

School of Agricultural Sciences

Master of Agriculture in SAFE

Response to External Review

The external review of the Master of Agriculture in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Environment (SAFE) program was broken categories based on different areas of interest. For each area we have offered a brief summary of the reviewer's key points and the programs response.

Strengths

First off, the reviewer discussed the strengths of the SAFE program. They mentioned that the faculty were engaging and brought a sense of community to students. This along with the high-quality teaching and research were vital to the program. These are things the School of Agricultural Sciences strives for in its courses and believe are things we need to include when marketing the program.

Additionally, the reviewer noted the scholarships provided by the university for our online students was a strength, yet only 2 of the 22 current students in the program are being funded by these scholarships. This is an issue that really is tied to the online nature of the program. Without regular interaction with the students it is difficult to know each student and their individual needs. While they are all informed that these finding opportunities exist, it is difficult to follow through with each student as you do not interact with them on a daily basis.

Next the reviewer commented on how the proposed facilities in the School of Agricultural Sciences can be used to improve our online offerings and strengthen the SAFE program as a whole even though the students are 100% online. With this we agree whole-heartedly but would like to note that until the proposed facilities are built and accessible, we are working with a number of outdated facilities as well as a horse barn that was recently condemned and torn down without a replacement. In short it will be a number of years before we can utilize the proposed facilities to improve and strengthen the SAFE program.

Another strength that the reviewer mentioned was the flexibility of the program. The numerous elective courses have been intentionally designed into the program to ensure that students will not be prevented from graduating by missing a single course from the rotation. However, without the faculty lines to increase the number of course offerings, students are required to take almost all of the elective courses offered by default. Within the curriculum of the SAFE program the reviewer also mentioned the internship component as a strength of the program. While we agree that this helps with the hands-on learning that is so often missing from online programs, it is difficult to design and provide oversight for these courses as each one requires faculty guidance. However, this opportunity for applicable learning is a definite marketing point for the program.

Areas of Improvement

One of the main areas for improvement noted by the reviewer was enrollment and the lack of consistent marketing. The reviewer stated there was a faculty to student ratio of 1.76 to 1, which we believe may be misleading as only two adjuncts teach only in the SAFE program and all other faculty have appointments teaching in undergraduate, the Master of Science in Agriculture program and the SAFE program. Regardless, enrollment is lower than desired, and this is an area that the School of Agricultural Sciences has also identified as a problem and wanted to focus on. The review made a suggestion of having a person (graduate assistant in agriculture communications) run organic advertising through social media by highlighting current students within the program focusing on their current careers, goals, and what they enjoy about the program. While this is an excellent idea, it would require faculty oversight for consistent content and due to the limited number of faculty lines this would be added to a faculty member's already overloaded workload. We agree with the need for consistent marketing that needs to target upper level undergraduates, sustainable and organic agriculture interest groups, as well as those people who are simply ready for a career change. In short, marketing alone can be a full-time job and is not feasible for a faculty members who are already stretched thin due to their responsibilities in undergraduate teaching and in our other graduate program. This issue of staffing was also brought up by the reviewer who saw the same bottleneck in teaching responsibilities of the faculty. However, a graduate assistant position for the SAFE program may allow us to regularly recruit students who can help in this effort. That in combination with university efforts in marketing the program may allow us to aggressively market program in order to meet enrollment goals.

A second issue brought up by the reviewer was the entry and exit points of the program. Currently, the program only accepts incoming students in a cohort system each fall. We have noticed that this has limited some incoming students who wish to start in the Spring or Summer and agree that we should open enrollment to Spring, Summer and Fall semesters. While this is a relatively easy fix, the reviewer also noted that the two-year rotation of courses impedes a student coming in and completing a degree in a timely manner. Faculty currently have some difficulty fitting in the SAFE courses into their current rotation of classes and additional staffing would be needed to enable the courses to be taught more regularly. This was also noted in the review when the review stated that pool faculty (adjunct) maybe an opportunity to help with some of the workload, yet one pool faculty will not be the end all to the problem. By a rough count we would need to cover approximately eight courses across roughly five disciplines. In short, it will take a number of adjuncts committed to teaching regularly to take the program from a two-year program to one that offers all courses over a one-year period. Once these instructors are in place it would allow us to expand the course selection in the SAFE program by offering novel courses beyond the core courses already offered. This would help with the lack of options mentioned by the students during the review. Additionally, the reviewer noted that students had some course design issues. As a result, it will be important to review the courses

to make sure that all courses, regardless of instructor, have consistency in course design to make courses uniform.

The last main issue that the reviewer brought forward was the students' response to advising. In the review it is stated that nearly 38% thought that the advising was neither bad nor good. This is an interesting area as students in the program like to communicate in many different ways and due to the online nature of the program, it is difficult to connect to each student individually as one would in a face to face program. Some want to work only through email, while others only want to talk on the phone for advising purposes. As a result, it is very easy to miss the mark when trying to communicate with students in between the other responsibilities of a normal tenure track faculty position. The reviewer suggests that once the program is large enough that a faculty member be brought in to help teach and manage the program. This is an excellent idea, as it will enable someone to focus solely on the needs of the SAFE program rather than weighing the needs of undergraduates, the Master of Science in Agriculture program and the Master of Agriculture in SAFE programs needs against one another. The sooner this is able to happen the better off the program will be.