Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

There are many assets in the current sociology program at Amelia University. Dedicated faculty work closely with students and are appreciated by them for their efforts. Sociology is seen as a good institutional citizen and the faculty are well integrated into the University undergraduate program. Recent hires bode well for new areas of intellectual and curricular growth. The number of majors is solid but could be expected to increase modestly in the coming years. There are departmental recognitions for student work, good resources for faculty and students, and there is a newly formed sociology student group contributing to identity as a sociology major and creating new opportunities for them.

As the department looks to strengthen its program and position, this report offers a rationale for and specific analysis of 4 major recommendations:

1. **Make significant short and longer term modifications to the sociology curriculum.** While there are multiple offerings in specialty areas and core courses in methods, theory and capstone, the current curriculum lacks some of the features of a strong set of offerings, has a pre-requisite system that would benefit from immediate change, and does not sufficiently consider key recommendations identified by the discipline.

2. **Mentor faculty toward tenure and promotion.** Attention to guiding untenured and associate faculty will contribute to building a department that can retain quality faculty and innovate and attract new colleagues when needed. Equally important is support of senior faculty in remaining engaged and taking on leadership roles the work ahead.

3. **Strengthen the intellectual community, vibrancy, and visibility of the department** on campus, especially in the areas of research; develop innovative strategies as an intellectual community within the department and among students.

4. **Create a comprehensive 5-7-year plan.** Envision the future of the department in anticipation of multiple lines opening up as colleagues retire and in support of longer term curriculum evolution within the Amelia University landscape.
Short term and long term modifications to the sociology curriculum

It is not uncommon for a curriculum to build over time toward the particular strengths of the faculty at a given point in a department’s history. Teaching in one’s research areas is an asset. However, when a curriculum is not proactively and comprehensively updated (versus reactive to smaller or immediate changes along the way), it risks becoming less than optimal. The current sociology curriculum needs significant attention. In the short term we recommend that collaborative departmental work begin soon (this fall?) to address the current pre-requisite system and the methods requirements.

First, to offer Classical Sociological Theory (Soc 1AA) as a first year course is atypical; if there is a function for this requirement in the major then it should be demonstrable how that theory course is built upon in upper division courses. If there is little evidence of using the theory foundation explicitly (which seems to be the case given the information we have), it is worth considering moving theory to an upper division course or to a different place in a typical major sequence. While the theory course is a requirement for the capstone, there could easily be a two or three-year gap between when it is taken and when it is used in the capstone. We learned that a very recent change was made to require intro prior to theory and to move the course from one hundred to two hundred level. It was very surprising that there was no prerequisite prior to this change, so we commend these adjustments. However, it is also an example of a modification that appears to be made in response to a particular problem not a change considered in light of a comprehensive review of the curriculum strengths and needs.

Second, we do not find any compelling rationale for requiring Soc 2BB Class, Status and Power. Inequality and stratification are certainly critical areas within the discipline but this requirement does not make any obvious sense in terms of being meaningfully linked to courses before or after that we can determine. If this is a legacy course based on a previous claim for its importance, rethinking why it is required and possibly making this an elective is recommended. Furthermore, the logic for “why theory” (Soc 1AA) is a pre-requisite for Soc 2BB is elusive. Although there is clearly a theoretical orientation to the syllabus we saw, and the number of sophisticated readings for each week is significant, other than “a background in theory could be helpful”, the sequencing of this course is confusing. Until this past year, a student didn’t even have to have had an intro course to take Soc 1AA and therefore did not have to take intro to take this required course.

Third, the methods sequence is troubling. On the one hand, emphasizing sociological skills in methods and providing opportunity for both qualitative and quantitative research
experiences is positive. However, the lack of sequencing and the far too numerous options for substitutions suggests a very messy process for students and faculty. If courses can be taken at any time in any order, how does the learning build? Is it not more limiting to teach the courses when an instructor cannot assume any shared methods knowledge and build on that? The value of requiring two research is diluted significantly when they are not coordinated in some way. Multiple methods courses can benefit student learning if they are intentionally related rather than stand-alone courses in topical areas that are overlapping. Consider requiring Soc 2CC, The Social Research Process, first for all students and then require a second methods course in the area the student chooses. Work to figure out how to offer each of the other sociology research courses once a year ideally taught by permanent sociology faculty. In the course of examining the curriculum it seems to us that some of the courses it is presumed must be offered every semester could be offered once a year. Keeping in mind that curricular revision should also be directed toward attracting future majors, such changes can open new opportunities for other offerings as well.

The program does not need more electives but different electives. When over a 2-year period, 19 different electives are listed as offered, the problem is not “not enough choices”. Rather, and several students mentioned this, it appears that faculty often teach the same electives repeatedly over their four years, so student choices are actually limited in that way. Of course, teaching in one’s specialty areas is to be expected. But it is helpful to keep in mind that 3 electives each about family or medical sociology, for example, can feel to students like 2 choices, not 6. Some students want other substantive areas, so thinking about how faculty might adapt one or two courses to take a different angle and be less specialized (and encouraging faculty to develop some new related topics) is one solution.

Collaborative work on moving toward a much clearer sequencing of courses, fewer substitutions, different electives, a more logical pathway for students to progress in the major can begin now. While some students may appreciate a highly flexible or unstructured program for scheduling purposes, the current complexity and loose coupling does not provide a comprehensively designed curriculum.

The longer term modifications to the curriculum are addressed in the last recommendation as they must be linked to the plan for hiring and the vision for the department for the next 5-7 years.

**Faculty mentoring and professional development**

Senior department members expressed a commitment to mentoring but should develop more robust mentoring practices in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service. This is especially important because of departmental demographics, including only one untenured member and upcoming retirements, which will require Prof. Addams to step
into leadership and thus to achieve promotion to full professor. Mentoring around teaching is the most readily available; almost all faculty reported discussing pedagogical issues, mostly in informal conversations. In this area, the department should consider establishing more formal teaching conversations on specific topics such as assignments, introductory teaching, core courses, comparing syllabi in a general area etc. Both tenured and untenured colleagues would benefit from such gatherings, especially as they work to better sequence their curriculum and reduce overlap among classes.

In addition, we think it crucial to invite the non-tenure-track faculty to these conversations and to make a special effort to reach out around teaching resources. While our limited feedback suggests the long-term adjunct is a dedicated, well-liked and a successful teacher, she is not well-connected to pedagogical resources and may have limited training in certain areas. Having required core courses “covered” by someone who knows the institution is helpful when dealing with sabbatical generated needs and other course releases, but it is not the strongest position for the department in terms of an exemplary sociology curriculum.

In the area of scholarship, there is some lack of clarity about the expectations for tenure and for promotion to full professor and we heard different things from different faculty about quantity of articles and/or books, pacing, and which publications are considered. We strongly encourage both junior and senior members of the department to speak with the Deans or designated persons about these expectations and to talk to each other regularly. It is our view that the scholarship of both the untenured and the associate members is strong and productive. Careful mentoring will help assure that it remains that way and will reduce unneeded stress and uncertainty.

Mentoring around service, including making decisions about which service to take on and how to say “no” to excessive requests, is an important unmet need in the department. The department collectively carries a heavy load of University-wide service, and some members are overwhelmed with service or combined teaching/service, such as supporting students; they report feeling “valued but not protected.” Careful attention to this will help reduce burnout, prepare associate and assistant faculty for departmental administration, and smooth department transitions with future retirements.

Finally, the heavy senior level demographic profile of the department makes clear that anticipated change is ahead. Throughout the department, senior faculty who will be teaching and researching for a number of years to come will benefit from intentional efforts to support each other between now and eventual retirements. Staying vibrant in teaching, finding the energy to take leadership in improving the curriculum, continuing with valued research interests and long standing engagement in the university should not be taken for granted. We heard repeatedly that there is a congenial and positive atmosphere in the department which is an excellent foundation for moving through complex transitions, differences in curriculum and adjustments in teaching areas. Institutional efforts are encouraged as well.
Intellectual community, vibrancy, and visibility

The self-study reports a desire for more intellectual community in the department and we heard this desire expressed in our individual interviews as well. Acknowledging some hiatus in research for some faculty in the past, nearly all are currently research-active and well-known in their specialty fields. Yet there is little conversation about research among department members and they their intellectual profile as scholars in the University as a whole is lower than we would expect given their stature. Members of the department are working in different research areas, but they ought not see lack of substantive overlap as a barrier to talking with each other about their work. They do share some overlapping conceptual or theoretical interests and this, as well as the general intellectual curiosity they share, is sufficient basis. We were struck at the department dinner, in fact, by how much members of the department engaged with each other about their work, an experience that some commented was too rare. The sociology majors have developed an intellectual and social community for themselves, which faculty universally recognized and praised\(^1\). Faculty ought to have the same. Our suggestions in this section are intended to help increase intellectual community, visibility of sociologists’ scholarship, and develop a more vibrant sociological community at Amelia.

We recognize that time is always limited, but small investments of time could make a big difference. To bolster intellectual community, we suggest: periodic research lunches or dinners at which members take turns presenting work in progress; department meetings could include a formal “tell us about what you’re working on” agenda item where shorter conversations could happen; events and talks organized by faculty, not just by students; gatherings of alumnae, students, and faculty around a common interest or professional focus. Sociology faculty could also spotlight their own research more, e.g. with events that feature faculty talking about their scholarship that are visible outside the department.

In addition, the sociology department, in our view, is more research productive than it is perceived by administration, particularly given the level of department resources to support research. (Comparisons with other disciplines can be tricky because the outlets available and the selectively of publishing can vary wildly.) Especially given that the majority of members are near retirement, it is impressive that almost all are actively publishing and several have books about to come out. Both of the younger faculty members have exemplary and active research programs. Members of cognate departments appreciated the reputation and research quality of sociology faculty,

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\(^1\) Note: Student presentations at regional and national meetings should be encouraged and institutionalized as much as possible. The current student group is active in new ways for the department. How can that be sustained as those individuals graduate? Is it really important to increase the number of honors projects? Are the standards too high? Would student work presented outside the department be of more benefit both for students’ resumes and visibility?
describing it as “small but lively.” We urge the administration to consider whether there are ways to support this research and to make it more visible University-wide.

Planning for the Future

The self-study lacks a substantial vision for the near and intermediate future of the program beyond the hope of another tenure line. Given the current strengths, of which there are many, what is the department moving toward and why? When positions do open up has the department built the case for how to fill those positions? In what ways can the department be prepared and persuasive about what is needed and why? Along with curriculum revision, hiring is best done proactively rather than reactively (“We need somebody to teach the courses others don’t want to/can’t teach” can be a weak claim to an administration). We understand (of course, we do not know anything for certain) that there are no plans to shrink the department but the department should not build a plan based on the hope that a 7th tenure position will be reinstated. That would not be wise. At the same time, in order to retain positions in institutional times of scarcer resources, departments that are prepared, convincing, and ready will be in the strongest positions.

One of the things we noted was an apparent lack of active involvement and connection to ASA (the American Sociological Association) among the senior faculty. Nurturing this connection, which seems in place with newer faculty, can be beneficial in two ways. First, the connection can make sure the department understands what the discipline is saying about teaching and curriculum. (The newest product addressing evidence based curricular work in sociology was given to the incoming chair and can be found at http://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/asa-booklet-2017.pdf). There is no issue with the other professional societies in which faculty are connected and well respected but we were surprised that ASA was not included and valued in addition those professional associations. Second, connection with ASA can provide a resource for advancing the standing of the department within the discipline and for shaping the vision for the future. A better understanding of the national sociology landscape can be enormously helpful; for example, there are department chair pre-conference workshops at ASA every year, teaching and learning scholarship both on its own and in subfields, ideas about assessment and assessment of student learning, and teaching preconference workshops on pedagogy that are very well respected. We would expect the institution to support taking advantage of such opportunities.

We cannot emphasize enough how important this planning work is to a strong future for the department. The self-study was detailed in describing the current activities and opportunities within the department but was less strong, perhaps as a first time through exercise, in making clear a level of collective self-assessment focused on future directions. It is not possible to detail in this report what the longer range planning of the curriculum precisely should be because it will depend on decisions the department makes on future positions. Is it important to replace a position that can contribute to Holocaust and Genocide Studies or to Global Studies? Should there continue to be a
sociology of law expert or family? The answers may well be yes but those claims need to be embedded in a comprehensive sense of what the department will build toward and why. How might each new hire fit with Amelia? How does the hire support a high quality sociology program? What is a distinctive mission for the department? What are measurable goals and how can what is learned in assessing those goals be acted upon to stay fresh and responsive to Amelia students?

Lastly, we strongly recommend that institutional resources be provided to make it possible for an outside facilitator/consultant to be part of the planning process. It is very difficult and not a good idea for the chair (or any department member) to lead this planning work because it changes the opportunity to participate in the process. The chair or designee certainly plays a critical leadership role in making sure the planning happens and is useful, but not in leading the actual decision making sessions or difficult conversations. There will be messy issues that the faculty have not had to wrestle with before and a skilled consultant who can help guide through those dialogues can be invaluable. We think that the consultant should not be from Amelia but rather someone in the area who can meet on some regular basis, with department work in between sessions. And, as a reminder, if this work is to be successful everyone in the department needs to commit and fully participate (make all the meetings, do the work in between) and/or an understanding needs to be reached in advance as to who will be involved in what ways and why.

In closing, it is always a challenge to make sure that the strengths of a program are not over-shadowed by the attention to what things can/should be improved. Clearly, Amelia is a prominent, well established university with a distinctive graduate/undergraduate configuration as a comprehensive institution. It was fascinating to learn about the dominance of geography and psychology in the mental model of how Amelia works and to think about how that shapes the culture. It is both very impressive and somewhat unique.

The Department of Sociology has much to offer built on decades of service to the mission, quality work with students, and substantial research. We were impressed with the depth of connection to teaching, the congeniality of the atmosphere of the department, the department staff, the students themselves, and the high expectations from the institution. Our task here is to identify what actions ahead will make the program stronger and responsive to both changes in the discipline and opportunities in the future. We hope this guidance is helpful.

Appendix: Has our schedule of meetings