“State” University

Department of Sociology & Anthropology Academic Program Review

External Review Report

Spring, 2019

May 8, 2019

External Review Report Prepared by

Tracy E. Ore, Ph.D.
Professor of Sociology, St. Cloud State University
320-308-5570
teore@stcloudstate.edu
Conducted: Spring, 2019  
Reviewer: Tracy E. Ore, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, St. Cloud State University

**Materials reviewed prior to/during the visit:**
1) Academic Program Review for the Department of Sociology and Anthropology draft self-study, including appendices  
2) CVs for all Sociology, Anthropology and “Graduate Program” faculty  
3) Websites for Sociology, Anthropology and “Graduate Program” programs

**Persons or Groups Interviewed During the Visit:**
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences  
Associate Vice President & Chief Information Technology Officer  
Deputy Chief Information Technology Officer & Executive Director of Academic Technology and User Services  
Sociology Program Faculty Members  
Anthropology Program Faculty Members  
Undergraduate students in Senior Seminar course

**BACKGROUND & CONTEXT**
In February 2019, I was contacted by the Department Chair regarding the external review of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at “State” University. Prior to my arrival, I read the well-prepared self-study of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology which contains detailed and helpful data on mission and planning and the Program’s goals and objectives. During my visit, I met with University administrators, Program faculty and staff, as well as students. Overall, I was struck by the warmth, collegiality, and positive attitude of the faculty and staff.

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, the Sociology and Anthropology Program, like others, is being asked to do more with less. Nevertheless, I was impressed by the consistently positive attitude of the faculty and staff and their deep commitment to providing a quality educational experience for students.

To better understand the Program, I spent my period on campus in meetings and interviews, including gatherings for lunch and dinner. This report summarizes my findings and presents my conclusions and recommendations regarding the challenges and opportunities facing the Department’s programs and the administration.

---

1 Dr. Tracy Ore has been a member of the American Sociological Association’s (ASA) Program Reviewers and Consultants (PRC)—formerly the Department Resources Group (DRG)—since 2003. The PRC advances the discipline of sociology by offering empirically grounded peer review and consulting expertise to academic departments regarding effective practices for pedagogy, curriculum and organizational structures in support of teaching and learning and the production of sociological knowledge. PRC consultants assist departments with program review, curriculum development, assessment, department 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 departments. PRC consultants are dedicated to empowering department chairs and faculty during periods of self-reflection, external review, or general department revitalization.
STRENGTHS OF THE SOCIOLOGY PROGRAM

Productive, Enthusiastic, and Dedicated Faculty

The primary strength of the Sociology Program is the faculty, with all exemplifying themselves as excellent teacher/scholars and advisors, doing considerable work to further the Mission and Vision of the University, College, and the Department through their dedicated teaching and service to students. They work hard to maintain a diverse curriculum that serves the needs of their students. Despite their heavy workload, they are professionally active and productive, exemplifying the ideal of the teacher-scholar. They are active in disseminating their knowledge through participation in professional and other organizations and possess an impressive portfolio of publications.

Faculty are accessible to students outside the classroom, and students reported receiving individual attention and mentorship that supports their success.

Positive & Collegial Environment

The level of friendliness and collegiality among the faculty and students of the Department was readily apparent to myself as the reviewer. Faculty spoke highly of each other, were complimentary of the accomplishments of their colleagues, and were strongly supportive of all members of the Department. Rarely have I witnessed such camaraderie and comity.

Strong Leadership

The Department Chair has served as a strong role model for all faculty in the Department, working collaboratively with his colleagues in order to fulfill its needs. It should be noted that the work of heading a department with three units amounts to an extra burden for the Chair, and he has sacrificed a great deal of his time and energy for the betterment of the Department. This, at the very least, should be acknowledged by the Administration.

Curriculum Consistent with National Standards

The curriculum of the core for the Sociology Major and Minor is strong and includes the ASA recommended needed core/required courses for the major, with the exception of requiring a specific internship experience for all students (see “Recommendations” below). It is particularly noteworthy that the Sociology Program is working to implement the recommendations on how to develop an academically solid sociology major that provides the skills necessary to be competitive in the workforce, as described in ASA’s recent publication The Sociology Major in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education. In addition, Sociology faculty contribute to the General Education Curriculum (GEC), and to courses in the “Specialty” Minor and the “Graduate Program.” Opportunities for further strengthening the sociology curriculum are discussed below in “Recommendations.”

The curriculum for the Anthropology Minor is also strong. It is important to note that the ability of the few faculty to continue to ensure that students have opportunities to be exposed to curriculum in all three sub-disciplines of Anthropology is particularly impressive. In addition, Anthropology contributes 3 courses to the GEC as well as to International Studies, Ethnic Studies, the Peace Corps Prep Program, and the Fulbright Student program in which two of their last five student grantees were anthropology minors. They currently maintain over 40 students in the minor with very few faculty. There may be even additional opportunities to serve the mission and vision of the University were it appropriately resourced. Suggested opportunities are discussed below in “Recommendations.”

The curriculum for the “Graduate Program” is strong as well and provides excellent opportunities for students pursuing leadership positions in various career fields. The decision to reduce the number of concentrations from 8 to 6 will facilitate greater flexibility in the program and may help to increase enrollments.
Mission & Goals
The Mission and Vision of the Sociology and Anthropology Department are consistent with the Mission and Vision of “State” University and the College of Arts and Sciences. Through their curriculum, the teacher-scholars in the Department prepare students in their individual programs as well as beyond the classroom in their professional and personal lives. By providing students with educational experiences and intellectual skills that enable them to think critically and reflexively about issues affecting cultures and societies, historically and globally, they encourage students to develop a comprehensive understanding of the nature and applications of sociological theory and methods, and promote a learning environment where students are taught to value cultural diversity. This focus places the Department in direct alignment with the University’s vision.

Enthusiastic Majors
During my visit, I had the opportunity to meet with a group of Sociology majors in a Senior Seminar class. Our conversation made it apparent that the Department is exceeding expectations with regard to student-faculty interaction and a supportive learning environment. I was pleased with the positive attitudes they expressed toward the faculty. Additionally, students clearly articulated what they saw as the strengths of the Sociology Program and had insightful ideas regarding the changes necessary to enable current and future students additional opportunities for growth and development (See “Recommendations” below).

Student-Faculty Research Opportunities
From the information presented in the self-study, it is clear that there are opportunities for student-faculty research. This is an important part of the curricula. As an ASA research brief found from its most recent Bachelors and Beyond study found:

student satisfaction with the sociology major increases when they are given opportunities to interact with their fellow students on substantive projects, when they interact with faculty in a variety of ways beyond the classroom, and when they take part in activities such as internships and service learning projects that provide for transitions to the next stage of their lives—be that graduate school or employment (Senter et al. 2013).

Not only are such experiences likely to increase student satisfaction with the major, but they are also more likely to increase graduates’ attractiveness to employers and to graduate departments (See “Recommendations” below for enhancing these opportunities through integrating them more formally into the curriculum).

Assessment Plans in Place
With regard to assessment, the Department has a good handle on this process, developing a plan, collecting data, and using that data to assist in further curricular changes for both Sociology and Anthropology. As this process helps the faculty identify areas of opportunity for curriculum revision, I will discuss below some possible recommendations for strengthening this assessment plan.

CHALLENGES OF THE DEPARTMENT
Based on my observations throughout the review period as well as my review of the self-study, I identified 4 areas of current challenges facing the Department: 1) permanent staffing in Anthropology, 2) curriculum, 3) assessment, and 4) support from upper administration. Each will be addressed below, followed by a discussion of my recommendations:

Permanent Staffing in Anthropology
The number of permanent faculty in the Anthropology Program is small relative to the number of minors and student credit hour generation. While the faculty have ensured the quality of students’ experiences by providing high-quality curriculum offerings in the minor as well as in the General Education Curriculum,
the small number of faculty limits the amount of coverage of important areas of the discipline, especially those where there is high student interest and strong connections to career opportunities (e.g., physical/biological anthropology, specializing in forensics; applied cultural anthropology, specializing in development).

Curriculum

As the above indicates, the regular availability of Anthropology courses remains a challenge for the program. In addition, while the core for the Sociology Major is strong and includes the ASA recommended needed core/required courses for the major, there is a lack of a requirement of a specific internship experience for all students. I am aware that some of the curriculum is currently under evaluation to address students’ ability to more effectively develop analytic and research skills and to provide even more focused and relevant subject matter to prepare students for their future careers. Finally, as the University reviews and revises its requirements for the General Education Curriculum, there is concern of the lack of offerings of Sociology courses in the GEC.

Assessment

As stated above, the Department does appear to have a good handle on the assessment process. However, it appears to lack a multi-year assessment plan across the curriculum, thus missing 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.

Support from Upper Administration

While meeting with the Dean, it was clear that she recognized the value of the Department to the University. However, 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 prioritization of student needs, the allocation of physical space, and the value of the work faculty do are not always timely and/or clear. In addition, it would be helpful for the Administration to assist in championing and marketing the Departments programs, particularly the “Graduate Program.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reflecting on the above, I have the following recommendations:

Stabilize the Anthropology Minor

As stated above, the number of permanent faculty in the Anthropology Program is small relative to the number of minors and student credit hour generation. While the faculty still manage to contribute to the University in significant ways, they are limited in the amount of coverage of important areas of the discipline, especially those where there is high student interest and strong connections to career opportunities. Approval of a full-time tenure-track line in the Anthropology Program should be made a priority by the administration.

Creating a Strategic Plan for the Sociology Program

Many of the challenges that the Sociology Program currently face, including the number of majors, could be addressed by creating a strategic plan. While the program offers many unique elements to students’ educational experiences (via the “Specialty” Minor, the opportunities offered through the various course offerings, etc.) a lack of identity and focus of the program can contribute to student attrition. After all, if there is not some clarity about the uniqueness of the Sociology Program at “State” University, how can a student build an identity as a Sociology major? While individual faculty expressed a desire to be involved in the recruitment, orientation, and advising of students, it will be important for the faculty as a whole to commit to creating a program that supports students’ decision making in achieving their educational and career goals.
In order to accomplish the above, including the changes to the curriculum that I outline below, I strongly advise the Dean to fund an outside facilitator to lead the program faculty through a workshop to re-visions its future. While the faculty currently function quite well as a group of collegial and professional teachers and scholars, they presently lack the “collective efficacy” needed in order to be successful as a program. It is important to note that this should not be read as a weakness of the program. Rather, it is a common experience of many sociology programs with a discipline that contains such varied areas of study. 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 “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 “State” University and higher education in general.

**Continued Curriculum Revision for Sociology**

The Program has already begun the important process of curriculum revision, essentially with the goal of constructing a zero-based curriculum, considering the ways it can be restructured and refocused. I encourage the faculty to continue to engage in such a process of strategic planning as they consider the future of the Program. With revisions in the General Education Curriculum, the development of new and existing opportunities for partnership at the University (including the development of a Nursing major), it is clear that there are possibilities for creating signature experiences for Sociology majors at “State University.” Some suggested changes include:

- **Reconfigure SOC 2XX: Sociological Practice:** While recently revised, I encourage the faculty to reconsider reconfiguring SOC 2XX into a course more 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 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.

- **Integrate 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” (see especially Recommendation 5). 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.

- **Reconfigure SOC 3XX & 3XX:** Reconfiguring SOC 3XX (Introduction to Social Research) and SOC 3XX (Data Collection and Analysis) into a sequenced course with connected curriculum may offer students additional opportunities to develop competency in data analysis and research and provide more thorough statistical and quantitative training in the major. This may even offer additional opportunities for student/faculty research experiences. As a student succinctly stated in an ASA Publication on careers in sociology, “data is the new currency.” To provide students with this important form of knowledge so that they can fairly compete in the 21st century job market, establishing additional curriculum in this area is essential.

- **Focus Curriculum:** I 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 as well as the ability of the faculty to deliver the broad array of courses currently offered.

- **Required Internship:** The faculty should consider the role a required internship might play in the overall major curriculum. Such a course could provide a culminating experience to bring together research and theory along with Senior Seminar.

- **Propose Additional Sociology Courses to the General Education Curriculum:** Currently, there is only one Sociology course offered as part of the GEC. With the revision of the GEC to
include upper-level courses, there are opportunities for the Program to include its courses in more areas, including the themes of “Interconnections” and “Natural World & Technology.” Again, with more opportunities for students to be exposed to sociology courses, there are more opportunities for them to become Sociology Majors.

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

Seek Additional Opportunities for Collaboration

The faculty in the Department have developed several important opportunities for partnerships across campus—through the availability of Anthropology courses in the GEC to the offering of an interdisciplinary M.S. degree through the “Graduate Program.” As they work to assess their existing partnerships, there may be additional opportunities for collaboration for the Program, similar to those already in existence. Additionally, there may be opportunities to collaborate with other units at “State” University (e.g., The College of Business, Teacher Education) to offer courses in the GEC that are specifically designed for specific majors. Such courses offer an opportunity to expose the general student body to the discipline of sociology and anthropology, thus offering opportunities for recruiting additional students to the major and minors in the Department. For example, there may be opportunities to connect courses to students intending to work in the medical field through specifically tailoring a section of 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 Social Work and Gerontology and plans for the development of a major in 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. 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 service 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 100 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 the Environmental Sciences” or “Introduction to Sociology for Business Administration”).

Finally, I also encourage the faculty to explore opportunities with high-quality programs that would provide a clear pathway for graduates of “State” University for continued professional preparation. In addition to the consideration of additional minors in the Department, the development of certificates in areas such as critical data analysis and community health may require fewer if any additional resources while offering additional opportunities of exposure to the fields of sociology and anthropology to potential majors.

Development of a Complete Assessment Plan in Sociology

Once curriculum revision is complete, it will be important for the faculty to develop a multi-year assessment plan across the curriculum that will aid faculty as the Program moves forward and continues to grow. Staff in Technology Services may be useful in developing a comprehensive plan.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at “State” University is made up of dedicated teacher-scholars and advisors led by a devoted Department Chair. The level of commitment that they have to the students is laudable. There are great opportunities for continued strengthening of its programs, and it is my hope that the administrative leadership will champion this effort by acting swiftly on my recommendations.

REFERENCES & RESOURCES