



Sociology

A department in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences offering the B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. in Sociology.

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

William G. Roy, chair (University of California, Los Angeles)

Troy Duster (New York University)

Suzanne Bianchi (University of Maryland, College Park)

■ Main Issues

The visiting team noted the department's long history of strength but also its recent struggles to cope with a large-scale loss of faculty, especially many of the senior faculty who had built the department's reputation a generation ago. The team found, however, that "the department is on the right track to rejoin the elite of American sociology departments," and is "nationally known as a department well on its way to bouncing back." The team found the department to be forward looking and already benefiting from the "impressive hires" it has made in recent years. The team's specific comments and recommendations were focused on continuing this forward momentum.

- The recent "major overhaul" of the undergraduate program was noted, but is "showing some signs of strain due to growing pains and organizational constraints." The team found that "classes have become generally quite large, even for a major research university," and that "the department may need to think about whether the size of the program needs to be smaller." The specializations established five years ago were "well-developed," but it may be time to review them in terms of alignment of faculty research strengths with undergraduate interests. The team expressed disappointment that the departmental writing requirement has been "downgraded" to be taught by TAs rather than faculty, and hoped that "the university would make writing a high enough priority to provide the resources for enhanced teaching."
- The team found the graduate program to be "in good shape, with strong leadership and a promising future." The team discussed at some length the recent change in the research and methods curriculum. One aspect, the creation of a Research and Writing course culminating in a publishable paper, was found to be successful and well-received by students. The other aspect, a Concepts and Methods course taught in modules by an array of faculty, was seen as less successful. The team noted that the department is already making revisions to that aspect. As with the undergraduate program, the team expressed concern with the effect of faculty reductions, and found that "the number of graduate course offerings has fallen below an acceptable level," with only four graduate electives offered in a typical semester.

- The team found that the faculty are all productive scholars and engaged in teaching, but that faculty numbers are “probably too small for the size of the undergraduate program [and for] the mentoring needs of the graduate program, and with a clear hole at the Associate level.” As a whole, the department is “acutely understaffed,” and the team urged action to “develop greater strength at the mid career level, filling a gap between young scholars with outstanding long term prospects and a capable rank of senior scholars looking at retirement just over the horizon.” The team noted the appointment this fall of an African American assistant professor, but urged continuing efforts to broaden diversity.

In terms of the broad question of what strategy might best allow the department to rebuild its reputation, the team advanced the idea of “focusing the department’s strengths in ‘signature’ areas where it has, or can develop, a critical mass to achieve national prominence.” This recommendation flowed from the team’s conclusion that it is “unrealistic to expect that the department will grow to near its former size.” The team found that the department “now lacks any well-defined areas that it promotes as its signature,” but also noted that there are “clusters of scholars” working in related areas that could form a basis for such a discussion. The team also suggested self-consciously creating faculty groupings through “cluster” hiring. This approach might also promote diversity by creating a “mutually supportive environment” for young scholars within Sociology and across related disciplines.

■ Results of the Review

The department responded to many of the team’s recommendations. The team’s emphasis on the enrollment pressure at the undergraduate level was welcomed, but the department argued that simply restricting enrollment would push the problem off onto other departments in the College with similar pressures. The department is, however, enforcing a statistics requirement and considering other steps that may reduce the flow of students into the major. The department reported changes in the way in which the writing requirement is organized that would increase faculty involvement in the supervision of TAs. In the graduate program, a series of mini-courses has been developed to increase the availability of electives. Overall, however, the department agreed that the shortage of faculty prevents major improvements to the teaching programs. The department found the question of developing “signature” specializations “a very difficult issue to resolve.” The faculty have not reached consensus, but will attempt to identify two or three broad “areas of concentration,” and to support clusters of researchers.

The Dean endorsed most of the team’s findings and the department’s responses, and also expressed caution regarding measures to limit undergraduate enrollment. The Dean concluded that “Sociology should be one of the priority areas of investment for the college on many grounds. Student demand is extremely high and is unlikely to abate. Its faculty is composed of highly productive scholars and researchers whose articles and books are highly praised and an increasing number of whom have, or are gearing up sponsored research programs. The commitment to diversity is unequivocal and, given some recent hires and an exceptionally strong junior faculty, a strong and improving mentoring system, the department is poised to attract and retain faculty of color.”