

Overview of Five-Year Program Review

Thank you for the opportunity to review the Weber State University Sociology Department. What a pleasure it was to meet the department faculty, community members, college administrators and especially the students, current and past. Everyone associated with the Sociology Department is commended for its good work with the self-study, review visit and most importantly the effectiveness of the department. This report includes an overview of our findings, strengths and challenges of the program, comments on the degree to which standards are being met, and recommendations.

Sincerely,

External Review Team

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Introductory Statement

The self-study documents and conversations during the site-visit demonstrate that overall the sociology program is effectively meeting its goals and missions. As is stated in the mission of sociology program, the major goal of this program is to provide students with the knowledge and skill, both in sociology and in general education, to help them meet the demand of society, including professional degrees or job opportunities. After a careful evaluation of this program, we believe that the sociology program has reached most of its goals. When student representatives were asked to rate this program, students gave an A.

Particularly noteworthy are 1) the collaborative, collegial, and student-centered environment of the department, 2) that students receive excellent community-based training in statistics and research methods that prepares them for advanced degrees in sociology, 3) the faculty are scholarly, effective and dedicated teachers, contribute to the Weber and Ogden community and take personal responsibility for the success of the department and the learning of their students.

In our review areas noted for program improvement focus on 1) sharing some of the current chair responsibilities with the faculty and identifying more efficient ways to accomplish administrative tasks, 2) regular attention to learning outcomes, outcomes assessment and alignment of the curriculum and courses with those outcomes, 3) utilizing technology to reduce workload, effectively deliver courses, and disseminate department information, and 4) preparing students for practitioner roles, not just research and graduate school.

Program Strengths

The Sociology Department has a number of noteworthy strengths. This section, along with the attached “Program Standards” rubric provides a description of those strengths.

- Students are provided with a rigorous education in the discipline. Students are particularly well-prepared for graduate school with excellent training in critical thinking, writing, statistics, and research methods. They also receive experiential learning outside the classroom by interacting and volunteering with several community partners.
- The learning environment is collaborative, collegial, and student-centered. Faculty members have great rapport and interaction with students. The three students interviewed during the program review gave their teachers an A grade for performance.
- The department has been innovative with allocation of resources, allowing general education classes to average 46 students so that upper-division classes can operate like seminars with about 14 students, an ideal size for learning.

- Faculty members are highly qualified. All six possess Ph.D.s and are either tenured or tenure-track. Even most of the seven adjunct instructors hold doctorate degrees. Most full-time faculty members have current scholarship that informs their teaching and are active contributing members of campus and off-campus communities.
- Faculty members are taking important first steps in assessing student learning. Learning outcomes for every class are prominently displayed in course syllabi and several general education courses and upper-division courses have been assessed with a preliminary instrument. The faculty is actively engaged in discussions about how to conduct assessment that is effective and efficient.

Program Challenges and Recommendations

While the strengths of the Sociology Department are significant, a benefit of program review is gaining insights into challenges a department faces and associated recommendations to address those challenges. This section outlines both the challenges and recommendations for enhancements.

- It is unclear that there is a process by which the faculty periodically assesses the mission statement based upon the constituencies served by the program. The review team recommends that the department reassess its mission statement, develop more specific learning outcomes, align the curriculum to those outcomes, and assess the degree to which the outcomes are achieved. This should be an ongoing process with a mechanism to utilize the assessment data to inform changes in pedagogy, course designs and/or curriculum.
- The Sociology Department has a demonstrated plan to allocate resources for future curriculum delivery that is consistent with their mission, supports students' degree progress toward graduates, and general education students. The five-year self-study report indicated there are courses on the books that are not presently taught or are

offered infrequently. To help students better plan their educational future, the review committee suggests posting a departmental two- to three-year plan.

- The assessment process of course outcome is an area of concern and should be strengthened. The chair and faculty should discuss how outcome data across the major could be shared to continue course improvement. Presently, assessment measures are direct because the students are demonstrating their knowledge; however, there are no comparison data and/or peer reviews of competencies. While comments exist in the five-year self-study regarding course changes based on the outcomes data, these data are not considered at the program level. Sharing outcome data across courses coupled with departmental conversations would likely result in the emergence of opportunities for program enhancement. The review committee recommends developing a mechanism to assess needs at the “program level” that are clearly defined and can be appropriately applied.
- The faculty member vacancies need to be filled to support curriculum delivery that is consistent with the mission of the program. Filling the vacant faculty positions will address the shortfall in teaching capacity that the Department chair tries to compensate for by taking on extra courses. Having a full department will allow for time and attention to revise learning outcomes, align curriculum, and develop effective department procedures. The review committee recommends that the chair take course reductions that come with the position and focus energies on department needs and building toward the future.
- The Department Chair appears to do the majority of student advising regarding course selection in collaboration with the College General Education advisor even though the procedure is to assign faculty advisors. The committee recommends implementing a strategy for all faculty members to advise students in some way.
- The program emphasizes demonstrated research competencies and graduate placements, which should be commended. It is unclear what “applied” competencies are developed and what assistance students receive to successfully enter the job market after graduation. In addition, internship opportunities and more hours volunteering in

the community are needed to implement an applied sociology emphasis. The alignment of the learning outcomes and curriculum will likely address this. It is recommended that an improved or new strategy for job placement could serve as a mechanism to attract majors and build the program.

- Student advising could also improve by 1) informing students wanting to teach sociology that they also need a teaching certificate so they can plan schedules and budgets accordingly, 2) periodically check students “self advising” to ensure they are making appropriate progress, 3) encourage students to utilize college-level advising, and 4) help students review their “Cat Tracks” so they can plan a timely graduation.
- The review committee recommends the Sociology faculty discuss the relevance and need to incorporate an Applied Sociology track, major, or emphasis area. If there is interest a thorough discussion should follow on the possible structure for this new approach. Regardless of the decision, the committee recommends increasing the number of community partners for internships and/or service learning to provide students with an “applied” experience.
- The capstone course, in theory, is an excellent approach to learning and educating sociology students, yet course success seems highly dependent upon the instructor. The committee recommends standardizing the course and sharing best practices among faculty who teach the class so all who enroll may have a positive educational experience.
- Adjunct faculty are regularly assessed but the only follow-up is when there is a problem. It would be beneficial to the program for the Chair to meet with adjuncts at least once a year to assess the courses taught and find out what teaching practices are successful and if there are any challenges. Adjuncts should get regular feedback in addition to student evaluations.
- As additional classes move to an online format, we recommend that all faculty who teach online be trained by the university and implement the standards that have been established by Weber State University and the College Online Standards Committee.

Meeting the Standards

For simplicity, the rubric of Program Standards has been completed noting areas of Strength, Concern, and Weakness. The recommendations for action are embedded in the “Challenges and Recommendation” section in the previous section of this report.

Conclusion

The Sociology Department at Weber State University is commended for fostering student learning, working collaboratively across campus, and contributing to the community, both at Weber State and Northern Utah. The faculty are poised to address the areas for improvement, specifically addressing the learning outcomes and assessment of the program, increasing support and structures for Sociology students not pursuing graduate degrees, and distributing workload more evenly across a full faculty. Overall, the Sociology Department at Weber State University is very successful with a few areas in need of attention.