

Weber State University

Department of Sociology & Anthropology

Sociology Program

Academic Program Review

External Review Report

February 23-24, 2023

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External Review Report Prepared by

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Review Team: Tracy E. Ore, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, St. Cloud State University¹

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Materials reviewed prior to/during the visit:

- 1) Letter to site visit team members
- 2) 5-Year Sociology Program Self-Study, including Executive Summary
- 3) Program website
- 4) Sample signature assignments

Persons or Groups Interviewed:

Dr. Julie Rich, Dean, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

Sociology Faculty:

- Dr. Huiying Hill, Professor and Department Chair
- Dr. Pepper Glass, Professor
- Dr. Marjukka Ollilainen, Professor
- Dr. Rob Reynolds, Associate Professor
- Dr. Carla Trentelman, Professor
- Dr. R.C. Morris, Associate Professor

Adjunct Faculty:

- Dr. Christina Wilson
- Kimberly Love

Community High Impact Partners:

- Andrea Beadles, Executive Director of Weber Housing Authority
- Carrie Maxon, ACCESS and Accountability Supervisor, Grant Facilitator, Ogden School District
- Sandra Baltazar, Community Engagement Coordinator, WSU Center for Community Engaged Learning

¹ Dr. Tracy Ore has been a member of the American Sociological Association's (ASA) Program Reviewers and Consultants (PRC)—formerly the Program Resources Group (DRG) since 2003 and on the Advisory Board of the PRC since 2018. The PRC advances the discipline of sociology by offering empirically grounded peer review and consulting expertise to academic programs regarding effective practices for pedagogy, curriculum, and organizational structures in support of teaching and learning and the production of sociological knowledge. PRC consultants assist programs with program review, curriculum development, assessment, program retreats, and teaching workshops. PRC consultants receive training at each ASA Annual Meeting and are in regular communication throughout the year about trends, data, and new resources that can help build strong programs. PRC consultants are dedicated to empowering program chairs and faculty during periods of self-reflection, external review, or general program revitalization.

² Dr. Molly Sween has been a faculty member with the Department of Criminal Justice at Weber State University since 2011. During her time at Weber, she has served in various leadership roles such as the Chair of a Faculty Senate Committee which oversees the General Education Program (called GEIAC – General Education Improvement and Assessment Committee) and more recently as Department Chair of the Criminal Justice Program. These positions have situated Dr. Sween to have first-hand knowledge about various stakeholders at Weber State University. As such, she brings to this position insider knowledge about the University, and more specifically, the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Additionally, Dr. Sween has served as an external reviewer for the Criminal Justice Program at Utah Tech University. Dr. Sween is also a trained Sociologist (PhD in Sociology, 2011), so she feels especially well equipped to be an internal reviewer for the Department of Sociology at Weber State University.

Support Staff:

- Belinda McElheny/Alex Monroe, Administrative Specialists
- Wade Kotter, Social Science Librarian
- Aaron Roberts, Social Science Career Counsel

Current Students:

- Brandon Charlton
- Angela Shaffer
- Jennifer Hepworth
- Reed

Alumni:

- Jordan Hammon (2016)
- Mike Nguyen (2012 – minor)
- Adriana Johnson (2011)

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Prior to working with the members of the program and the administration, the review team reviewed the responsibilities of the Program Review Committee, the program's thorough self-study, website, sample signature assignments, and available assessment data. The visit took place over two days with a diversity of constituents, including individual and group meetings with the Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, community/high impact partners, support staff, current students, alumni, program faculty, adjunct faculty, students, and informal gatherings for meals.

By all accounts, this is a difficult period for institutions of higher education across the globe. Budget cuts require new priorities, and the futures of many disciplines are uncertain, particularly in the social and behavioral sciences. As a result, faculty are being asked to do more with less. Nevertheless, we were struck by the deep commitment of the caring and thoughtful members of this strong program to providing a quality educational experience for students.

This report summarizes our observations, evaluates the overall quality of program offerings, and presents our conclusions and recommendations regarding the challenges and opportunities facing the program.

STRENGTHS OF THE SOCIOLOGY PROGRAM***Productive & Dedicated Faculty***

The primary strength of the program is the faculty as they labor to further the mission of the institution and the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. To this end, the Department of Sociology strives to offer rigorous and relevant academic instruction that gives students the knowledge and skills necessary to embark upon productive careers and engaged citizenship. As active teachers/scholars, the faculty work hard to maintain a diverse curriculum that serves the needs of their students. Despite their heavy workload, they have been professionally active and productive, disseminating their knowledge through participation in professional and other organizations. In addition, they contribute greatly to the campus and community. Finally, current and former students expressed great appreciation for the active and applied orientation of the curriculum as it aided with comprehension and better prepared them for application of the knowledge that they gained beyond the classroom.

Positive & Collegial Environment

The level of friendliness and collegiality among the faculty and students of the program was readily apparent to the review team. Faculty spoke about caring for one another and discussing with each other when challenges arise in their teaching, scholarship, or service. Additionally, they, were complimentary of the accomplishments of their colleagues, and were strongly supportive of each other. This sentiment

was supported by administrative support staff as well. Rarely have we witnessed such camaraderie and comity in a program of any size.

Strong Leadership

The Department Chair, Dr. Huiying Hill, serves as a strong role model for the faculty in the program, working collaboratively with her colleagues to fulfill the mission of the College and the Program. Dr. Hill's leadership as Chair epitomizes what Wheeler (2012) refers to as a servant leadership, especially regarding her organizational stewardship, focusing on the empowerment of faculty and students as they work for the common good for the program.

Curriculum Fosters Critical Thinking and Application

The curriculum of the core for the B.A. in Sociology is rigorous and relevant and includes the recommended core/required courses for the major as outlined in the American Sociological Association's (ASA) *The Sociology Major in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education* (Pike, et al. 2017). Course offerings provide students with the background and experience needed to form an understanding of society and human interaction preparing them for a variety of career paths after graduation. Alumni noted that they learned critical thinking skills that made them exceptional candidates in a crowd of other graduates. Many also spoke about using critical thinking skills, their sociological imaginations, and other skills in their current professions.

In addition to the above, the program also serves the university's Liberal Arts tradition by contributing to the General Education curriculum and thus preparing students as engaged and responsible citizens who can navigate the unique social, political, and economic challenges of the 21st Century.

Enthusiastic Majors

During our visit, we had the opportunity to meet with both current students and alumni. Our conversation made it apparent that the program is exceeding expectations with regard to commitment to student learning, and we were pleased with the positive attitudes they expressed toward the faculty. Additionally, students clearly articulated what they saw as the strengths of the program and had insightful ideas regarding the changes necessary to enable current and future students additional opportunities for growth and development (See "Recommendations" below).

Supported Staff

Our visit also included conversations with adjunct faculty and support staff. Both groups expressed feeling supported by the program and the presence of a collegial atmosphere. In addition, the adjunct faculty expressed feeling set up for success due to onboarding from the Department Chair and the ability to shadow and reach out to the tenure-track faculty for tips/pointers/sharing of ideas.

CHALLENGES OF THE PROGRAM

Based on conversations throughout the review period as well as our review of the self-study, we have identified five areas of current challenges facing the program: 1) curriculum, 2) student outcomes assessment, 3) staffing and the need for a succession plan, 4) support from upper administration, and 5) faculty morale. Each will be addressed below, followed by a discussion of our recommendations.

Curriculum

While the core for the Sociology Major is strong and includes the ASA recommended necessary core/required courses for the major, clarification is needed regarding the six program-specific student learning outcomes and their alignment with the *Sociological Literacy Framework*³. According to the

³ Ferguson, S. J. (2016). The Center Does Hold: The Sociological Literacy Framework. *Teaching Sociology*, 44(3), 163–176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X16651478>

ASA, by the time a student graduates, they should have the mastery of the following essential competencies:

1. Apply sociological theories to understand social phenomena
2. Critically evaluate explanations of human behavior and social phenomena
3. Apply scientific principles to understand the social world
4. Evaluate the quality of social scientific methods and data
5. Rigorously analyze social scientific data
6. Use sociological knowledge to inform policy debates and promote public understanding

The current measurable Sociology Learning outcomes as outlined in the self-study do not adequately align with the above and should be revised to more closely match the essential competencies as appropriate for Weber State University. Clarification of the program's learning outcomes could serve the larger goal of clarification of the program's identity. In addition, the program should consider a revision of curriculum offerings with the goal of streamlining students' progress through the program and balancing faculty workload (See "Recommendations" below).

Student Outcomes Assessment

While the program does have an assessment plan in place, it appears to lack a multi-year assessment plan across the curriculum. Incorporating formative assessment more thoroughly in addition to existing summative assessment will afford the department the opportunity to progressively assess student learning throughout their tenure in the program. It will be important to develop a more comprehensive plan that will aid faculty in identifying the strengths and limitations of the curriculum, pedagogies, and advising activities as it revises its curriculum.

Staffing and the Need for a Succession Plan

Several faculty in the program anticipate retiring in the coming years. This highlights the need for immediate attention to the development of a succession plan to ensure the continued success and growth of this program. It will be important for the program to develop a plan not only for its immediate leadership needs but also for a more long-term plan for the future (See "Recommendations" below related to strategic planning).

Support from Upper Administration

In conversations with faculty, it became apparent that there is a need for more transparent support from members of the upper administration. Communications around department needs, the value of the work faculty do, and the value of the program in the college and beyond are not always timely and/or clear.

Faculty Morale

Finally, while the faculty are clearly dedicated to providing high-quality educational experiences for students as well as a significant level of service to the university, the corresponding high level of workload and perceptions of lack of support from upper administration is likely to negatively impact their morale. Indeed, several people mentioned concerns about low morale among the faculty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reflecting on the above, we have the following recommendations for the continued improvement of the program:

Revision of Program Mission

The mission of the Sociology Program as included in the self-study lacked the clarity that we heard when speaking with faculty. We would recommend that the program revisit their mission and develop language that reflects the current goals and commitments of the faculty. The American Sociological Association's

publication *The Sociology Major in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education: Curriculum, Careers, and Online Learning* (Pike, et al. 2017) would be a helpful resource for this work.

Development of a Program Identity Statement

Once the program has revised its outward-facing mission statement, it would be very beneficial to develop a departmental “identity statement.” Such a statement is intended to be inward facing, incorporating critical aspects of your mission and vision in a way that describes who you are at this moment in time. It can be helpful to the program in identifying what is unique about your program and highlight what is the potential signature experience for participating students.

Creating a Strategic Plan for the Sociology Program

Many of the challenges that the Sociology Program currently faces could be addressed by creating a strategic plan. While the program offers many unique elements to students’ educational experiences, a lack of identity and focus of the program can contribute to student attrition. For example, a significant component of the program is its high impact learning (HIEE) curriculum, incorporating Community Engaged Learning classes utilizing the very valuable relationships and networks some faculty have built with the local community. However, this is not significantly reflected in the program’s mission or any other program documents. After all, if there is not some clarity about the uniqueness of the Sociology program at Weber State University, how can a student build an identity as a Weber State Sociology major?

In order to accomplish the above, including the changes to the curriculum that we outline below, we strongly advise Dean Rich to fund an outside facilitator to lead the program faculty through a workshop to re-vision its future. While the faculty currently work exceptionally well together as collegial and professional teachers and scholars, there is a need to establish a succession plan due to impending staff changes in order to continue the key elements that make this a successful program, including its HIEE curriculum. Bringing in an outside consultant to help reconfigure program dynamics—by having the kinds of frank conversations that typically accompany organizational change—may help the program and its future direction. The goal would be to help them identify the “signature experience” of being a Sociology major at Weber State University, creating a greater sense of belonging for not only the students but the faculty as well. The timing of such a strategic visioning retreat fits well within changes happening at Weber State University and higher education in general.

Curriculum Revision for Sociology

While the program has made changes in curriculum in response to previous external reviews, we encourage the faculty to continue to engage in a process of strategic curriculum development as they consider the future of the program. With likely revisions in the General Education Curriculum, and of new and existing opportunities for partnership at the University, it is clear that there are possibilities for creating signature experiences for Sociology majors at Weber State University. Once again, we would encourage the faculty to utilize the ASA publication *The Sociology Major in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education: Curriculum, Careers, and Online Learning* as well as the Curriculum Mapping Toolkit for Sociology (CMTS).

Some suggested changes include:

- **Develop a 1 or 2 credit entry experience for students in the major:** We encourage the faculty to develop a 1 or 2 credit course explicitly oriented toward the Sociological Career. Offering such a course during the sophomore year provides an opportunity to focus on the career pathways for students early in the curriculum sequence and would help orient students to the major, help prepare them for the professional applications of the discipline, and help students identify their career pathways (all fostering student retention and success). This should be a required course for the major.

- **Greater integration of data analysis:** Integrating quantitative data analysis skills throughout the major, particularly in the Senior Seminar is in line with ASA's recent publication *The Sociology Major in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education* and its "Sociological Literacy Framework." Tweaking existing courses to involve greater emphasis on quantitative literacy and more focus on data equips undergraduates to better navigate a labor market increasingly dominated by Big Data.
- **Focus Curriculum:** We recommend that the faculty narrow the elective options for the Sociology major and conduct a review of course titles and descriptions to ensure that they accurately reflect contemporary trends in sociology.

It will be important for administration to provide additional resources, if necessary, to assist with this planning.

Revision of Assessment Plan

As stated above, it will be important to develop a more comprehensive plan that includes formative assessment at earlier touchpoints in the program as well as summative assessment. Additionally, it is likely that the above strategic planning and curriculum revision will lead to revised student learning outcomes. With revised learning outcomes, it will be especially important to revise the existing assessment plan, with an eye toward creating a sustainable plan that will help the program foster the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum offered.

Seek Additional Opportunities for Collaboration

The faculty in the program have long served the university through their contributions to University Faculty Senate Committees, campus-wide service, and other areas. As they work to assess their existing partnerships, there may be additional opportunities for collaboration for the program, similar to those already in existence. For example, there may be opportunities to collaborate with other units in the university to offer courses in General Education that are specifically designed for specific majors. Such courses offer an opportunity to expose the general student body to the disciplines of the program, thus offering opportunities for recruiting additional students. For example, there may be opportunities to connect courses to students intending to work in the health care professions through tailoring a section of SOC 1010 to Introduction to Sociology for the Health Care Professions. This example is especially relevant given that pre-medical students, beginning with the 2015 MCAT, are required to have significant training in the social and behavioral determinants of health. With the existence of majors such as nursing, the sociology program has particular relevance here. In his 2011 Hans O. Mauksch address, John F. Zipp posed several questions related to the existing curriculum for Introductory Sociology and the current population of students.⁴ Specifically, he argued that Introductory Sociology is the "public face" of sociology, as most students who enroll in these courses do not go on to careers directly in the field. Rather, because of its large presence in general education curriculum as well as serving as a prerequisite for many professional disciplines (e.g., health and human sciences professions), the only contact that students have with the discipline of sociology is in the introductory course. As a result, sociologists need to reflect on the ways in which our public face accurately represents the discipline and whether or not the curriculum of the introductory course adequately meets the needs of the students. By targeting SOC 1010 to students in other programs, the program can provide not only a much-needed service to future healthcare workers, but also raise campus-wide awareness of the relevance of sociology to fields not immediately associated with the social sciences. Moreover, this may lead to future connections with other programs (e.g., through course offerings such as "Introduction to Sociology for Business Administration").

⁴ Zipp, John F. 2011. "Hans O. Mauksch Address: Teaching for Whom?" *Teaching Sociology* October 2012 40: 301-311.

Support from Upper Administration

Clearly, members of upper administration recognize the value of the program to Weber State University. The recommendations in this report offer several specific opportunities to demonstrate this support. Above and beyond suggestions mentioned above, the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences can work to help promote the Department of Sociology through a large marketing push as has been done for other programs in the college. Additionally, the facilitated faculty retreat mentioned above will take financial support either from the College or University.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Sociology Program at Weber State University is made up of dedicated educators and advisors supported by a dedicated Chair. The level of commitment that they have to the students and the university is commendable. Our recommendations reflect challenges presented by dwindling resources rather than weaknesses among the faculty. There are great opportunities for continued strengthening of this program, and it is our hope that the administrative leadership will champion this effort by acting swiftly on our recommendations.

READINGS & RESOURCES

- American Sociological Association in *The Sociology Major in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education* (<http://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/asa-booklet-2017.pdf>).
- Senter, Mary S., Nicole Van Vooren, Michael Kisielewski, & Roberta Spalter-Roth. 2012. *What Leads to Student Satisfaction with Sociology Programs?* Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.
https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/files/pdf/bachelors_and_beyond_2012_brief1_satisfaction.pdf
- *Social Capital for Sociology Majors: Applied Activities and Peer Networks:*
http://www.asanet.org/documents/research/pdfs/Bach_Beyond4_Social_Capital.pdf.
- TeachingWithData.org: Pathway to Quantitative Literacy in the Social Sciences:
<http://www.teachingwithdata.org>.
- Pike, Diane L., Teresa Ciabattari, Melinda Messineo, Renee A. Monson, Rifat A. Salam, Theodore C. Wagenaar, Jeffrey Chin, Susan J. Ferguson, Margaret Weigers Vitullo, Patrick Archer, Maxine P. Atkinson, Jeanne H. Ballantine, Thomas C. Calhoun, Paula England, Rebecca J. Erickson, Andrea N. Hunt, Kathleen S. Lowney, Suzanne B. Maurer, Mary S. Senter, and Stephen Sweet. 2017. *The Sociology Major in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education: Curriculum, Careers, and Online Learning.* Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.
- Wheeler, D. W. 2012. *Servant Leadership for Higher Education: Principles and practices.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.