

**External Review Report  
Western Carolina University Sociology Program  
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## **I. Introduction**

### **a. Description of visit length**

The team, which was comprised of two external Sociologists and one internal Political Scientist, gathered on Sunday evening at a local restaurant with Director of Assessment Wargo and the Department Head, and a couple of members of the Sociology faculty. The team spent the day Monday meeting with faculty, students, and administrators. The team departed on Tuesday morning.

### **b. Summary and Description of Meetings Conducted**

On Monday morning the team and Director Wargo met to discuss the day's activities. The review process began with a session with the unofficial program director Hickey and the department head Williams. The main items of conversation were the questions of space, Cherokee Studies, and curriculum. The manner in which Resource-25 allocates classrooms was criticized. Questions of faculty scholarship and student internships were also discussed.

The second meeting was with the Dean of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Kehrberg. This meeting focused on ways the program could develop a specific niche that would allow it to establish a unique identity and generate resources for future growth. The Cherokee Studies program was raised as a possible means toward this end. Raising the profile of the program internally and externally was addressed.

The next meeting was with the Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Dr. Tyson-Lofquist. The issue of Cherokee Studies and its relationship to the program and department was raised. The relationship of enrollment growth with additional resources was discussed. The goal of integrating undergraduate students in faculty research was also raised.

For lunch, the team met with several students including one recent alumnus of the program. The students spoke very highly of the faculty members, and were proud of their activities with the Sociology Club.

After lunch the team met with the Sociology faculty and discussed space issues once again, and spent considerable time discussing the current curriculum and possibilities for adapting the curriculum. The issue of how service is valued in the promotion and tenure process was raised with concerns that service consumes considerable time with little payoff. The faculty raised the possibility of creating a MA in Social Research. The discussion focused on the limited resources available for this undertaking.

The team next toured the departmental facilities in McKee building, including the main office, classrooms, and faculty offices.

Following the tour, the team had an opportunity to review the day's materials and plan the writing of the report.

The final event of the day was dinner with faculty from the program as well as the department head.

The next morning Director Wargo and the team met for breakfast after which the team disbursed to their origins.

## **II. Analysis of Program**

### **a. Undergraduate Program**

The curriculum is standard for universities of WCU's type. The major requires 33 hours of Sociology courses and 120 credit hours to graduate. The core consists of an introductory course and two methodology courses and one theory course. The remainder of the curriculum is designed with maximum flexibility to enable students to complete the program in a timely manner even if they join the program in their sophomore or junior years. Courses show strong enrollment. The program has both a BA and a BS degree with roughly 80% of the students in the BS program. This high percentage is due to the easier requirements (MFL is required in the BA program). The question of prerequisites was discussed with no firm conclusion reached. This area deserves more discussion. Approximately 60 percent of majors complete internships.

A review of syllabi for required courses (Human Society, Methods of Social Research, Analysis of Social Data, and Sociological Theory) indicates that these courses are thoughtfully constructed and rigorous. Course materials and required assignments are consistent with those at other universities. Together, these courses provide a core of sociological knowledge that prepares students for advanced electives in the discipline as well as for further study or employment.

The ratio of tenure-track faculty (5) with reported majors (~50) allows faculty to spend significant time with advising duties and building rapport with the students. The student body has a high ratio of minority students and the faculty has a high number of female members (a fact that was noted for approval by the students).

The planning and assessment processes are undergoing revision and are not yet completed. An alumni survey was the largest evidence of student satisfaction presented. The faculty within the program seems to decide matters collegially with a senior faculty member identified as the unofficial program director. The faculty indicated that they played an advisory role in producing the self-study document. As part of a three-element department (along with Cherokee Studies and Anthropology) the program is in danger of getting less than they deserve.

### **III. ANALYSIS OF FACULTY**

#### **a. Qualifications**

The sociology faculty is highly qualified. All have the terminal degree and are teaching courses consistent with their areas of specialization and interest. All are enthusiastic classroom teachers and all have active research agendas and programs of professional development.

#### **b. Resources and Support**

Institutional support seems adequate. Processes and procedures for tenure and promotion seem appropriate and are consistent with those of the University. The department faculty did however express some concern that contributions to service were undervalued in the evaluation process.

We received no information about faculty compensation in the documents we were sent. However, based on informal conversations with department members, it seems that compensation is consistent with similar departments at this University and comparable institutions. Some concern was expressed that quickly rising housing prices in the area strain faculty salaries, and this could be an issue in recruiting and retention.

Library resources seem adequate at present but the library budget for the sociology program is a concern. According to the 2006 Program Review, the budget for book purchasing has remained static for the last several years while book costs have risen. Another concern is that this budget is shared with the Cherokee Studies program but no provision for the added expense has been made. An increase in the library budget to balance inflation and to account for the added expense of the Cherokee Studies program would be appropriate.

Technological support for the program seems adequate. The University supplies all faculty members with computers and high speed Internet access and some classrooms have electronic teaching equipment.

Support for travel to professional conferences is barely adequate. At the moment, the budget will cover travel expense to, at most, one sociological regional or national meeting per year for each department member. These meetings are vital for professional

development and networking with others in the profession and are especially important for a younger department in which four of five members are untenured or Assistant Professors. We urge the University to at least double the budget for travel to professional conferences.

At present, the sociology program is part of the larger Department of Sociology and Anthropology, led by a department head who happens to be an anthropologist. This arrangement seems to be working well but we believe that the structure could be improved by formally creating a director for the sociology program. This would provide more recognition for program leadership and a clearer contact point for communication between department members and the Department Head and University.

#### **IV. ANALYSIS OF OPERATIONAL FACILITIES AND BUDGET**

##### **a. Facilities**

This is a major concern. The department is cramped and some faculty members are in small, windowless offices. Perhaps more importantly, the scheduling software used by the University frequently assigns sociology faculty members to classrooms in other buildings. While we recognize that classroom space is in high demand – and will become even scarcer as buildings continue to be remodeled – we concur with the department that assigning sociology courses to classrooms close to faculty offices has a number of important benefits. Communication with students and particularly with sociology majors would be enhanced, as would the sense of community so important to the department. While it appears to be possible to “game” the scheduling software, we believe that it would be more straightforward to simply assign a higher priority to keeping sociology classes in the same building as the departmental offices.

##### **b. Budget**

Given the recent departmental budget increase, the program budget seems adequate but, as noted previously, more support is needed for travel to professional conferences and library holdings.

#### **V. SUMMARY OF PROGRAM STRENGTHS AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

##### **a. General impression of the program**

Overall, this program has succeeded in creating a strong and cohesive intellectual community for faculty and students. The curriculum is rigorous yet flexible, covering the foundations of the discipline while allowing faculty to teach in their areas of specialization. Faculty are dedicated to their students and institution. Resources are adequate to meet instructional needs, though research support is very limited. The program faces some challenges in terms of its visibility within the college and its relationship with Cherokee Studies.

## **b. Areas of strength**

Students feel a strong sense of community within the sociology program, and enjoy camaraderie with the faculty and with one another. They are engaged by the program content, and eager to apply what they are learning. Small course sizes almost certainly contribute to this feeling of integration. These students are eager to share their high opinions of the program with others, and would be a great resource in recruiting majors. The department should be commended for reaching out to a diversity of students, and providing them with a supportive atmosphere.

The faculty are thoughtful and energetic teachers who clearly care about the students' wellbeing. They seek novel and engaging approaches to teaching, and have developed interesting activities for students outside of the classroom. Furthermore, they share an enthusiasm for improving their Department and University through professional service, and for continuing their own research agendas.

## **c. Areas for improvement**

The program lacks a strong identity or presence within the institution. Faculty should work to increase the profile of their own and students' accomplishments, and better define their specific contributions within the College. The department could also raise its profile on campus by focusing more on professional publications and research projects that could involve students as co-investigators.

As is the case in many sociology programs, students have trouble visualizing how their studies will be put to use in the work world. The department could better facilitate these understandings through use of American Sociological Association materials, increasing student-faculty collaboration in research, continued development of the internship program, and expansion of the Professional Issues course (at current the course is optional, and has a low enrollment, but this course has the potential to aid the school-work transition for all majors).

While students in the major are engaged and successful, as the department works to recruit additional majors it might also consider strategies to recruit high quality students to the major. Opportunities to collaborate on faculty research, and active engagement on campus and in the region might serve this end.

## **VI. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Allocation of office and classroom space to facilitate a learning community:** The strong sense of community shared by majors and faculty is one of this program's greatest strengths. The physical proximity of classroom and office space helps to develop and maintain connections between students and faculty, and facilitates the out-of-class communications that enhance student engagement. Faculty report that when they teach near their offices, students are far more likely to continue conversations into office hours.

This type of benefit should be considered as important as the presence of specific classroom equipment (e.g. maps, technology) in allocating classrooms to courses.

**Resolution of relationship with Cherokee Studies:** At present, the Sociology Program (and the Department as a whole, evidently) has an awkward relationship with Cherokee Studies. While the Cherokee Studies is physically and administratively housed in Anthropology & Sociology, it does not appear to be well integrated in terms of program contents or collaboration on events (though personal relationships seem amicable). The Cherokee Studies Program is thus regarded as a drain on spatial and financial resources. Possible solutions include increasing the degree of integration or severing the relationship and housing Cherokee Studies elsewhere. The broadly interdisciplinary nature of Cherokee Studies, which, at present, includes almost no sociology content, and differences in the intellectual and administrative approaches of the programs, suggest that severing the relationship might be the easier course. Were a new hire in Cherokee Studies to be a sociologist with a strong vision of how the programs could better work together, integration might be a possibility.

**Increased visibility & recruitment of majors:** The program must increase its visibility within the College and University in order to secure future resources and recruit majors. Some strategies for achieving this could be immediately implemented with minimal resources. For instance, the creation of a regular speaker series wherein academic sociologists or practitioners in sociologically relevant fields address contemporary issues would increase student interest and draw attention across campus. In addition, because program faculty are actively engaged in research, they might present in a regular colloquium series for interested students and faculty in other disciplines. Similarly, a panel presentation by WCU sociology alumni would be a visible event as well as a means to showcase what one does with a degree in sociology (a question that perennially plagues students). In addition, because most students do not enter college with an awareness of sociology, the Program and/or Sociology Club should have a booth at the annual Valley Ballyhoo to draw the attention of incoming students.

Other strategies for increasing visibility require more planning and resources. For instance, focusing on a substantive sub-field that is particularly relevant to the area might garner regional attention. At the moment, the faculty's strengths are well distributed across the breadth of sociology, which allows this relatively small faculty to cover the discipline well. Future hiring in targeted areas might complement this breadth with some depth and regional specificity. Areas to consider might include environmental sociology, social inequality, community development, or the Hispanic/Latino diaspora. A stronger connection between sociology and Cherokee Studies might also serve this purpose, but due to the issues noted above, this seems more challenging.

Any discussion of growing the major should be based on an accurate count of the students served by the program, including education majors who choose Sociology as an area of specialization. Resource allocation should reflect service to students in this capacity, and to those fulfilling Liberal Studies requirements, as well as service to majors and minors.

**Curriculum:** We feel the curriculum provides a good base of fundamental knowledge while allowing students substantial flexibility. Curriculum development should focus on removing elective courses that are no longer taught and replacing these with courses in the faculty's research areas, as well as developing courses that fulfill the Liberal Studies requirement at all levels. The program should also provide advising materials (in a brochure or website) that show students how courses might be combined to provide coherent courses of study and to complement their career interests.

**Development of a Master's Degree program:** Given current demands on faculty, we do not advocate the development of a graduate program at this time. Discussions on the topics should continue, however, and the program might consider this part of a long-range plan (10-15 years) should demand and resources prove adequate.

**Institutionalization of program leadership:** At this time, the program is led by an unofficial Program Director with limited authority. This position should be formalized and granted sufficient resources and bureaucratic authority to lead the program. The Program Director should be charged with crafting strategies to improve and grow the program.