

Response to the Sociology Program Review Evaluation Team Report

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The sociology program is pleased to receive such constructed feedback from the review team. In our view, the team has delved in depth into the self-study report and, through the interviews of the program's key stakeholders, they have sufficiently understood the key elements of the program and its future challenges. In the following segments, I will address each segment of the report and provide explanation and context for the team's findings and suggestions for the future.

A. Mission statement

The Program had met the previous review team's (2012) suggested revisions to the mission statement. No recommendations.

B. Curriculum

1. Development of a community engaged pathway

The current team revisited the 2012 team's recommendation to develop an applied sociology track for sociology majors, which the program had considered but declined for lack of expertise and interest. The current team supported the lack of action on that recommendation by noting that, although it was a worthwhile goal, "applied" sociology is understood in the discipline as narrowly focusing on program evaluation and assessment. However, they did notice a gap in "more intensive experience-based opportunities" in the program that would add and build on the current courses utilizing community-engaged learning.

Recommendation:

The team suggested that the program develop a "community engagement pathway" through the major that would work with the existing CCEL courses, but expand into other classes, and culminate with a capstone internship. They also suggested that instead of offering a separate internship capstone, the students who chose this track would be guided through their project alongside with thesis students in the same Capstone course.

Response:

We agree that a Capstone internship option would create a stronger structure for professional networking and developing professional skills outside the academy. The program is immensely proud of its Capstone experience, which has proven to be a major advantage for students who continue to graduate school. We agree that the program could offer more practical skills development and community engagement opportunities for students who are planning to transition to the labor market. The program will consider this recommendation as we proceed to review our curriculum as a whole and create strategies to increase both recruitment and retention of majors and minors. The option of "community engaged pathway," broadly understood to offer opportunities to develop practical skills, is a good idea. In that context, revisiting the need for an advisory board would also make sense. We look forward to considering this pathway as part of our program without losing the academic rigor of a research-based Capstone course.

2. One-unit professional development seminar

Recommendation:

The review team also encouraged the Sociology program to create a “professional development 1-unit seminar” and offer it as required course. It would also serve as a strategy to recruit students who hold 60-90 credit hours. The team further noted that the seminar could be the introduction for students planning to intern in their final year in the program.

Response:

Developing this type of required seminar has been in the plan for a while and we believe it is a good idea. The program’s pilot effort to offer a career-building seminar were not successful. However, it would make more sense if integrated into the engaged pathways-track. The potential function of this seminar as a recruitment tool is uncertain, but not impossible. Students tend to declare sociology major within the suggested academic level (60-90 credit hours), which would be an ideal time to get them thinking about the next two years of their college education. The program will revisit the career seminar in the next year, as it finally returns to fully functioning program with six full time faculty members.

C. Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

1. Too much superficial assessment

The review team was concerned about the amount and intensity of assessment the program had completed. While clearly meeting university expectations, they said that this model left little time for collective meaningful discussion and data driven decision-making.

Recommendation:

The team recommends building a more reasonable long-term assessment plan for sociology. In other words, developing a more in-depth annual assessment for “one” learning outcome at the time and to plan a focused, six-year assessment cycle. That would allow for more focused attention and change related to a single outcome, rather than making too many programmatic changes at once.

Response:

We agree with the team that there is a lot of assessment. That said, we wanted to have 5-year cycle where all course taught would be assessed. We will be glad to proceed with greater focus and more in-depth assessment, perhaps by one learning outcome at the time. The benefit of the annual assessment has been that the faculty have learned to think about how best to assess their courses and that we have essentially built a culture that views assessment as part of what we do, although to what extent it has been a meaningful exercise is still undecided. We will move into the future with a more purposeful assessment plan and welcome the support from the review team to do that.

2. Scaffolding learning outcomes

Recommendation:

The review team also suggested the program discuss scaffolding of learning outcomes related to research and academic writing across core required and sequenced classes. They recommended that we introduce building blocks that would entail a skill set on which to build and increase the intensity of practice. For example, article annotation as a skill could be introduced in an introductory level class. Then, in upper level courses, students would be taught skills to synthesize across readings. According to

the team, “this scaffolding takes the pressure off courses like research methods and capstone to accomplish all outcomes.”

Response:

This is a good idea, as we already have ongoing efforts to identify and name skills that students learn in sociology courses. An intentional scaffolding of skills that build on one another as students progress in their degree will be an easy and effective way to ensure students acquire skills that we say they will through the program. We will begin a discussion of how to implement the scaffolding as part of reviewing the program curriculum.

D. Academic Advising

The team concluded that our students receive extensive advising if they come in for advising, but were concerned that this was not sufficient.

Recommendation:

The team recommends “a more intrusive advising protocol” that would draw students into advisement even before they officially declare the major.

Response:

The department chair currently advises all sociology majors and minors. Typically, a student gets their first full advising session on a program of study as they declare a major. The department administrative specialist offers more general advising on how to become a major/minor, the requirements of the program and send the student then to the chair for more focused discussion. However, as the team noted, advising is driven by students’ perception of their own need. Although we attempt to ensure all students receive adequate advising, if a student does not independently seek advising, it is difficult to reach them. The new software, Starfish, that the university has recently bought will hopefully allow a closer tracking of students and enable the advisor to receive alerts about student performance. Our administrative specialist Belinda McElheny has been critical in creating a culture where students feel comfortable asking questions and getting them to think about the importance of continuous advising for finishing on time. We will continue to strengthen that culture.

E. Faculty

The team noted the program’s key strengths lie in the faculty who are committed to students and maintain active research agendas while teaching a heavy load.

Recommendation:

“The department might consider recruiting adjuncts who identify as scholar/activists or public sociologists to develop broader support and connections for the development of any potential community engagement pathway.”

Response:

This is a good idea; although we believe that with our full faculty starting in fall 2017, we can address this need internally without relying on adjunct faculty and, instead, cultivate closer ties with such individuals in the community by bring them onto campus for guest lectures and meetings with students (and especially students in the proposed community-engaged pathway).

F. Support (Staff, Administration, Facilities, Equipment, and Library)

The team's interactions with the department's administrative specialist and the social science librarian found sufficient support for the program. No recommendations.

G. Relationships with the External Communities

The team found the CCEL system of placing students in community organizations effective and noted that the community partners seemed pleased with the sociology students in their programs. The community partners also reported their capacity to absorb more students on longer placements that would support their needs for larger project support and potentially grant writing assistance. No specific recommendations, but we will keep this point in mind as we begin the discussion about a possible community engaged pathway for majors.

H. Summary of recommendation and program's responses:

Recommendations	Program response and plan
1. Develop a "community engaged pathway" for students.	1. A good idea to address skills development outside the thesis option. Will explore in curriculum revision.
2. One-unit professional development seminar.	2. Will explore making this a required course, perhaps for students in "engaged pathway."
3. Focused assessment.	3. Will revise assessment plan to focus on quality and meaning.
4. Scaffolding learning outcomes.	4. Will discuss integration of skill development into course sequence.
5. More intrusive advisement.	5. Developing a stronger culture of advisement. Starfish program may help identifying students who need advising.
6. Recruit public sociologists as adjuncts to develop connections to community.	6. Program can accomplish this in house and cultivate community connections.