Dean's Response to the Sociology Program Review

May 15, 2017

I appreciate the work of the program review team (Drs. Mary Virnoche, Barbara Wachocki, and Eric Ewert) in producing their thoughtful report, and the work of the Sociology faculty as evidenced by their self-study and response to the report.

The review team's report was overall highly positive. It notes the qualifications and dedication of the faculty and administrative assistant, the "particularly impressive" curriculum, the quality of teaching (including experiential learning opportunities), and the enthusiasm of both students and community partners for the program. They find the mission statement appropriate, and support for the program (e.g., library) good. They note that the department was quite responsive to the last program review five years ago.

The review team does have some concerns, and made several recommendations:

Curriculum
The review team recommends that, to enhance community-engaged learning, the program develop a "community engagement pathway" in the major, featuring a capstone internship option. The program's response indicates agreement that such a pathway could offer more practical skills development for students intending to enter the labor market, and states that the faculty will seriously consider it as part of an upcoming curriculum review. The faculty also agrees with the report's suggestion that if the pathway is developed, it would be a good idea to add a community advisory board.
The review team also suggests that the program add a required 1-credit professional development seminar for students in the 60-to-90 credit hour range. The faculty responds that they will consider such a course, despite the recent unsuccessful effort to offer a career-building seminar. I find the program's response reasonable on both issues.

Student learning and assessment
The report finds that assessment of student learning is well done, but on an intensive schedule that leaves insufficient time for analysis and informed decision-making. They suggest a "more reasonable" assessment schedule that could annually assess one learning outcome on a six-year schedule. The faculty respond that, while they still want to assess all courses over a five-year schedule, they will proceed with "greater focus and more in-depth assessment, perhaps by one learning outcome at a time."
The report also suggests scaffolding of learning outcomes relative to research and academic writing across several courses, thus reducing pressure on methods and statistics courses. The program faculty will discuss how to implement this idea.

Academic advising
The review team compliments the program on the quality and availability of its advising, when students avail themselves of it. They recommend a more intrusive advising regime, featuring required advising by the chair for all students declaring the major. The department will work on

strengthening the program's "culture of advisement," and on incorporating the new Starfish software, with its ability to flag students with problems and alert advisors. I might add that the College's two full-time advisors are an additional advising resource, particularly on general University graduation requirements.

Public sociologists
The review team recommends hiring "scholar activists or public sociologists" as adjunct faculty members who could support the engaged community pathway. The faculty believes that, now that they will be at full-strength of six full-time, tenure-track faculty, they can address this need internally, though they envision inviting such public figures to campus to lecture and meet with students.

The review team's report is quite positive about the Sociology program. It finds no serious weaknesses, and its recommendations are aimed at enhancing what the program already does well. I find the program's responses to these recommendations appropriate. I share the review team's very positive assessment of the Sociology program, and stand ready to support the faculty in their work to continuously improve the program's quality