

**External Review Report
Western Carolina University Sociology Program
November, 2014**

Douglas L. Kuck, Sociology, University of South Carolina – Aiken
Winford A. Gordon, Psychology, Western Carolina University
Karen A. Mason, Criminology & Criminal Justice, Western Carolina University

Table of Contents

I. Introduction...	1
a. A description of visit length...	1
b. A summary and description of meetings conducted by the review team...	1
II. Analysis of Program...	2
III. Analysis of Faculty...	3
a. Qualifications...	3
b. Resources and Support...	3
c. Teaching, Research/Creative Activity, and Service...	3
IV. Analysis of Operational Facilities and Budget...	5
V. Summary of Unit Strengths and Areas for Improvement....	6
a. Overall, what are the areas of strength?...	6
b. Overall, in what areas could the unit make improvements?...	7
VI. Summary of Recommendations...	8
a. Enhance course sequencing. ...	8
b. Continue to review the equivalency of the research methods and data analysis courses in sociology with those in psychology....	8
c. Development of a capstone course....	8
d. Sociology faculty should consider offering SOC 386 and, secondly, SOC 385 as four hour lecture/lab course with six contact hours per week....	8
e. Continue to justify and advocate restoration of tenure-track position....	8
f. Continue with plans to establish a designated area for sociology students....	9
g. Review and reduce number of course offerings....	9
h. Consultancy for program assessment....	9

I. Introduction

a. A description of visit length

The review visit ran from 7 AM Monday, 10/20/14, through 1:45 PM Tuesday, 10/21/14.

The team, which was comprised of one external Sociologist and one internal Criminologist and one internal Psychologist, gathered on Monday morning, 10/20/2014. The team spent the day Monday meeting with faculty, students, and administrators. The team spent Tuesday morning in work sessions and exit meetings with administrators, and the department head from Anthropology and S-Sociology.

b. A summary and description of meetings conducted by the review team

Monday, there were interviews and meetings with the Dr. Allison Morrison-Shetlar, Provost, Dr. Richard Starnes, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Kathleen Brennan, Head of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Drs. Marilyn Chamberlin, Anthony Hickey, Peter Nieckarz and Mr. Munene Mwaniki, faculty in the Sociology program and seven current and former students from the Sociology program.

Each meeting lasted for 50 minutes except for the meeting with Dr. Brennan which lasted for one and a half hours.

The meetings on Monday consisted of open discussion during which the review team asked exploratory questions. The discussion varied in each interview but generally included a number of common questions

Tuesday was spent in working sessions and there were meetings for an initial review of the team's findings. One review session included Dr. Allison Morrison-Shetlar, Provost, Dr. Richard Starnes, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Kathleen Brennan, Head of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology. A second review session, which also served as a closing session, included Dr. Carol Burton, Associate Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Studies, and Mr. David Onder, Director of Assessment.

II. Analysis of Program

The sociology program provides general education course offerings (SOC 103, 235, and 414) within the liberal arts curriculum at WCU as well as B.A. and B.S. baccalaureate degree programs with a major and minor in sociology. There is no graduate degree available in Sociology. With the exception of a required senior-level capstone course, the core requirements of the degree programs meet the American Sociological Association's (ASA) recommendations: introductory sociology (SOC 103), research methods (SOC 385), statistics/data analysis (SOC 386), and sociological theory (SOC 391). Review of SOC 385, 386, and 391 syllabi reflect appropriate levels of breadth and depth for an undergraduate program and each appears to be rigorous.

Goals and objectives have recently been articulated at the departmental level (Anthropology and Sociology) through the departmental QEP plan. In the current self-study, it is stated that a forthcoming department-level revised mission statement and strategic plan will be aligned with the University and College missions.

Assessment of the achievement of goals and objectives of the sociology program has begun. Exit exam scores and satisfaction survey data from graduating seniors was first collected during the spring 2013 semester. Results appear to be positive for the one program outcome learning goal that the exit exam can, though rather imprecisely, measure: Students will be able to *discuss core concepts and theoretical perspectives in sociology*.

Sociology faculty are currently grappling with ways in which the reflective piece of ELE project can be evaluated to assess the achievement of goals and objectives. Other assessment mechanisms that were proposed in the QEP plan (e.g., random sampling, evaluation of student research) remain in development. It is apparent the faculty have realized that implementation of their well-conceived plans is a practical enigma and a time-consuming process. The demands of assessment are challenging for professionals who are primarily charged with and actively engaged in teaching and scholarship. The faculty in Sociology are now expending their time and effort toward the noble cause of providing all sociology majors with a quality experiential learning experience. This limits the time available to execute a thorough assessment program.

III. Analysis of Faculty

a. Qualifications

The Sociology program has one Professor and three Associate Professors. A vacant tenure-track position for which a search is underway in the current academic year will be filled with someone who holds a Ph.D. in Sociology. With the new hire, the program will have an appropriate balance in rank.

The American Sociological Association also recommends a balance in chronological age of faculty which is realized in this program. The faculty members are highly qualified. All full time faculty members have the terminal degree in the field and teach courses that are compatible with their areas of specialization and interests.

b. Resources and Support

The program has adequate and appropriate processes and procedures for tenure, promotion, and faculty rank decisions. The departmental collegial review document (DCRD) provides guidelines and standards consistent with those of the University.

The review team was not given information about faculty salaries or compensation. However, the absence of standard pay increases for numerous years, including basic cost of living adjustments, mostly due to state budgetary restraints were noted as a source of concern for faculty retention and recruiting.

All library resources and holdings were reported to be satisfactory. In the most recent prior program review there was an expressed concern about a shared book purchasing budget. That concern has been resolved.

All classroom technology access and support is adequate. In the most recent prior program review there was an expressed concern about classroom assignments that required faculty to teach in buildings far removed from the department. That concern has been resolved.

Support for travel is consistent with University standards; however the funds are barely adequate. Travel money will support travel to one regional or national meeting a year. In fact, travel to even one conference requires additional an application for additional funding from a University level travel fund. There is particular concern with a lack of funding for membership fees required to attend professional conferences.

c. Teaching, Research/Creative Activity, and Service

All faculty teach a three-three load, except for the department head who has a course load reduction. The teaching load is consistent with that of other social science departments at the University. Based on a review of numerous course syllabi it is evident that the faculty have created courses that incorporate a high level of student engagement,

and represent a thorough examination of critical material in the discipline. Input from the exit exam and face to face meeting with undergraduates confirm both the rigorous standards of the courses and a high level of enthusiasm for the teaching and learning shared by the faculty.

The sociology program is composed of active scholars, and the administrative leadership indicated that the department has experienced a notable resurgence in scholarly activity. This was confirmed by the review team through the examination of curricula vita. Three faculty members have recent or upcoming peer review journal articles and all faculty consistently participate in scholarly activities such as presentations at professional conferences and applied research projects. The faculty members also present their scholarly work and offer their expertise in a variety of venues including community meetings, national and statewide professional organizations, and active memberships on nonprofit agency boards.

The service of the faculty is strong at the regional level. Several faculty members have been engaged in regional projects that showcase the expertise of the department and University. Faculty members reported satisfactory levels of service participation at the college and University levels. Concerning program service, the faculty fulfill commitments on an *ad hoc* basis rather than in regular standing committees. Faculty in general seemed satisfied with and valued the flexibility in the division of the program service workload.

IV. Analysis of Operational Facilities and Budget

The faculty office and classroom issues that were raised as a problem that needed improvement in the 2006-07 program reviews have been resolved. All faculty have relatively ample windowed office space and classroom assignments are within reasonable proximity of those offices and the department.

A concern was expressed with the annual operating budget. Faculty claimed in this review that, near the end of each academic year, they routinely personally purchase classroom and office supplies because the departmental budget has been depleted. It should be determined whether the budget can be managed differently or whether it is inadequate. Something should be done to avoid this personal expense for faculty.

V. Summary of Unit Strengths and Areas for Improvement.

a. Overall, what are the areas of strength?

In the program's self-report, one strength that is emphasized is that the program is "purposefully streamlined." This "flexible, fast-track" can be seen as a strength since the average point in which a WCU student declares a sociology major is in late in their junior year (2.7 years into their undergraduate studies). The streamlined program allows these students to "finish in four" and it is possible for students to complete the program in just one academic year.

The streamlined degree program also allows WCU students to expediently complete a dual degree or double major in sociology and another discipline. Dual degree and double major students benefit from the enhanced interdisciplinary and broad-based learning experiences. This can only be a positive as students seek to enter the workforce or continue their education. As with many sociology programs, the WCU program attracts many psychology majors seeking a second major in sociology. For psychology-sociology dual majors, the research methods and the statistics and data analysis courses have been deemed, in an informal agreement between two disciplines, as equivalent. That is, each department will accept and substitute the two course research sequence from the other department within its major curriculum. Students completing this double major, Sociology and Psychology, are typically advised into one set of research courses based on the student's individual plans or academic standing.

The review team was very impressed during the meeting with current sociology majors and recent alumni of the program. These current and former students confirmed that sociology majors are enthused about the sociology program at WCU. It is especially evident that these students and alumni hold the sociology faculty in very high regard. The students and alumni spoke of their faculty's expertise and dedication to student learning and overall development.

It was also demonstrated that, at least these students, comprise a cohesive, close-knit group established through frequent interaction and activities associated with the Sociology Club. The current students expressed passion about their ELE projects and experiences and embraced the requirement as a valuable participatory learning experience. It was also strongly pointed out that the program's travel course to Kenya is an outstanding opportunity for a cross-cultural exposure and education. Both sociology faculty and students remarked about their commitment toward enhancing the quality of life in Kenya as well as the work of the Sociology Club to provide ongoing funding for the cause.

Sociology 460, Professional Issues in Sociology, is a one-hour course now offered on an annual basis. This course is a progressive and valuable component of the curriculum. The course is intended to serve as a bridge as students transition from college to the workforce or graduate school. Sociology majors accumulate knowledge, skills, and experiences that are germane and central to a wide array of occupational careers.

Through this course, faculty have the opportunity to help students see how their intellectual achievements and academic skills are applicable and valuable in the workforce. After this course students can articulate in concrete and practical terms the qualifications they bring to an employer.

There is ample evidence that sociology faculty are primarily dedicated to student learning and are both effective teachers and engaged scholars. In fact, the resurgence in scholarly productivity across the faculty is particularly impressive because of late teaching responsibilities have undoubtedly become heavier. There has been an increase in the number of majors and minors. Thus, the average class size in both the liberal studies courses and in upper-level courses within the major is larger. Based on review of the syllabi, the required SOC 385 and 386 courses are rigorous and there are expectations for student mastery of a weighty level of content and skills. Faculty members teaching these courses are very involved in one-on-one instruction. These courses are much more demanding than an average lecture course.

b. Overall, in what areas could the unit make improvements?

Although the “finish in four,” fast track to degree completion can be defined as strength, it limits the opportunity to adequately sequence degree requirements. Based on best practices identified by the American Sociology Association, it is recommended that at least four levels of core and elective major courses be sequenced with appropriate prerequisites. This serves to progressively increase the students’ depth of knowledge in the field and promote an integrative learning experience. It is doubtful that many sociology programs are able to achieve this ideal because most programs nationwide realize a sizeable number of students declaring sociology majors well into their undergraduate careers. However, a logical progression should remain a goal with a high priority.

At WCU seven upper-level sociology courses (SOC 316, 345, 380, 414, 423, 450 and 456) do not carry a sociology prerequisite requirement. SOC 414 does not carry a prerequisite by design since it is designated as an upper level perspective courses within the liberal studies curriculum. The other courses seem unusual given their upper division status. While both the major and the minor curricula require SOC 103, and even if the program chooses to retain maximum flexibility in the major curriculum, at a bare minimum, SOC 103 should be a prerequisite for all courses at the 300-level and above.

The number of sections offered annually has declined because of the need to offer multiple sections of core courses. This has reduced the ability of the program to offer a typical range of elective courses within the major and to provide its service to the wider student body through general education offerings. Solutions to this problem are not obvious.

As with many sociology programs located in non-urban areas, adjunct faculty qualified to teach sociology are scarce. Further, the program’s self-study indicates that funding may not be available to hire qualified adjunct faculty until after the

semester schedule is finalized. This complicates the planning for course rotation and coverage. A stable, predictable course rotation is central to helping students finish in four years. Thus, staffing limitations are particularly confounding for a unit that is realizing significant growth in demand for both liberal studies and major course offerings and enrollment.

The program does not currently include a required capstone course. This is a distinct void in the curriculum. A capstone course could address several needs. It would be an ideal occasion to administer the senior exit exam and survey for assessment purposes. Currently, completing the exam or interview is voluntary. The low response rate does not suggest that the results are representative of all majors. The exit exam and survey should be required of all students. This requirement could be realized in either a required capstone coursework or mandated as a graduation requirement by some other mechanism.

A capstone course would also an opportunity for students to “pull it altogether.” This is particularly important for a program that allows students broad options for completing degree requirements. A capstone course could also facilitate the completion of the ELE requirements if it has not been satisfied previously or by other arrangements (e.g., travel abroad).

Finally, a required capstone course would offer all sociology majors the advantages currently offered to the student who choose to take Sociology 460. If SOC 460 is a progressive and valuable component of the curriculum as an elective, it would be even more valuable as a required component of the major.

VI. Summary of Recommendations

a. Enhance course sequencing.

Sociology faculty consider appropriate course sequencing, especially establishing SOC 103 as a prerequisite for all 300+ level coursework.

b. Continue to review the equivalency of the research methods and data analysis courses in sociology with those in psychology.

The regular substitution of SOC 385 and 386 for PSY 271 and 272, and vice versa has an obvious benefit to sociology and psychology double majors. However, the programs should periodically review the content of these research methods and statistics/data analysis course to affirm that the ongoing practice of substituting between the two curricula is appropriate. Because the dominant methodologies in the two disciplines tend to diverge considerably, the equivalency of the research methods course should be of particular concern. It is also noted that a student who substitutes the psychology courses into a sociology major can earn a sociology degree with only 27 hours of major coursework. This seems to be a low number of hours for upper-level core sociology coursework.

c. Development of a capstone course.

Sociology faculty should consider transforming SOC 460 into a required capstone course---remaining at just one credit hour or ideally as a three hour course. Further, whether or not SOC 460 is revised into a capstone course, the course should be incorporated into someone's regular course load. The ability to offer this valuable course to students should not be dependent on the generosity of faculty to take on an overload.

d. Sociology faculty should consider offering SOC 386 and, secondly, SOC 385 as four hour lecture/lab course with six contact hours per week.

It is not unusual for sociology programs offer these courses as four hour lab courses: three hours lecture and three hours contact (one hour credit) per week. This should be especially considered for the SOC 386 course which is already delivered with clearly segmented lecture and lab components. Whether these courses are offered as a three or four hour course, there is substantial justification that class sizes for these courses should be reasonable and have the smallest averages within the unit.

e. Continue to justify and advocate restoration of tenure-track position.

In order to accommodate the considerable growth and to accommodate selected quality advances recommended here, relatively high priority should be placed on restoring the tenure-track position in the program that was eliminated following the 2010-11 academic year.

f. Continue with plans to establish a designated area for sociology students.

The WCU Sociology Club is a vibrant and benevolently involved organization that would benefit from a gathering area contiguous to the departmental office block. A vacant office has been identified as a possibility. This would further strengthen the bond between majors and allow for enhanced social and intellectual exchanges between students and between students and faculty.

g. Review and clearly indicate the schedule for course offerings.

It appears that many sociology courses are no longer offered or are offered rarely. It is recommended some mechanism be developed to indicate which courses will be offered on a regular basis. While it may be ill advised to remove courses from the catalog, it would be appropriate to provide a clear schedule for course offerings over at least a four semester calendar.

h. Consultancy for program assessment.

The program should consider seeking an outside consultant to assist in developing effective and efficient means to assess program goals. Program faculty may want to consider revising the goal to include “recognize and understand” core concepts and theoretical perspectives along with the ability to discuss them. The exit exam can be used to measure students outcome on the recognition and understanding while the other stated assessment strategies will be used to measure student’s ability to discuss.