

2020-
2025

CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROGRAM REVIEW RESPONSE



Prepared by the Criminal
Justice Faculty of the
Department of Social,
Cultural, and Justice Studies,
the University of Tennessee
at Chattanooga

Overview

The Criminal Justice on-site 5-year external program review was conducted from 2/5/25-2/7/25 by Dr. Kent Kerley, Professor and Chair of the J. Frank Barefield, Jr. Department of Criminal Justice at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). Dr. Kerley earned his PhD in Sociology (Criminology concentration) from the University of Tennessee in 2001. He has since established himself as a widely respected scholar in the field of criminal justice, having authored nearly 60 peer-reviewed publications and received \$1 million in external funding. Dr. Kerley has served as a department chair for 10 years between the University of Texas at Arlington and UAB, each of which is classified as a Carnegie Foundation R1 university. At UAB, he oversees the operations of a department that houses multiple degree programs, 280 undergraduate students, 20 graduate students, and 15 full-time faculty.

During his visit, Dr. Kerley was given time to interact with Interim DH Dr. Rick Dierenfeldt, Associate DH Karen McGuffee, all full-time faculty members, and the majority of the program's graduate students. Beyond the department, Dr. Kerley met with 1) Dr. Cindy Williamson, Director of Accreditation & Assessment and SACSCOC Liaison, 2) Dr. Jerold Hale, Provost and Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, 3) Dr. Pam Riggs-Gelasco, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, 4) Mr. Bo Baker, Library DH of Research and Public Services, and 5) Dr. Victoria Bryan, Director of Walker Center for Teaching and Learning. Dr. Kerley submitted his external review on 2/19/25.

Overall, Dr. Kerley's assessment of the UTC Criminal Justice program was extremely positive. He offered strong praise for the quality of our faculty and the work they produce, our curriculum, and the experiences we provide for our students. He did, however, express serious concerns regarding current staffing levels and our heavy reliance on part-time faculty. Below, we offer a summary of Dr. Kerley's assessment, including his recommendations and our associated responses.

Part 1 – Learning Outcomes

Relative to other criminal justice programs with BSCJ and MSCJ degrees and 3/3 teaching loads, Dr. Kerley ranked our program in the top 25%. He noted that program and learning outcomes were clearly identified and praised the program for its efforts to incorporate standardized measures of outcome and program assessment, create student research opportunities and field experience (e.g., internships), graduate recruitment, and placement of students in occupations related to their field of study.

Recommendation 1: Create a new handbook, including mission, vision, and goals following the dissolution of SCJS and restoration of Criminal Justice as its own department.

Response: The Criminal Justice faculty met in March, 2025, to draft and vote on a new set of department bylaws. This document provides clear guidance on all department-level processes and includes a new mission statement. It has since been forwarded to Legal Affairs and Academic Affairs for final approval. Moreover, the department recently submitted a proposal for additional space to house an AI Crime Analysis Lab, Crime Scene Investigation Lab, Firearms

Training Simulator Lab, and Mock Court Room. This proposal is aligned with the vision and goals established by the newly formed Department of Criminal Justice, including increased enrollment and enhanced applied learning experiences for our students.

Recommendation 2: Have all full- and part-time faculty complete the initial WCTL certification.

Response: Our bylaws now require all adjunct faculty to complete online pedagogy certification offered by WCTL within 1 year of hire. Nearly all part-time faculty are now certified, and all remaining adjuncts and new part-time faculty will join the Fall 2025 cohort. A handful of part-time faculty expressed disinterest in attending this training or failed to complete it. They have since been released from the adjunct pool. All full-time faculty complete pedagogical training offered by the WCTL during their first year. A course release is provided in order to accommodate completion of this training.

Recommendation 3: Have all full-time faculty get at least one course certified for online delivery by Quality Matters.

Response: The department began funding a full-time graduate assistant to support the online program in Fall 2024. During the 2024-2025 academic year, the role of this graduate assistant was to assist in the development of an online shell for CRMJ 1100 Introduction to Criminal Justice, while providing instructional support to criminal justice faculty teaching online courses. Beginning in Fall 2025, the graduate assistant will be expected to work with faculty to prepare courses for Quality Matters (QM) certification. Our goal is to prepare a minimum of two courses for QM certification during the 2025-2026 academic year.

Recommendation 4: Offer at least one section of all core courses each semester.

Response: For several years, many of our core classes were offered once per academic year. It should be noted that this practice was the result of a recommendation made during our 2020 external review. However, this practice ultimately prompted numerous bottlenecks and widespread frustration among students, faculty, and the CAS Advising Hub. Beginning in Spring 2024, the department began offering multiple sections of each core class and in multiple modalities (e.g, at least one F2F and one online section) each semester. As a result, all bottlenecks have been eliminated, and timely matriculation is more strongly supported. This approach has also allowed for incorporation of lower caps in writing intensive courses (e.g, Research Methods and Capstone), coupled with improved satisfaction among students, faculty, and academic advisors. It does, however, present a specific drawback. Due to our current staffing levels, this practice reduces opportunities for full-time faculty to teach electives in their specialty areas. Over time, this is likely to become a point of frustration among full-time faculty—one that can only be relieved if the department is given an adequate number of tenure-line positions to meet student demand for *both* core and elective courses. At present, nearly half of our student credit hours are produced by adjunct faculty.

Recommendation 5: Review previous enrollments to determine which electives are most popular and poll students to obtain ideas for future electives.

Response: The DH, Associate DH, and MSCJ Program Director have continued to work in concert to ensure that popular electives are offered in the undergraduate and graduate programs to the extent possible. The department has also added several electives to the permanent curriculum in recent years, including Homeland Security, Crime Scene Investigation, Sexual Victimization, Cyber Crime, and Mental Health in the Criminal Justice System. As noted above, however, our current staffing levels are not enough to meet growing demand for these electives. Instead, the program has been forced to rely far too heavily on adjunct faculty. As noted by Dr. Kerley, the addition of full-time faculty appears to be the only viable solution to this particular problem.

Recommendation 6: The department might consider conducting routine surveys of their students to ask them about their courses, professors, and any concerns they may have. Surveys of recent graduates can also yield useful data.

Response: The department routinely reviews student evaluations of courses and instructors, and incorporates this feedback to improve learning experiences and outcomes. Beginning in Spring 2025, the department also began to host roundtable sessions within the graduate program in order to provide a forum for graduate students to offer feedback and discuss concerns. We have also completed a final draft of a student experience survey for program alumni, as well as stop-outs and dropouts. The department has reached out to the CAS Advising Hub regarding contact information for stop-outs and dropouts, and the Office of Accreditation and Assessment regarding contact information for alumni. Assuming that the department can secure this contact information, we intend to distribute the survey within the next two academic years.

Part 2 - Curriculum

Again, Dr. Kerley offered high praise of the department's approach to curriculum development. He noted that the criminal justice curriculum, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, reflects current standards, practices, and issues in the discipline while enabling students to develop necessary skills. He further described the department's extensive and on-going efforts to review and revise its curriculum in accordance with student outcomes and experiences. In his report, Dr. Kerley also described the balance of core versus elective offerings and efforts by our faculty members to teach students to be "not only critical thinkers but also problem solvers." Dr. Kerley further noted that he was highly impressed by the department's strong relationship with the WCTL, its efforts to support graduate students through assistantships, and the level of connectedness among students in our programs. Similarly, Dr. Kerley lauded the department's internship program and established record of student scholarship through co-authored manuscripts and conference presentations. Finally, Dr. Kerley praised the department for its efforts to establish clear alignment between the BSCJ and MSCJ programs, as well its mission to offer multiple sections of core courses each semester in both traditional and online modalities. No specific recommendations were made for improvement.

Part 3 – Student Experience

Like the previous sections, Dr. Kerley's assessment was highly positive. He expressed his enthusiasm for the department's use of annual faculty evaluations to improve student

experiences. Specifically, he appreciated the fact that faculty review and respond to student feedback and narrative comments as part of their EDO and use that material to make improvements to their courses. As described by Dr. Kerley, “I cannot recall hearing of a department that has this process for continuous improvement, and it speaks to the accountability, quality, and student engagement expected of faculty in this department.” He further re-emphasized his positive impression of professional and career opportunities made available to students, including those outside the classroom. He also praised the department’s focus on diversity in terms of faculty composition, course offerings, and our two recently implemented lecture series. Finally, Dr. Kerley appeared highly impressed with efforts of our faculty to ensure appropriate academic support services. In particular, he emphasized our relationship with UTC Library and faculty participation in the Affordable Course Materials Initiative (ACMI). Per Dr. Kerley, the library estimates that “over the last three years, 630 students have benefitted from Criminal Justice’s use of ACMI materials and saved nearly \$90,000.” No specific recommendations were made for improvement.

Part 4 - Faculty

Dr. Kerley expressed high praise for the faculty. He noted that the department has actively pursued external funding and established strong relationships with community partners, even as many of our faculty members attempt to juggle these responsibilities with leadership roles in the department, college, university, and discipline. He also reiterated his positive impression of the department’s annual review process and diversity among the faculty in terms of ethnicity, sex, and academic background. Dr. Kerley further emphasized the strong research agenda of our faculty and the frequency with which we present and publish with our students. In terms of grant funding, he indicated that “CAS Dean Pam Riggs-Gelasco noted that CJ was ‘setting a standard’ across the college in terms of how to collaborate with community partners to solicit and receive grant funding. I concur with that assessment...” Finally, Dr. Kerley noted the exceptional service contributions of our faculty members across the department, university, community, and discipline. He did, however, express major concerns about whether there is an adequate number of faculty to meet needs of the program, as well as the ratio between regular and adjunct faculty. Specifically, Dr. Kerley stated, “I have major concerns with faculty staffing. Even as about 40% of full-time faculty are teaching at least one overload course, the department remains heavily reliant on adjunct/part-time faculty. They currently have about 20 adjunct faculty members teaching courses in the department.” He also noted that, “The reliance on adjunct faculty is very concerning on a number of levels. First, and most importantly, this places the department outside the typical acceptable limits of full- v. part-time faculty for SACSCOC. Second, heavy reliance on adjunct faculty makes it difficult for students to connect with faculty when they may not have the same professor for more than one class in four years. Some students could even end up with the large majority of their CJ classes being taught by adjunct faculty. Third, reliance on adjunct faculty can prompt negative reactions from current and prospective parents of students.”

Recommendation 1: At a minimum, the department will need three hires: one tenure-track Assistant Professor, one full-time administrative assistant, and one Visiting Scholar.

Response: Unfortunately, the department can do little in response to this recommendation beyond requesting additional faculty lines from the university—which it has done each of the

past 3 years. The department was given permission to hire a full-time administrative assistant, and she began her duties in June, 2025. Since the time of this review, the department has actually *lost* rather than gained faculty. Dr. Gale Iles passed away unexpectedly in March, 2025. Dr. Sherah Basham resigned her tenure-track position in June, 2025, to assume a research manager position at UTK. Dr. Lindsay Whetter's position as a visiting lecturer was not renewed. Thus, it is expected that more than 50% of our SCH will be produced by adjunct faculty during the 2025-2026 academic year, even as multiple faculty will carry overloads. The department has been granted permission to conduct searches to fill the lines vacated by Dr. Iles and Dr. Basham. A request submitted in June, 2025, for another full-time lecturer was denied. In July, 2025, the DH began meeting with the Provost and Dean of CAS to further discuss possibility of adding a full-time faculty line, preferably tenure-track. At the time of this writing, the Provost and Dean voiced support for an additional line, but no final determination has been made.

Part 5 – Learning Resources

Dr. Kerley praised the department's efforts to regularly evaluate its equipment and facilities, noting that we have requested and received several necessary improvements. He also noted the department's strong relationship with the WCTL and the commitment of our faculty members to utilize all available training and resources to improve learning outcomes. No specific recommendations for improvement were offered.

Part 6 – Support

Dr. Kerley noted that enrollment and graduation rates in Criminal Justice have remained stable for the last several years and have begun to increase over the past two years. He further noted that the department has been responsive to the local, state, regional, and national needs of our discipline. Despite these promising trends, Dr. Kerley was dissatisfied with the current state of our operating budgeting, indicating that it falls short of meeting the needs of our program. He also lamented our staffing levels, arguing that faculty lines represented the most pressing resource need of our program.

Recommendation 1: As noted previously, the department will need three hires in very short order: one tenure-track assistant professor, one full-time administrative assistant, and one Visiting Scholar.

Response: Again, the department maintains little power to directly address this concern. As noted in Part 4, although the department has been able to hire a full-time administrative assistant, it has not been granted two additional faculty lines (1 tenure-track, 1 lecturer) as suggested by Dr. Kerley. In fact, the department lost a visiting lecturer line that had been occupied by Dr. Lindsay Whetter. The DH will continue to submit requests for new lines during this academic year. A request submitted in June, 2025, for another full-time lecturer was denied. In July, 2025, the DH began meeting with the Provost and Dean of CAS to further discuss possibility of adding a full-time faculty line, preferably tenure-track. At the time of this writing, the Provost and Dean voiced support for an additional line, but no final determination has been made.

Part 7 – Summary Recommendations

As described by Dr. Kerley, our program is on a positive trajectory given its 1) enrollments/credit hour production, 2) department leadership, 3) scholarly research and teaching, and 4) external grant funding. He was also “encouraged by the inclusive environment in the department as all faculty input, regardless of rank or time in rank, appears to be taken seriously and is valued. And it is clear that the faculty are committed to teaching and mentoring their students.” He voiced his sentiment that the newly formed Department of Criminal Justice will be an important contributor to the university’s movement towards reclassification as a Carnegie R2 institution. In terms of strengths, Dr. Kerley emphasized the program’s faculty, leadership, and students. Regarding weaknesses, Dr. Kerley pointed to our lack of staffing and heavy reliance on adjunct faculty.