

TO: Digvir Jayas
President and Vice Chancellor

DATE: November 4, 2025

FROM: Lynn Kennedy
Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee

RE: PhD Cultural, Social, and Political Thought Academic Quality Assurance Review

In accordance with the U of L *Academic Quality Assurance Policy and Process*, the Academic Quality Assurance Committee approved the review of the PhD Cultural Social and Political Thought at its September 16, 2025, meeting.

The Self Study Committee for this review was comprised of: Kristine Alexander (Program Review Coordinator), Kim Mair, and Suzanne Lenon.

The review produced 4 documents:

1. Self Study Report. Written by the Self Study Committee. Received February 10, 2025.
2. External Review Report. Written by Dr. Rachel Berger (Concordia University) and Dr. Samantha King (Queen's University) based on a site visit April 23 to 24, 2025. Received May 20, 2025.
3. Program Response. Written by the Self Study Committee. Received June 24, 2025.
4. Dean's Response. Written by Matt Letts, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science and Jackie Rice, Dean of the School of Graduate Studies. Received September 8, 2025.

Self Study Report

The report highlighted a number of program strengths including:

- The CSPT PhD major has successfully graduated students who have found work in academia, government agencies, and the arts.
- The major currently has a strong retention rate, and the graduation rate appears to be improving.
- The small size of the major means that students can receive individualized attention from supervisors and committee members, and the fostering of interdisciplinarity.
- This program allows residents of southern Alberta who cannot undertake a doctoral degree elsewhere to pursue research.

The report also noted some challenges experienced by the program:

- Enrolments in CSPT courses are consistently low, which sometimes results in course cancellations, and a lack of a meaningful cohort experience for students.
- The role of the CSPT Advisory Committee is unclear, as is its relationship with the U of L's Social Sciences and Humanities Graduate Program Committee. (For example, the CSPT Advisory Committee's recommendations to reject unqualified applicants (students who don't meet the minimum GPA, for example) are regularly overruled by the Social Sciences and Humanities Graduate Program Committee (SSHGPC).
- Lack of focused recruitment and marketing of the CSPT PhD; for example, the major does not have its own website (akin to a department website).
- Uncertainty whether or to what extent graduate supervision is recognized in faculty members' professional activity evaluations as part of faculty workload.
- Graduate student funding is low relative to other institutions, and is particularly egregious for international students.
- Uncertainty and inconsistency with respect to Comprehensive Examination expectations and process.
- The program's interdisciplinary nature is often interpreted too broadly ("interdisciplinary" acting as an empty signifier for some potential students, supervisors, and administrators).
- Current admissions criteria focus on student achievement, with no consideration of fit with supervisor expertise and the curriculum/goals of the CSPT major.
- There are disparate rates of familiarity with the major among faculty and administrators.

The report made several recommendations and asked for External Reviewer feedback on several areas including:

- The CSPT major embodies the U of L's commitment to Liberal Education; this could be highlighted and celebrated more.
- There is a strong research culture among faculty who teach and supervise in the major, which could be used more effectively to recruit students.

- Efforts to promote, and recruit to the MA in CSPT could help to address low course enrollments, as the MA is underperforming with respect to expected/target numbers, while the PhD regularly attracts multiple applicants. There is also the potential for promotion and recruitment efforts to attract students who have received MA degrees from similar programs.
- How can the identity, learning objectives, and scope of the PhD CSPT major be more effectively communicated to students, faculty, and administration to resolve problems with our admissions process and ensure that admitted students are prepared to succeed?
- Do courses reflect the major's purported interdisciplinarity? Are there other courses we should be offering? Are there courses we should be changing, updating, or eliminating?
- How might our major's comprehensive examination process be strengthened and better communicated? What mechanisms would help to ensure that, in practice, the content of these examinations is consistent with the major's learning outcomes?
- How can the major best nurture and sustain a cohort model?
- How might we improve the efficacy of the major's governance structure, particularly with respect to the role and adequacy of the CSPT Advisory committee, and to its relationship with the Social Sciences and Humanities Graduate Program Committee?
- How can the School of Graduate Studies better promote and support this PhD major?
- The U of L continues to undergo significant budget cuts, and many faculty survey answers indicate a reluctance to supervise/teach in the major in the future. Is the PhD CSPT major sustainable?

External Review Report

The External Review Report contained twelve (12) recommendations for improving the PhD Cultural, Social, and Political Thought:

- Establish a clear and transparent process for appointing a program Coordinator who would have the capacity to serve a three-year term, thus enhancing stability and providing the program with the attention it requires.
- Provide one additional course release per year to support the Coordinator in fulfilling their responsibilities.
- Develop terms of reference for the Advisory Committee, including policies and procedures around the appointment and role of committee members, thus creating sustainable program stewardship.
- Develop a mechanism to recognize supervisory work as part of faculty workload.
- Enhance the cohort model and communication among the Coordinator, the Advisory Council, supervisors, instructors, and students through the development of a student-supervisor handbook, a program website, and regular seminars, program sessions and professional development/career/other workshops.
- Conduct a curriculum review focused on content and credit structure.
- Conduct an evaluation of student progress through the degree.
- Collaborate with SGS to provide professional development and make use of para curricular programming.

- Collaborate with SGS to build career-planning support into the program.
- Clarify the program's scope and align admissions criteria and process with that scope.
- Streamline the admissions process and appoint the Coordinator to sit on the Social Sciences and Humanities Graduate Program Committee (SSHGPC) to ensure the program retains appropriate autonomy in student admissions.
- Review the capacity for increased enrolment.

Program Response

In their Program Response, the Self Study Committee addressed the recommendations from the External Review Report as follows.

1. Establish a clear and transparent process for appointing a program Coordinator	The program agrees with this recommendation.
2. Provide one additional course release per year to support the Coordinator	The program agrees with this recommendation. However, we would suggest that compensation be two course releases or the equivalent, for example, RA support. One of the challenges in recruiting a coordinator is the impact on course releases for the curricula of small (and shrinking) departments. The labour involved in coordinating the CSPT PhD major is considerable, and having this recognized with an additional course release and/or RA support would likely make more faculty interested in taking on this role.
3. Develop terms of reference for the Advisory Committee, including policies and procedures around the appointment and role of committee members	The program agrees with this recommendation. Based upon discussion with the External Reviewers, we also believe that there should be a more formalized and transparent process for the selection of the Advisory Committee Members and open calls for course instructors, yet, if there is an institutional commitment to preserving the coherence of the current critical method/theory/content, as the Reviewers recommend, care must be taken that members are likewise committed.
4. Develop a mechanism to recognize supervisory work as part of faculty workload	The program agrees with this recommendation.
5. Enhance the cohort model and communication among the Coordinator, the Advisory Council, supervisors, instructors, and students through the development of a student-supervisor handbook, a program website, and regular seminars	The program agrees with this recommendation.
6. Conduct a curriculum review focused on content and credit structure	The program agrees with this recommendation.
7. Conduct an evaluation of student progress through the degree	The program agrees with this recommendation.
8. Collaborate with SGS to provide professional development and make use of para curricular programming	The program agrees with this recommendation.
9. Collaborate with SGS to build career-planning support into the program	The program agrees with this recommendation.
10. Clarify the program's scope and align admissions criteria and process with that scope	The program agrees with the reviewers' caution "against transforming this rigorous, focused program into a catch-

	all interdisciplinary degree” and that “further broadening it would threaten the harmony of the critical method/theory/content balance that makes it exceptional” (p.3). To achieve this goal, the CSPT Advisory Committee’s recommendations about admissions need to be taken more seriously by the Social Sciences and Humanities Graduate Program Committee and the School of Graduate Studies.
11. Streamline the admissions process and appoint the Coordinator to sit on the Social Sciences and Humanities Graduate Program Committee	We agree with this recommendation. It is vital that the CSPT Coordinator be a member of the Social Sciences and Humanities Graduate Program Committee.
12. Review the capacity for increased enrolment	We agree with this recommendation, and with the reviewers’ suggestion that this can only be achieved through “a reinvigoration of institutional commitment to the vision of CSPT.”

Deans’ Response

The Deans of the Faculty of Arts and Science and School of Graduate Studies responded to the recommendations from the External Review Report.

1. Establish a clear and transparent process for appointing a program Coordinator	The Deans of the School of Graduate Studies and the Faculty of Arts & Science agree with the recommendation to develop a procedure for deciding upon a Coordinator. We have not encountered a situation in which there are multiple faculty members interested in this role, perhaps because many suitable candidates are early in their careers. However, a process should be established to determine how this would be done in this cross-Faculty and multi-departmental interdisciplinary doctoral program. In the absence of an interim Coordinator, Associate Deans will coordinate the program this in 2025-6, followed by a newly appointed candidate in 2026-27 and 2027-28. We will endeavor to define this process by that time.
2. Provide one additional course release per year to support the Coordinator	We recently carried out a program sustainability exercise in which Chair and Coordinator compensation was reduced across the Faculty of Arts & Science. This was done to find adequate teaching capacity under budgetary constraints. In this context, one of the challenges in recruiting a coordinator is the impact of course releases on curriculum delivery on already small units with decreasing numbers of faculty members and reduced sessional budgets. Furthermore, the labour involved in coordinating the CSPT PhD major is considerable. Given the importance of the CSPT program for Ph.D. level teaching and research in the social sciences, humanities and beyond, we will provide two course releases per year through 2027-28, as we work to develop a sustainable program with more efficient course delivery across disciplines. In addition to the idea of including a Graduate Assistant (Research) as an option for compensation, research stipends and salary stipends could also be provided, so that there could be two course releases or perhaps one course release plus one of these three options. The School of Graduate Studies Dean notes that in other Faculties there is an Associate Dean whose portfolio includes more fulsome oversight of

	graduate programs. That model may not currently work for Arts & Science at present; however, it could be worth considering with some changes in resource allocation under discussion. However, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts & Science notes that any process for deciding on a Coordinator would need to be consistent with processes for other Coordinators and that there is an existing Chair Selection Committee process that could be used as a good starting point.
3. Develop terms of reference for the Advisory Committee, including policies and procedures around the appointment and role of committee members	The School of Graduate Studies Dean notes that the Faculty of Health Sciences has several advisory committees that contribute to decision-making around some of their graduate programs. There may be some lessons to learn from in terms of what they found worked, or didn't work, for their advisory committees. The Dean of the Faculty of Arts & Science notes that the acting coordinators are beginning to work on such a committee and intend to have this established this year. At the same time, we caution that there is an overall need at the University of Lethbridge to lessen, rather than increase, service and administration workload, so that the effectiveness of the committee will need to be clearly demonstrated, including sufficient enrolment.
4. Develop a mechanism to recognize supervisory work as part of faculty workload	This is a broader theme of discussion across the institution. The normal assignment of teaching duties moved from five to four courses for research faculty in the early 2000's. This move was to provide time for the supervision of graduate students, independent studies, applied studies, and Honors' theses. Such mentorship is highly valued in performance evaluation when done effectively. Budgetary limitation prevents additional compensation for graduate supervision, unless a new model is implemented with higher teaching load for those with less involvement in these elements. This is because, after recent sustainability efforts, it would be very challenging to sufficiently further reduce the total number of courses taught by tenure-track and continuing faculty through program streamlining, cross-listing or program elimination. Faculty members who supervise multiple graduate students may propose to their Chair and Dean to adjust workload allocation for PAR purposes, by increasing the teaching and research fractions. The School of Graduate Studies Dean also suggests that better processes and support for graduate supervisory activities will help to reduce the occasional highly intensive efforts for students who are having difficulties and to streamline institutional support for students, thus reducing supervisor workload where possible.
5. Enhance the cohort model and communication among the Coordinator, the Advisory Council, supervisors, instructors, and students through the development of a student-supervisor handbook, a program website, and regular seminars	Professional development activities can be supported by the School of Graduate Studies Manager of Graduate Student Engagement. The School of Graduate Studies cannot provide resources to support development of program specific materials; however, School of Graduate Studies materials could be distributed and/or modified by the program coordinator or others who champion this

	program. It is agreed that we must always strive for excellent communication among all involved.
6. Conduct a curriculum review focused on content and credit structure	The Faculty of Arts & Science and the School of Graduate Studies both agree with this recommendation. The current model is unsustainable from a resource perspective. A model with three-credit courses, or at least a program not requiring nine different courses, would be more efficient. We recommend that series courses could be the focus of a three-course model, so that different instructors could deliver the courses while providing their expertise, and these courses could count for both the M.A., and the Ph.D. Student will also need the ability to take suitable courses for program credit from outside the program when needed.
7. Conduct an evaluation of student progress through the degree	The School of Graduate Studies notes that Graduate Studies staff could provide data that could contribute to this analysis. The School of Graduate Studies will be hiring a Financial Officer who also may be able to assist with some of the analysis work, but this position will not be in place for several months. The Faculty of Arts & Science also agrees with this recommendation as supporting student progress is critical and will conduct some analysis of Progress and Standing Forms for the CSPT Ph.D. However, the Faculty also cautions that we must (i) avoid additional administrative complexity for students, faculty and staff while developing such processes and (ii) not reduce opportunities for Ph.D. students interested in obtaining valuable teaching experience from doing so.
8. Collaborate with SGS to provide professional development and make use of para curricular programming	The Deans agree with this recommendation, but the School of Graduate Studies Dean notes that the coordination of professional development activities falls in the portfolio of the Manager of Graduate Student Engagement. The Graduate Funding Facilitator can also be a part of developing skills for a CSPT cohort, particularly around scholarship- and grant-writing.
9. Collaborate with SGS to build career-planning support into the program	The Deans agree with this recommendation and the School of Graduate Studies Dean notes that this would be an excellent model for what all graduate programs should be building into their planning.
10. Clarify the program's scope and align admissions criteria and process with that scope	School of Graduate Studies Response: One way to incorporate more input into those decisions would be to have the Coordinator of the CSPT program be a statutory member of the Social Science and Humanities Graduate Program Committee. That change could be discussed with the Faculty of Arts & Science, who assign members to that committee. With regard to scope, while this should not be a catch-all interdisciplinary degree, one concern is that the name may suggest a broader theme of scholarship than is envisioned by the coordinator and other champions. Clear communication is essential, and also support for other faculty members in the institution who currently have no access to Ph.D. opportunities for their students outside of this program. If there is general agreement that the current focus should not be broadened, then the Dean recommends that other Deans

	be supported in exploring avenues for Ph.D. programming that would complement this program and allow faculty outside of the current CSPT focus to engage in Ph.D. supervision. Faculty of Arts & Science response: This is an interdisciplinary Ph.D. of importance across many fields. If sufficient resources are not available to develop additional Ph.D. programs in narrow disciplines, the program will need to remain open to students from multiple fields. In fact, there is an additional need for more efficient programming whereby regularized three-credit graduate courses are available to students across disciplines, perhaps employing a series courses. Individual Ph.D. programs can be very focused on committees from narrow fields, but we need courses that benefit all. The reviewers were impressed by the rigour and theoretical grounding provided in the CSPT Ph.D. program, but there may be examples of exceptions to this that are concerning. Some course instructors have raised concern that it can be difficult to maintain rigour with students with such varied backgrounds and needs for their theses. One idea to consider might be to develop curriculum streaming, with a theoretically driven stream primarily for Social Sciences students and another stream that would serve the needs of Humanities and Fine Arts students.
11. Streamline the admissions process and appoint the Coordinator to sit on the Social Sciences and Humanities Graduate Program Committee	The School of Graduate Studies Dean agrees with the proposed addition of the CSPT coordinator to the SSHGPC (as mentioned above). The Dean of Arts & Science also likes the idea of these members being appointed but notes that no other program gets an automatic representative, so this needs to be considered as decisions are made as to how this is done. It is already possible to bring ideas and concerns to Graduate Council and nominations and self-nominations to Council are highly likely to be successful, so we recommend that this problem might be resolved simply by the Coordinator putting names forward. This would be consistent with the process for other coordinated graduate programs. Considering the offer to provide two course releases as these review recommendations are implemented, another solution might be for the Coordinator to also sit on Graduate Council.
12. Review the capacity for increased enrolment	The School of Graduate Studies Dean notes that it is difficult to envision how increased enrolment can be achieved if additional resources are being sought to support existing enrolment, and if the current focus of the program is not to be broadened. It may be that the program should focus on the current enrolment capacity and effective and efficient support processes at the current levels, and reconsider enrolment growth opportunities when some of the resourcing questions have been addressed. The Faculty of Arts & Science agrees with the Graduate Studies perspective that efficiencies can be found within the delivery of courses within the program but also notes that we have now

Provost's Action Plan

Consulting the External Reviewer Recommendations, the Program Response, and Dean Matt Letts, the Academic Quality Assurance Committee made the following three (3) recommendations for action which the Program must report on in 1 and 3 years:

1. The Faculty of Arts and Science and the School of Graduate Studies will establish a clear process for appointing a program Coordinator for CSPT going forward including a transparent discussion of key duties, compensation, and memberships in associated committees (e.g. SSHGPC; Grad Council, etc.).
2. The CSPT Coordinator(s), along with the Deans of the Arts and Science and the School of Graduate Studies, will develop the terms of reference for a new CSPT Advisory committee which takes into account the best uses of time and expertise. Membership will ideally include representatives from Social Sciences, Humanities, and Fine Arts.
3. The CSPT Coordinator(s) and the Advisory Committee, in consultation with all of the various stakeholders, will:
 - a. Conduct a curriculum review considering:
 - i. if program requirements need to be changed to reflect current student needs and available resources.
 - ii. whether the programs offerings need to be broadened or redefined.
 - iii. how best to clarify program scope and align admissions criteria.
 - iv. the relative merits of 1.5 versus 3.0 credit courses.
 - b. Work to improve communication with instructors, and current (and potential) students, by improving the website and potentially developing handbooks and workshops.
 - c. Evaluate student progress patterns through the degree and review the capacity for increased enrolment.
 - d. Work with SGS to provide professional development opportunities.

The Academic Quality Assurance Committee is satisfied that the PhD Cultural, Social, and Political Thought academic quality assurance review has followed the U of L's academic quality assurance process appropriately, and acknowledges the successful completion of the review.

Sincerely,



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Associate Professor, Department of History and Religion

cc Michelle Helstein, PhD.
Provost & Vice-President (Academic)