

Review of:

**The Master of Science in Criminal Justice (online)
Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology
Sam Houston State University**

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Introduction

This report reviews the Master of Science in Criminal Justice (online) in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Sam Houston State University. Our evaluation is based on a review of the self-study that was provided to us, an examination of the Department's website, and meetings with administrators, faculty, students, and staff that are affiliated with the university, department, and program. Our review first provides a brief overview of the program. Second, we discuss its strengths. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of some of its challenges and make recommendations to address these issues.

Overview of the Program

The Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology (DCJC) at Sam Houston has a long and distinguished history. It has one of the oldest criminal justice doctoral programs, it has a large network of graduates that have been placed in academic criminal justice programs, and it has outstanding connections to criminal justice organizations. It is not an overstatement to say that the Department has played an important role in defining the academic field of criminal justice. It is clear from the self-study that DCJC has a good understanding of opportunities for growth and change and has made some significant progress with new faculty hires. Our focus here is on the online graduate master's program—a program that is ranked as the second best online program overall among graduate programs in criminal justice and the top online criminal justice program for veterans. It seems to us that the Department as a whole has an outstanding reputation overall as it is considered a top, national leader in criminal justice online education.

The Master of Science program is over twenty years old, but moved to a completely online format starting in 2013. The program is primarily designed for criminal justice practitioners. Its mission, vision, and goals focus on providing high quality instruction to mostly current or soon to be practitioners in the field of criminal justice. The belief then is that the delivery of the curriculum will increase professionalism, critical thinking, and knowledge of cutting-edge practices in the field. The design of the program allows students to complete the degree in two years. Since 2015, the program has produced almost 160 graduates (note that more than half of the graduations have occurred since Fall 2019), have roughly 100 students currently enrolled (note that enrollment has more than tripled in last five years), and just under 30 complete the program each year. Class size is relatively small averaging approximately 25 students per class at a 7:1 student-to-faculty ratio.

Most MSCJ students are from Texas (85%). The students are current professionals working in criminal justice seeking another credential or students who recently completed an undergraduate degree and wanting to continue their education before transitioning into a criminal justice position. The student population is diverse as about 70 percent currently enrolled are females, 12 percent are African American, 41 percent are Hispanic, and 35 percent are European American. Data on current employment is not systematically collected although a survey was completed in 2021 with 36 respondents. An equal number of students work in law enforcement or private intelligence, mental health agencies, or crime labs (at about 40%) and the remaining student respondents worked in corrections or courts. Interestingly, over 35 percent of the respondents said they changed jobs after completing the program which may be evidence of the degree opening up new opportunities for students.

There are 29 tenure-track and 6 non-tenure track faculty available to teach in the online program. Faculty in the Department are well respected internationally, are extraordinarily productive, and are diverse, interdisciplinary scholars. In fact, faculty that teach in the MSCJ program have published over 200 journal articles since 2016. The faculty has achieved significant success with obtaining research grant funding. Teaching evaluation scores are very high with a mean average of about 4.4 on a 5.0 scale. There is financial support provided to faculty to develop a new online course (up to \$4,000), and faculty can access support from the Criminal Justice Online Team. Students and faculty seem to have adequate access to IT and computer support.

The administrative structure includes the College Dean, the Chair of the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, Senior Associate Dean, the director of the MSCJ program, and a Graduate Coordinator/Advisor. The program is also supported by SHSU online for course development and instructional design specialists. Students are admitted on a rolling basis, with admissions deadlines August 1 and November 1. The admissions committee considers data typical of online graduate admissions: transcripts with a required 3.0 GPA, GRE scores (upon request), personal essay, three letters of recommendation and a 550 TOEFL score for international students. The number of students denied admission has ranged from 24 to 55 percent.

Student progress is monitored each semester and the College of Criminal Justice's Graduate Advisement Coordinator, the Director of the MSCJ, and MSCJ faculty are all available to guide students through the program and answer any questions. In order to complete the program, students must complete 36 course credit hours. Twenty-one credits are filled by required courses and 15 courses are filled by electives. This balance is similar to other comparable online master's degree programs. The required courses include a Capstone Course, Critical Analysis of Justice Administration, Seminar in Organization and Administration, Research Methods and Quantitative Analysis in Criminal Justice, Ethics in Criminal Justice, Program Evaluation in Criminal Justice, Community Theory and the Administration of Justice, and Emergent Issues in Criminal Justice Leadership.

Students must take a capstone course where they complete a "Portfolio Project" and a "Demonstration Project." The Portfolio includes a 1). Leadership Philosophy Statement and Management Preparation Statement; 2. Academic Integrative Essay; 3. Professional Development Activities, Applications, and Points; and 4). Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Individual Assessment.

Students generally finance their own graduate education. The program has strong retention rates overall at about 75 percent, with graduation rates between 20 and 40 percent of students after a 2-year period, and 3-year graduation rates for Fall and Spring cohorts ranged from 61%-82% and 43%-59%. These rates are what one might expect considering that the students are generally part-time and are managing other full-time work and life responsibilities.

Strengths

The strengths of the MSCJ program include the following:

- In general, the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Sam Houston has

a long history and an excellent international and national reputation. Moreover, its online programs have consistently been ranked among the very best. The Department receives considerable support from the university administration, the state legislature, and Texas criminal justice agencies.

- The College includes a number of criminal justice training and research institutes. Thus, the reputation of the school among its students and its connections to practitioners certainly provide sufficient opportunities for marketing and recruitment.
- Faculty members who teach in the M.S. program are primarily full-time faculty in the Department and are recognized in the field for their areas of expertise. The faculty are highly successful publishing their research, receiving grant funding to complete original research, partnering with criminal justice organizations to work on policy-oriented projects, and using these research opportunities to mentor graduate students.
- The Department also employs highly qualified practitioners to teach in the M.S. program, including the Director of the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT). The involvement of practitioners is critical as it helps to illustrate how research and theory gets translated into practice.
- The M.S. program also benefits from its flexibility. It is quite challenging for professionals to carve out the necessary time to complete a graduate degree while working full-time, but the MSCJ programs is aware of the challenges and designed a program where completing the program in a reasonable period of time, usually within 2- to 3-years. Costs are competitive.
- There is significant support for both faculty, students, and staff for the development and delivery of the online courses.

Challenges and Recommendations

1. Leadership

We heard that current Director Gerber and past Director Brown are doing/did an outstanding job growing and maintaining the program. It is important to have an effective leader in this role and it will be critical to find a strong replacement once Director Gerber steps down. We think that either leadership model that has been in place (faculty-led; non-tenure track phd-led) could be successful, but it is critical to continue to have an effective leader in this position.

We do think that the small stipend that is given to administrator this program is an insufficient incentive. It is critical that a faculty member fully invests in trying to build the program and take it over once Director Gerber steps down, but the stipend is not sufficient for producing an adequate “pool of candidates.” Our belief is that lieu of offering a stipend to administrator the program, the Department should offer a 2 course reduction. Doing so would make taking on the role of leader more appealing to faculty members (the stipend could be

offered as an either/or if preferred). This might incentivize a larger pool of faculty members to take a leadership role as it would allow them to continue to maintain their active research portfolio while administering the program.

The second option, identifying a strong non-tenure track phd with practitioner experience, is also viable and could be promising with the right candidate, but it would likely be more costly. We think that asking this administrator to teach multiple courses might offset the costs, but one of the key issues we heard from the students we interviewed is that they want more and not less faculty contact.

2. Faculty Involvement

The teaching evaluations score for current faculty are high and the students that were interviewed emphasized the quality of instruction. The students felt that faculty were providing access to cutting-edge knowledge and, in general, the students felt that the structure and delivery of course content was excellent.

There would be added value in increasing student access to more of the outstanding faculty members from the department, involve them in extracurricular learning opportunities when opportunities arise, and create informal ways to connect faculty to online master students. We have a couple of suggestions to consider. First, it would make sense to offer faculty not currently involved in the program, and would want to teach in it, a course reduction for a semester to develop an online course to serve as an additional elective to offer on a consistent basis. There really is not enough electives for students. Second, there is some portion of students that want more connection to the department and faculty. Although distant learners, students are still looking for other ways to connect with each other and the university. There should be online opportunities for research talks to help with connectivity, or to offer seminars/research talks delivered by faculty to these students. Such seminars would be well attended and provide students the opportunity to connect with the school more effectively. We believe that such connections will help in establishing relationships that could also be helpful in building an alumni network.

3. Growth

The application, acceptance and enrollment data indicates that the program is healthy. The program reviews applications twice a year (spring; fall) and we would not recommend adding a third application cycle (summer). On average, the program receives about 140 applications per year (more applications in fall than spring), accepts about 45 percent of the applicants, and about 30 percent of students actually enroll. As there has not really been a major push to increase the number of applications, these numbers speak a lot to the reputation of the department and the program and its sustainability.

There is some room for growth, but it does not have to be substantial. The self-study argues that one goal is to get to 150 students in the program. This seems to be a lot to absorb without expanding the administrative help to administer the program, faculty involvement, and course offerings. We think a plan to increase enrollment slowly, to perhaps 10 additional students a year, and then evaluate the impact on the overall faculty/student experience. We recommend keeping the size of classes to be maintained at about 20 students, and offering a few more electives would help to grow the program slowly.

As was stated previously, the diversity of the student body is outstanding with 12 percent African American and 41 percent Hispanic. This diversity is impressive but we would still

recommend attempting to increase the size of both of these groups. One suggestion to do this effectively would be to survey alumni of the program on a number of issues, including how they learned about the program and factors related to enrollment. One could easily examine the results in a comparative fashion and tailor some marketing strategies accordingly (see below).

4. Marketing/Branding

As we stated previously, the program has had great success attracting students to the program with only modest investment. An important discussion we had with faculty and staff is whether there should be an effort to attract students from a wider geographical area or even increase the number of international students. Currently, 85 percent of the students in the program live in Texas. We actually do not view this as a negative aspect of the program for three reasons. First, most “general” criminal justice online Master’s programs focus more on regional/state enrollments. Second, there would have to be a significant investment to attract national or international students which would probably only result in a modest uptick in applications. It is important to remember that there is not a need for significant growth. Third, the program is already attracting outstanding candidates under the current model.

The only question is whether there are untapped areas in the State of Texas. A simple geographical map of program participants could highlight potential new market areas to also attract. In short, we believe that some amount of investment in marketing could be helpful, but the resources should be spent in target areas within the State.

5. Consider Options for Offering a Capstone Alternative

The Capstone course appears to be a good end-of-program course, allowing the student to reflect on their experience. Course ratings are good, and the students who we interviewed thought that it was an effective course. We do believe, however, that some portion of the students (maybe as many as 20-25 percent), would be interested in another type of end-of-program course. It is likely that some students will want to pursue a PhD at some point, but may not be ideally positioned to enroll because they will have had minimal research experience and have not produced an independent research project. We recommend that the Department consider offering a research project option in lieu of completing the capstone seminar. This course could focus on guiding students through the steps of conducting an independent research project. Students could decide their own subject area and produce a project that exposes them to the research proposal/project process. Current students that we interviewed to note that there was not significant opportunity to specialize and take diverse electives, but this type of course would provide one additional way for students to pursue specific topics of interest to them.

6. Tracking and Developing Long-term Relationships with Students

Although this is a challenge for most graduate programs, there is great value in developing a strong alumni network with graduates. It is important to remember that a large portion of the students are already working in the field as practitioners. This is valuable for several reasons. First, your current and former students are probably your best and least expensive source for marketing of the program. Informal contacts and word of mouth are really powerful sources of advertising. Second, these graduates are already/going to be leaders in the field. They could provide access to students to get experience via internships, but also could end up being research partners for graduate students and faculty to conduct research studies and potential give access to data.

