, DC, the power of the high quality internship experience, the rigor and application of the coursework, the focus on living Christ-centered shalom and justice in a contemporary, urban setting, and the introduction to career experiences. SACP recommends that the web presence of ASP be stronger and that it clearly articulates these benefit statements.
4. ***Capitalize on the ASP name without letting that name become limiting.*** At present, ASP truly has a brand among alums and among many faculty nationwide as a flagship program for the CCCU and one of the vanguards for the study of faith and public life. Changing that name would damage the brand, although those interested in global development may not immediately see the ***American*** Studies Program as the place for the study of international development. Until a day when some new structure may be necessary, it is vital for ASP to underscore the importance of Washington, DC as a hub of non-profit organizations, global-minded companies, and NGOs. That theme needs to be stressed in marketing and in conversations with campus leaders. Students inclined to social entrepreneurship and global development need to see how a semester in the federal capitol is also a semester living near so many architects of global business, philanthropy and service. And ASP should work to cultivate a few more of the stronger global development organizations as internship sites.

SUMMARY

The American Studies Program continues to build on its strong foundation by offering dynamic, academically grounded and experiential programs in Washington, DC that offer students a wonderful opportunity to interact with peers from all over the nation and the world while engaging with the rich resources that our nation's capital has to offer. The two tracks capture powerful components of the city and the living/learning experiences are challenging and well constructed. The staff is constantly seeking to shape the program in ways that meet the needs of the students and CCCU campuses while also responding to the shifting political, economic and social atmosphere of the city. The ASP program has a strong staff and they are doing their jobs very well.

The primary area of challenge facing the ASP is the need to develop relationships with an even broader constituency on CCCU campuses so that this excellent program maintains a strong presence in the CCCU in the face of many competing programs and needs. The faith-learning-living integration of this program is exemplary and deserves strong constituent support and participation.