

Academic Program and Curriculum Committee Review of the Undergraduate Program in Urban Studies

Review Team:

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1. Introduction

The urban studies major is housed in Urban Studies Programs (USP) within the College of Letters and Science. Approved in 2016, the major offers an interdisciplinary curriculum supported by faculty across the humanities, social sciences, and professional fields. The program aligns closely with the university's strategic goals and the 2030 plan, emphasizing community-engaged research and an outstanding learning environment. Since its inception, the major has experienced sustained enrollment growth, including a 40% increase over a five-year period. Additionally, the program innovated its offerings by introducing an accelerated Urban Studies BA – Urban Planning MUP program in 2022.

Recommendation: Despite resource challenges, the program is "clearly succeeding in terms of enrollments" and has met standards in curriculum.

2. Actions since Previous Review

A. Response to Previous Review

Not applicable, as this is the program's first formal review process.

B. Opportunities and Challenges

- Opportunities include expanding community partnerships through initiatives like the Racial Justice and Equity Community Project fellowship and the BLC Field School.
- A primary challenge involves cross-college advising for the new accelerated BA-MUP program to ensure students meet credit thresholds before transitioning to graduate studies.
- Another challenge is the structural reliance on affiliated faculty for elective offerings, which necessitates careful advising to maintain a cohesive interdisciplinary major experience.

3. Department/Program Overview

A. Department/Program Mission and Organizational Structure

- The mission of USP is to educate students to become effective practitioners, researchers, and leaders in urban organizations, public agencies, nonprofits, and community groups.
- The program aims to promote multidisciplinary urban research and engage in community outreach to address societal and urban issues.
- The program is led by a program director and an associate director, supported by a .5 FTE program associate and a steering committee.
- USP also serves as the institutional host for the Urban Affairs Association (UAA).

B. Facilities and Resources

There are sufficient resources to meet program needs, to provide for program stability, for facilities and space within the university, and for facilities and space outside the university.

- Supply and expense (S&E) budget allocations have decreased from \$10,000 in 2020 to \$6,000 in 2024, before rising slightly to \$7,596 recently.
- The program increasingly relies on an endowment and a general fund to cover travel, fellowships, community projects, and supplementary stipends.
- On-campus facilities are adequate, providing offices, a student lab/lounge, dedicated classrooms in Bolton Hall, and seminar spaces.
- Off-campus facility usage is limited but includes community gardens or centers utilized during the summer BLC Field School.
- Technology and library resources are robust and adequately support the program.

Conclusion. The standards for space and facilities are met. The standard for sufficient resources is met, though long-term program stability heavily depends on endowment funds due to stagnant budget allocations and rising expenditures.

Recommendation(s). Monitor budget and expenditure divergences closely to protect the program's endowment principal.

C. Curriculum and Instruction

As a highly interdisciplinary major there is significant variation in individual students' curriculums and paths to graduation allowing customization to match students goals. The core of four required urban studies courses ties them together with appropriate learning outcomes. Regular interaction with employers and organizations in the field during coursework supports graduates ability to secure employment.

Conclusion. This standard is met.

Recommendation(s). Continue working with Letters & Science (L&S) advising administration to establish and implement a formal subplan code/designation for students pursuing the accelerated BA-MUP track, ensuring accurate program tracking, cohort management, and coordinated advising. Additionally, consider implementing formal course substitution/waiver pathways or structured alternative plans to better accommodate double majors.

D. Assessment and Evaluation

Student facing assessment of curricula is performed in the capstone 600 course. While this is adequate for successful students it may be beneficial to add an assessment early in the curriculum to capture the goals and expectations of incoming students. Regular involvement of related organizations ensures input from appropriate community and employers.

This program reports excellent retention but time to graduation information is lacking. Time to graduation is hard to measure for this program because few students declare this major as freshmen causing tracking issues with OAIR

Conclusion. This standard is met with room for improvement.

Recommendation(s). Add student facing assessment early in the curriculum to gain insights into early student expectations goals and desires (catching any students who may transfer away). Introduce a Tracking mechanism to monitor time to graduation, this can be as simple as a question and an exit survey.
Yes

E. Contribution to General Education

This program currently supports 3 general education courses for the campus which is reasonable considering its unique size and structure. The supported courses are Urban Studies 150 (Social Sciences and Cultural Diversity), Urban Studies 250 (Global Impacts and Innovation), and Urban Studies 360 (Social Sciences).

F. Faculty

A. Faculty Composition

The Urban Studies Program is composed of 25 faculty members, of which 24 have tenure homes in other departments. Jamie Harris (Teaching Associate Professor, with faculty status) is the sole faculty

member whose line is within Urban Studies. The other 24 faculty members affiliated with Urban Studies have a wide range of expertise – including, for example, in architecture, education, engineering, geography, history, literary studies, nursing, sociology, public health, and urban planning. While the program’s affiliated faculty provide for the program’s interdisciplinary breadth, the program’s core courses are taught by one faculty member and two TAs whose lines are within Urban Studies, which insures a stable and consistent foundation for the major.

B. Faculty Numbers and Qualifications

Among the 25 faculty members that compose the Urban Studies Program, 11 are full professors, 12 associate professors, 1 assistant professor, 1 teaching associate professor, and 2 TA instructors. The program’s affiliated faculty come from 13 different departments and 5 different colleges across the UWM campus, bringing a range of different perspectives and approaches to the field. The program’s self-study notes that its breadth of disciplinary approaches sets it apart from urban studies programs at most other institutions across the country, which tend to be more limited in scope.

C. Faculty Workload

The workload chart is not applicable to interdisciplinary programs like Urban Studies that rely mostly on affiliated faculty.

Conclusion:

This standard has been met: Faculty and instructional academic staff are qualified and in sufficient numbers to provide quality learning experiences.

This standard (that TT faculty devote at least 25% of their time to the undergraduate program) is not directly applicable to the Urban Studies Program, since the program does not itself have tenure-track faculty. However, the program does meet this standard in spirit, since the majority of courses that count toward an urban studies major are taught by tenured and tenure-track faculty members.

Recommendation(s).

The Urban Studies Programs' reliance on affiliated faculty for delivering many of the elective courses in the major should continue to build upon and further encourage faculty collaboration and discussion of program curriculum and student advising needs.

G. Students

A. Student Numbers and Composition

- The program has demonstrated enrollment growth, with 33 declared majors reported by OAIR for Fall 2024 and 46 active major course plans tracked internally.
- The major attracts students from diverse backgrounds, and the graduate teaching assistants instructing introductory courses reflect significant diversity.

B. Student Success

- Students benefit from applied learning experiences and community engagement, though some structural challenges exist regarding broad interdisciplinary advising.
- Retention for first-year and transfer students fluctuates, but transfer student retention consistently reaches 100% in multiple tracking years.
- Career and professional development opportunities are currently introduced in the capstone course, but there is room to expand these services.

- There is clear evidence from program-supplied tracking data of graduates that alumni of the urban studies degree have found meaningful employment opportunities in urban studies and other fields.

Conclusion. The standards for adequate student numbers and sufficient resources for assisting students are met.

Recommendation(s). Implement a formal process for identifying and addressing student achievement gaps through targeted advising. Partner more closely with the Student Excellence and Training (SET) office to direct students toward comprehensive career discernment and networking events.

H. Plans for the future

- The department's primary focus is to improve clarity and administrative efficiency for the accelerated BA-MUP program by implementing mandatory subplan designations to ensure correct advising.
- The program plans to review course evaluations specifically through the lens of student retention.
- There is an intention to survey students who drop out or face delays to better understand and mitigate barriers to completion.

Summary and General Recommendations: The Urban Studies major provides a highly interdisciplinary, community-engaged curriculum that successfully prepares students for diverse professional careers and graduate studies. The program is financially efficient, effectively utilizing affiliated faculty to deliver robust course offerings. Moving forward, the program should focus on reinforcing its academic advising structures—especially for the accelerated degree track—and continue monitoring the financial health of its endowment to ensure long-term stability and sustained student support.