Florida Atlantic University

Sociology BA, MA

Program Review: February 26-28, 2020
Program Review Report Submitted:

Program Review Team:

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This report provides the findings of the review team for the undergraduate and graduate programs in Sociology. The findings are based on the department self-study, which included appendices containing supporting documentation, and the meetings conducted with the following individuals.

- Dr. Ann Branaman, Chair of the Sociology Department
- Dr. Russell Ivy, Senior Associate Provost for Academic Affairs
- Dr. Karin Scarpinato, Senior Associate Vice President for Research
- Dr. Edward Pratt, Dean of Undergraduate Studies
- Dr. Anthony Ambrosio, Director of Undergraduate Assessment
- Assistant Professors Will McConnell, Phil Lewin, Laura Backstrom, Lotus Seeley and Carter Koppelman
- Associate Professors Phil Hough, Patricia Widener, and Farshad Araghi
- Instructors Maritza Flores, Gina Carreno-Lukasik, Greg Lukasik, and Robert Caputi
- Program Assistant Cathy King
- Undergraduate Students
- Graduate Students
- Dr. Michael Horswell, Dean and Professor of the College of Arts and Letters

These meetings were well-organized, informative, and enjoyable. All the individuals seemed to appreciate the opportunity to spend time with the review team and spoke candidly about all the issues raised including their accomplishments and concerns.

The Department of Sociology has undergone a significant transformation since the last program review was conducted in 2013. Dr. Adams was a member of 2013 review team. She noted that there were important improvements made since her last visit to FAU and observed that the department faculty profile had significantly changed during the interim as several senior faculty retired and new faculty had been hired.

The Department now has 10 tenure-track faculty and five full time instructors. The tenure-track faculty include one full professor (the Chair), five associate professors, and four assistant professors. The Chair anticipates that in a couple of years the department faculty profile should be more balanced, as two or three associates will most likely be promoted to full, and three assistants will have been promoted to associate.

Across the three-year window -- between the academic years of 2015-2016 and 2017-2018 – the number of Sociology students ranged from approximately 500 to 600 undergraduate students and 20 to 30 graduate students, most of the latter being full time students. The Department offered approximately 110 to 115 undergraduate sections, which included sections offered in the Intellectual Foundations Program (IFP) as well as sections taken by undergraduate students mostly majoring in Sociology. Tenure track faculty teach both undergraduate and graduate courses for Sociology majors; instructors teach courses offered in the Intellectual Foundations program. Tenure track faculty who are research-productive are on 2:3 teaching loads, whereas instructors are on 4:4 teaching loads. Reduced teaching load accommodations are given to untenured faculty to ensure they have sufficient time to do research prior to applying for tenure.

In addition to the undergraduate and graduate Sociology programs, the faculty teach courses in the Social Science track of the Comparative Studies PhD program in the College, an Honors program in Sociology, and it is anticipated they will contribute to the BA and MA in Data Science and Analysis programs in the future.

The Department has made important strides in implementing many of the recommendations made in the prior program review. These efforts have been comprehensively described in the department self-study.

In the remainder of this report, we note many of those efforts among the strengths listed below. We also list the challenges and opportunities that we observed. And we provide specific recommendation that focus on addressing those challenges.

Strengths

- The spirit of collaboration and support among tenure track faculty is very strong. As noted in the self-study, recent faculty hires have been productive and have invigorated the Department; there is a shared commitment to the collective good; there is a respect for theoretical and methodological diversity; and there is a culture of getting along with

each other. Faculty commented on the positive influence of the Chair in building and supporting this culture. The faculty who have been in the Department the longest commented that the current culture is much better than was the case previously.

- The Department's Mission Statement is a carefully crafted document reflecting the important role of the sociological perspective in higher education, the faculty commitment to excellence, and the connection to local and global issues and concerns.

- The Department's commitment to the University's Strategic Plan was carefully articulated in the self-study and reinforced by the Dean who expressed strong interest in linking the College's investment of resources to areas that align with the University's Pillars and Platforms. This commitment is evident in the Department's recent hires, whose areas of specialization are related to the University's Healthy Aging Pillar and Global Perspectives Platform, among others. It is also evident in the College's commitment to the Diversity Pillar in its "cluster hiring" of seven new African American faculty, one of whom will be in the Department of Sociology.

- The Department research profile of the tenure-track and tenured faculty significantly improved over the recent review period. All new hires come from excellent PhD programs and are active researchers. Peer-reviewed publications increased from four in 2015-2016, to 11 in 2016-2017, to 15 in 2017-2018, to 19 in 2018-2019. The faculty have increased book production as well. And, while submitting grant proposals had been unfamiliar in the Department, recently there were a total of seven proposals submitted for external funding. The Senior Associate Vice President for Research noted the important role that the Associate Dean for Research for the College had in facilitating these proposals.

- Since the last program review, the Department has been successful in undertaking a serious effort to engage in program assessment. Most importantly, the faculty have made changes in the curriculum based on data collection and analysis findings. Among these changes, which "close the loop" in continuous improvement efforts, are the notable following:
    - Course-number adjustments were made (i.e., a number of 4000-level courses were changed to 3000-level courses) to ensure that undergraduate students are better prepared to successfully undertake the requirements of the higher-level courses.
    - A "Writing Enhanced Curriculum" initiative was started in which students begin developing writing skills earlier, which are reinforced throughout, so that later in the curriculum students are better able to achieve specified learning outcomes related to writing. The Department has become a campus model for how to infuse writing throughout the curriculum.
    - These two changes support the University initiative on Undergraduate Research and the Department's Honors program, which was started in 2018-2019, and

includes a thesis requirement. The shift in course numbering provides a scaffolding structure to ensure better student preparation in research methodology. One faculty member commented that they want their students to produce knowledge, not just to read about it, and they have revised the curriculum to reflect that goal. The emphasis on writing improvement is intended to contribute to this goal as well.

- The amount and quality of office space allocated to the Sociology Department is commendable. It is also noteworthy that graduate student accommodations are close to faculty offices which is an arrangement that supports greater interaction among faculty and graduate students – a very positive impact on learning and the culture within the Department.

Challenges

- The Department has made important strides implementing the goals of the University strategic plan and trying to better align with its pillars and platforms. The challenge is in the realm of following this trajectory and taking the Department to the next level where it develops unique programs and courses based on the teaching and research strengths of its faculty.

- The Department is understaffed in administrative support. Currently a portion of graduate student time is allocated to help the Department administrative assistant. This use of graduate student time is not consistent with the purpose of their assistantships nor does it adequately address the problem of understaffing.

- Undergraduate students did not appear to be uniformly well-informed about University support and resources available to help them succeed. Although faculty expressed concern that undergraduates did not visit them frequently during their office hours, undergraduates reported faculty were not available enough outside of classes. Both of these issues suggest that communication with undergraduate students needs to be enhanced, but the latter issue also suggests that the scheduling of classes and office hours may need to be examined to determine whether it is compatible with student needs.

- Faculty receive a College of Arts & Letters newsletter which is distributed with some frequency, whereas the Department newsletter is only sent out quarterly or twice per year; and there is no listserv for students and faculty to receive information on events, opportunities, course offerings, or other newsworthy items. This may contribute to the lack of information that students and some of the faculty are experiencing.

- The report of the last program review identified undergraduate advising as a weakness. Since then the Department has begun sending students to professional advisors in a centralized College office, which seems to have alleviated the problem. However, on this site visit, students reported that professional advisors did not understand Sociology well enough to give them advice on careers and that wait-times for appointments were long. Approximately half of the 35 undergraduate students that the review team spoke to reported that they had not developed a relationship with a faculty member – implying that the other half did – which is an informal way of addressing the concern for more information related to discipline specific issues. While students say they are not getting the information they need, it is not clear whether this is so or if this is a matter of incompatible scheduling of work, classes, and office hours. Regardless, this should be addressed.

- The employability of undergraduate Sociology majors depends on their ability to articulate what they have to offer to potential employers and their use of the Career Services Office. The Sociology Department has not provided them with systematic guidance in this area. The employment-after-graduation record for undergraduate Sociology majors at FAU is not known.

- The quality of the fulltime graduate students in Sociology is very strong, whereas the quality of the part-time graduate students appears to be less so. The challenge is working with both types of students and providing each with opportunities to be successful.

- The stipend for graduate students is low compared to other institutions. The stipend amount of $8,000 makes it difficult to attract more quality students, and in some cases, means that students must find supplementary sources of income which negatively affects their educational experience.

- Instructors contribute substantially to the teaching mission of the Department. Their salaries are low, especially given the cost of living in Boca Raton, and they are restricted to one-year contracts, but from all appearances their efforts are appreciated.

- The number of different course preps for tenure-track and tenured members of the faculty is very high. This aspect of the faculty workload undoubtedly has a negative impact on faculty research productivity.

- The level of service performed by the tenure-track and tenured faculty is also high, especially for the associate professors. For example, the Associate Professor directing the graduate program, and who is also a productive researcher, has taken on clerical tasks that could be alleviated by an administrative or advising assistant.

Opportunities

- There is strong institutional support for collaboration across disciplines which could be a very important and timely opportunity for the Department. Greater collaboration across research disciplines could increase the number of proposals for external funding, which in turn could increase the quality and impact of scholarly contributions by the faculty. Another area of collaboration could result in not-for-credit or for-credit certificate programs which could be an important source of revenue for the Department as well as a form of community and alumni engagement that would enhance the visibility and help create a distinct identity for the Department.

- The graduate students interviewed showed a strong willingness to engage in activities that will support their professional growth. Many expressed an interest in applying to doctoral programs. There could very well be an opportunity in this enthusiasm. Graduate student engagement with undergraduate students could be beneficial to the students and to the department, possibly increasing enrollment at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

- The institution has a strong infrastructure for assisting in career placement and internship opportunities in FAU's Office of Career Services. Undergraduate students appeared to be interested in receiving guidance on these matters. Careers Services may introduce Sociology majors to consider options beyond the scope of their current horizons. Internships would be especially important for undergraduate students who do not intend to consider graduate school because they often provide a potential employer the time to become familiar with the skills and work ethic of the student. Placing students in internships could also increase community and employer understanding of what sociologists have to offer.

Recommendations

- **Distinguishing the Department.** The Department has taken important steps to align its resources and focus with the University Strategic Plan, following the direction provided by the Dean of the College. New faculty hires have been made in areas linked to the pillars and platforms. The Department is clearly on a positive upward trajectory. In order to continue on that trajectory, the Department should consider (1) whether the Department has strengths or institutional capacities to distinguish itself from programs offered by other institutions in the State University System; (2) can develop tighter alignment with the University's strategic plan; (3) can become more tightly linked to targeted constituencies within the region, state, and beyond; or (4) some combination of the above.

  The development of strong strategic initiatives is sometimes accomplished by defining new areas of focus, which often require substantial new resources. However, in

institutions with relatively modest resources available to devote to new areas, strategic development can be done by *recognizing* existing strengths and *reinforcing* them. Strengths can be capacities evident in faculty interests and skills or can be developed by leveraging the interests of faculty in other departments and colleges. While Departments of Sociology across Universities share similarities, they can distinguish themselves by focusing on existing strengths so that over time they develop a more defined profile.

The nature of the academic enterprise is such that in order to build departments, administrators must be attentive to building careers. Attention to building careers not only means providing the resources needed to conduct research, among other things, but also ensuring that teaching loads are appropriate for research faculty. The challenge for the Sociology Department is not so much the number of courses the research faculty are required to teach during the academic year, but the number of different preparations faculty teach during any given year and across years. In recent years, the faculty have made important curriculum decisions to improve student success. This effort has also meant that faculty service loads have been quite high. Going forward, the challenge will be to ensure that the range of courses offered and service obligations fit the higher productivity of the research faculty and allow them to meet the recent institutional expectation of seeking external funding to support research.

- **Building Relations with External Constituencies.** Faculty in the Department have different research interests that regional, state, national or international organizations and enterprises may find of value. Fostering more or stronger ties may provide critical sources of external funding and internships and career placement for students. This recommendation is broad, and the review committee recognizes the challenge and time commitment required to build these ties. Successful relationships with external constituencies require that research faculty develop entrepreneurial skills in seeking support for their interests. Perhaps the Dean's Office funding-raising personnel could provide some assistance.

- **Reinforcing Undergraduate Advising.** The College has improved advising for students in all departments in recent years by centralizing advising personnel. This effort, across all colleges at FAU, has provided an important structure for ensuring greater and more consistent advising services to more students. This arrangement provides a foundation for the Department's exploration of innovative enhancements closely tied to the discipline of Sociology that may improve student success

  Improved mentoring would include three areas: (1) the support services infrastructure offered by the University, (2) the curriculum, and (3) career development. Providing the undergraduate coordinator with release time, providing peer advising via the graduate students or members of Alpha Kappa Delta, examining the schedule for faculty office hours to make sure it is compatible with student availability, and working with Career

Services more closely are possibilities. A closer relationship between the Department and its undergraduates might also allow them to track their success post-graduation.

- **Supporting Graduate Students.** The review team was very impressed with the quality and diversity of the graduate students. The University has recently provided health insurance to graduate students which is important and puts the institution is a better position relative to other Universities in the Florida system. We understand that the stipend for all graduate students in the College of Arts and Letters is $8,000 and that the Dean was instrumental in ensuring that graduate students in all the departments are compensated equally. However, our strong recommendation is to find a way to increase the stipend for all graduate students in the College.

  The increase in the number of proposals submitted for external funding could have very important consequences for the graduate students. The Department's self-study noted a difference between the quality of fulltime and part-time graduate students. Given that more faculty in the Department are research productive, proposals for external funding are being generated by the faculty, the Department is attracting strong fulltime graduate students, now may be the time to review whether the practice of accepting part-time graduate students can be sustained. Developing strategies can entail defining what the Department cannot do, just as much as what it can do. The ratio of part time students appears to be relatively small compared to full time students. Perhaps focusing only on full time students would be a way of improving the profile of the graduate program.

- **Increasing Administrative Support.** As noted elsewhere in this report, the Department is understaffed and the Program Assistant is not compensated well. If the Chair, Undergraduate Coordinator, and graduate assistants cease doing clerical work, it will be necessary to hire a part-time Program Assistant.

- **Integrating Non-Tenure Track Faculty.** Although the Department does not set the level of compensation for instructors, it may be possible to arrange for them to have multi-year contracts, improving their sense of job security. While it is not unusual for departments to establish patterns of operation over a period time they can be perceived as arbitrary by some. The Department should increase its efforts to integrate instructors into Department meetings and search deliberations. It would be mutually beneficial for instructors and the Department if instructors were invited and encouraged to participate more fully in the life of the Department, including serving on committees and attending meetings. We recognize that scheduling and distance between campuses might be difficult constraints to overcome.

- **Improving Department Communication.** Conventional methods of communication, such as hardcopy or electronic newsletters may be more appropriate certain audiences rather than others. For example, newsletters may be more appropriate for alumni

whereas students may prefer social media. The Department should consider polling their students to determine methods of communication they prefer, and what information they would like to receive to improve their experience as Sociology majors.

- **Fostering Revenue Generating Visibility.** The Department offers online and in person courses that could contribute to cross-disciplinary certificates available to alumni and the general public, including those who are not geographically close to FAU. The Department is well positioned for such an endeavor given the initiatives undertaken developing new courses and engaging in collaborative grant writing with other faculty in the social sciences and across the campus.

  One or more certificates drawing upon the expertise of the faculty in the Department and elsewhere could include: Peace, Justice, and Human Rights; Culture and Community (or Urban Issues); Intersectionalities (or Diversity and Inclusion); Applied Research; or some other area initiated by faculty with different but interconnected areas of research.