

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

External Consultant Report

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Spring 2006

Introduction

This report results is based on the Sociology Department's Self-Study Report completed in Spring of 2005, including the Various Appendices and corrections, as well as a campus visit on April 10-11, 2006. During that visit, I met with fourteen tenure-line faculty, one lecturer, the department ASC, the Director of ISR, the Dean of SSIS, and undergraduate students.

Commendations

1. The faculty are deeply committed to the undergraduate major program and striving to provide a curricular coherence. The department also plays a major role in servicing Area D general education.
2. The department culture is one of inclusiveness and collegiality. Faculty are genuinely happy to be members of this department. They feel that colleagues value their work and that course assignments are fairly distributed.
3. Faculty and students are engaged in research and activities of benefit to the Sacramento region as well as the state as a whole. The department has high visibility in the College, and the Dean would like to help increase its visibility in the larger community.
4. The department has been utilizing student perception assessment data for many years and is thus able to analyze trends in the students' perceptions.
5. Undergraduate students seem to be enthusiastic about their major though they have deep concerns and frustration about impacted core courses and course scheduling.

Concerns

The faculty feel overburdened in terms of RTP expectations and the amount of time that is required to engage in research and scholarly activities and service. There is deep concern among junior faculty about salary "inversion." Several faculty voiced concern that the university does not value graduate education nor adequately support it. These are not issues that the department can address. These are systemic issues of the university and indeed of the CSU system as a whole.

Program Introduction and History

The Department's self-study specifically responds to twenty recommendations made in the last program review. Many of the concerns raised in that review have been addressed by the recent hiring of many new faculty, the increased administrative support staffing, restructuring of the major and development of many new courses, strengthening of internship opportunities for students, and the addition of service learning opportunities in some courses. The graduate

program is still somewhat problematic as faculty see this as a lower priority than its undergraduate offerings in terms of resources provided. I found that in person, faculty and staff confirmed the responses provided in the self-study report.

The department has utilized the American Sociological Association's Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major as a resource for examining the structure of the undergraduate major and for developing the major's goals and learning expectations. New courses have been developed that examine issues of race, class and gender, with a more global emphasis that is in line with the most recent ASA identified trends and issues that should be integrated into a sociology major. The major is structured around core courses in theory and methods culminating for the students in a senior original research project. This is in compliance with ASA recommendations and similar to most sociology majors in other colleges and universities.

Academic Programs and Assessment

The department has aligned its curricular offerings with the missions of the college and the university. In addition to the undergraduate major, it offers a minor, one Area A, eleven Area D, three Area C, and five Area E general education courses. Nine other CSU Sacramento programs have sociology courses as requirements or electives. While this is typical of most Sociology programs and this program is perceived by the Dean as being "good citizens" and "heavy lifters" in terms of FTES generation, this is of concern to me. Teaching to multiple audiences (GE, sociology majors, majors in other programs) can be extremely challenging. Further, not counting the basic lower division general education introductory course (which is the typical way students find sociology as a major), fully 45% of the remaining 40 units of course work majors may select for their degree could be in courses that are designated as GE courses. For students minoring in the field, all of their units might be selected from courses that are designated as GE courses. Faculty I talked with expressed mixed feelings about teaching to multiple audiences. Most felt that the undergraduate major was a strong cohesive major, and as one faculty member said, "When I teach a sociology class, I teach a sociology class." But there was some concern that perhaps majors do not have optimal experiences in courses that also serve other purposes.

Recommendation: Examine students' course selection to see to what degree students are using GE courses as electives for their major. A sample of graduating student transcripts from the past three years should provide ample data to address this question.

Currently general education courses are being assessed at the campus. Another way to determine if there is any conflict between courses designated for general education and courses designed to promote the learning expectations for majors

is to compare the goals and learning expectations for the various general education categories and for the major.

Recommendation: If students are heavily electing courses that are GE courses, and if there is any tension between constructing a course to meet GE goals and major goals, consider limiting the number of elective units that majors can select from GE courses (to perhaps 6 or 9).

In a somewhat related vein, some faculty expressed concerns that students were not taking courses in a sequence which would provide coherence to the major. For example, I heard that students took the theory courses in their senior year when ideally they should take those courses in their junior year. (Students also expressed concern about not being able to take courses in the appropriate sequence.) Other faculty were not at all concerned with a lack of sequencing, noting that instructors explicitly made linkages to other courses in the curriculum for the students.

Recommendation: As part of the examination of graduating students' transcripts, map the sequence of courses taken. Determine if there is any correlation between sequences of courses taken and quality of capstone project.

This department was one of the leaders among sociology programs in adopting student perception assessment strategies, and it continues to rely heavily on this method of indirect assessment, with incoming major, graduating major, and alumni surveys. However the expectations for assessment have changed dramatically with an emphasis on embedded, direct assessment measures of student learning and performance. The department is assessing the capstone projects for writing and computer/information competency. Assessing only at the end of the major may not produce useful diagnostic information about what and where curricular and pedagogical changes should be targeted. The department has mapped its learning objectives onto the courses it offers. But due to at least a combination of workload concerns, frustration with the way general education is being assessed, and past experience with assessment outcomes being used against the program, there is resistance to moving to direct assessment activities. Another impediment to moving toward direct assessment rather than indirect assessment is that the department has adopted ASA's eleven goals, each with two to five specific learning expectations. This is just too much to directly assess in a program review cycle!

Recommendation: Revisit the learning goals and expectations with the purpose of identifying which are the most critically important to the faculty and which can be assessed directly from students' course performances. Develop and implement a direct assessment plan so that a few learning outcomes are assessed each year, with a rotation plan so that each of those selected outcomes are assessed at least once in a program-review cycle.

Critical here is that the assessment data must belong to the department. What needs to be reported annually is what the faculty are planning to do as a result of analyzing the assessment data they have collected. And developing plans require that the faculty collectively have conversations about the curriculum and the assessment data they collect. I did hear that faculty informally engage in these kinds of conversations. Some faculty are eager for more formal, regular, collective conversations about pedagogy and student performance.

Recommendation: Develop methods to document those curricular conversations, and consider devoting some department meeting time to explicit curricular and pedagogical discussion.

The focus of the faculty has clearly been on the undergraduate major. From the documents I reviewed, there does not seem to be anything comparable to a mission statement, goals, and learning expectations for the master's degree program.

Recommendation: Develop the same type of framework for the master's program, including mission, goals, learning expectations/outcomes, mapping of expectations/outcomes on the graduate curriculum, and devising relevant embedded assessment activities.

Faculty see the graduate program as meeting a critically important need for the Sacramento region's professional workforce. They are concerned about the disparities in preparation and writing skills, in particular, of the students who enter the program. The program is described as a "labor of love." Most of the faculty do teach graduate level courses and shoulder the work of serving on students' thesis committees. They do not feel that they receive adequate resources or recognition for this, a problem for most master level programs in the CSU.

Of deserving mention is the Institute for Social Research and its affiliation with the Sociology department. Several faculty are running major projects through this Institute. As important, it provides key opportunities for students, and is pursuing possible sources of funding that would provide critically needed financial support for graduate students.

Enrollments in the undergraduate major have increased dramatically in recent years, Graduate enrollments have remained fairly steady (but the faculty can control the number of graduate students in ways they cannot for undergraduates). The percentages of students completing the degrees is higher than for the college and for the university as a whole. That speaks well of both programs, in terms of curricular relevance and faculty involvement with their students.

Students

Student articulated concerns about the program with respect to one primary area: scheduling and availability of courses. Issues they raised with me include the inability to get into core courses at an appropriate stage of their major. Because seniors have pre-registration priority, juniors and sophomores find core courses filled before they can access registration. They wanted more sections of core courses, on-line courses, and core courses as part of the summer schedule. While the department has attempted to address this problem by offering additional sections of some courses, the rapidly increased numbers of majors in recent years means that students are still experiencing great frustration in getting the courses they need when they feel they need them. The Dean wants a better sense of how the department faculty see themselves in terms of serving undergraduate majors, graduate students, general education and service to other programs, given the upward trajectory in enrollment.

Recommendation: The department faculty need to have the conversation again about how they wish to balance their commitments to their own programs and to other university programs, and determine what additional resources, including additional faculty, in order to achieve that balance.

The student club, while small in membership size, is providing those students opportunities for excellent leadership skill development. The club activities provide a mechanism that helps many more students learn about career options and applying to graduate school. Club events help build cohesion among the students and attract attendance from the across the campus and the larger community, enhancing the program's reputation.

Faculty

The faculty are a diverse group and productive group. Collectively they are actively engaged in scholarly and creative activities, in departmental and university governance, and in professional service. Somewhat to my surprise, the faculty are overwhelmingly full-time tenure track folks. They are deeply committed to their teaching and to their students. As noted above, many of the junior faculty would welcome more departmental discussions about pedagogy, appropriate use of academic technology, and other dimensions of what comprises quality instruction. They are very appreciative of the support they receive from each other, from the most senior faculty as well as their junior colleagues. The relationships between faculty and staff are warm and mutually supportive. The major issues for faculty are heavy teaching workload (as evidenced by the high departmental SFR and correspondingly high class size), trying to find the time to also engage in their high levels of scholarly and service productivity, and being able to afford to live in the Sacramento area given their salaries. These are not issues the department itself can address. These are systemic issues within the CSU system.

Institutional Resources and Support

According to the report from the library, and from the department's self-study, the library resources are barely adequate, and there is a desire for more smart classrooms. This affects both students and faculty. Faculty are very complimentary of the library and technology staff. The problem again is a systemic one in the CSU; there simply are not enough resources to adequately maintain a library that meets the scholarship needs of undergraduates, much less faculty and graduate students, and there simply are not enough resources to meet the IT needs of faculty and students.

Faculty are satisfied with the level of support staffing they have, and with the provision of office space and basic supplies. They would be willing to shoulder an even larger teaching burden than they already carry, but there are not enough large classrooms to schedule for high enrollment courses.

Conclusion

I found this to be a most enjoyable and collegial group of sociologists. Their commitment to both their undergraduate and graduate programs is highly commendable, especially given the number of systemic barriers and problems they must deal with. These folks are working hard, with great dedication. While they are highly regarded by their Dean, and are making substantial and important contributions to the university and the larger community, they do not feel that they are supported or appreciated as much as they deserve. For what it's worth, they definitely have my support and appreciation.