External Review of the Department of Sociology
Georgia State University
May 5, 2014

David L. Brunsma (Virginia Tech)
Phyllis Moen (University of Minnesota),
Nancy A. Naples (University of Connecticut)

Introduction

On March 13, 2014, the three of us were invited to serve as external reviewers in the Third Cycle Academic Program Review of the Department of Sociology at Georgia State University (GSU). The review took place from April 20 through April 22 and followed an intense itinerary of opportunities to meet with Provost Palm, Vice Provost Renick, Associate Provost Lyons, Dean Long, Associate Dean Downs, Chair Reitzes, the vast majority of the faculty and a couple groups of graduate students. We were also sent the Self-Study Report approved by the Department of Sociology Faculty on March 7, 2014 and the associated Chair’s Report, Departmental Promotion and Tenure guidelines, and 2011-2016/21 GSU Strategic Plan. These guiding documents prepared us well for the visit and these, along with the rich data gathered across over two days of interviews, enable us to speak confidently and insightfully into the primary charge of Provost Palm and Associate Vice Provost Lyons: To provide an assessment of the Self-Study and, most importantly, to provide a concise, forward-looking report highlighting where the Department of Sociology goes from here to continue to grow, rise in the rankings, and strengthen elements of the GSU Strategic Plan, all from the perspective of the discipline of Sociology. Our observations and conclusions constitute the remainder of this report.

Overview of Sociology as a Discipline as its Significance for a Research University

According to the American Sociological Association, sociology is a science focused on the “study of the social lives of people, groups, and societies” which ranges from “the analysis of short contacts between anonymous individuals on the street to the study of global social processes” – and the relationships between the two. Sociological scholarship is made up of a wide variety of epistemological orientations, theoretical traditions, methodological approaches, and practical interventions. Its practices range from the most complex of mathematical modeling of social structures to rich and deep ethnographic fieldwork, from the pedagogical challenges of developing a sociological imagination within people who make up the very fabric of that which they aim to understand to the community action research grounded in close work in communities facing the aftereffects of neoliberal policies. Sociology is, always has been, and always will take disciplinary pride in being collaborative and grounded in a diversity of theoretical and empirical approaches.

We begin with this description of the discipline of Sociology to demonstrate the ways in which it can contribute to the overall mission and strategic plan of the university. The GSU Department of Sociology has played, and will continue to play a vibrant and vital role in supporting and strengthening GSU’s pursuit of the goals clearly articulated in the 2011-2016/21 Strategic Plan as it transforms into a top-notch research university: 1) to serve as a model in higher education that all undergraduate students, regardless of
background, can succeed; 2) to provide strong graduate and professional programs that support and nurture the next generation of researchers and community leaders; 3) to become a leading public research university with a deep culture of research at all levels, community-campus collaborations, and a plethora of structures to support innovation in scholarly research; 4) to be a national and international leader in the study of, collaboration with, development of, and understanding of the critical challenges that cities face in the 21st century; and, 5) significantly globalize the engagement and reach of GSU.

Challenges in This Time of Transition

The Department of Sociology at GSU is in a time of transition: senior faculty have retired or are moving to other jobs, there is a large cohort of recently hired junior faculty, the graduate program is the largest it has ever been, and the department is teaching record numbers of undergraduates with an overall low number of faculty. Despite this reality of transition and the confusion that often comes with such transitions in terms of expectations for tenure and promotion, we were extremely impressed with the Department of Sociology across several dimensions: 1) the high quality of its quite diverse faculty, 2) the commitment to training the next generation of graduate and undergraduate students who come from a wide array of class, racial, gender, and sexuality positionalities, and 3) the forward-looking focus on research productivity strengthened by a web of networks that range from within the local urban community to ties that span the world. Indeed, the Department of Sociology at GSU has become, in less than two decades, a force to be reckoned with in the broader discipline, but there is so much more it could do, and should do, to build on the successes fostered by previous Self-Studies, Academic Program Reviews, and the concerted effort towards implementing the insights from both over the years.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Recommendations

We recognize and applaud the historical trajectory of the GSU Department of Sociology since its first cycle of Self-Study and Academic Program Review in the mid-1990s. Indeed, the current Self-Study as well as our interviews with faculty and administration provides quite rich data with which to contextualize the current state and future possibilities of the Department. The Department certainly has come a long way, and, along that path it has developed strengths and specialties (as well as a collaborative culture) with which to face the new challenges confronting contemporary higher education, GSU, and sociology as a discipline. It is to those that we now turn.

Members of the Review Committee have been impressed with the trajectory of intellectual growth within the department, despite the loss of several active senior scholars to early retirement. We conclude that the external search for the next chair (which the Dean has mentioned is the direction that will be followed to replace the current chair who is stepping down after 15 years of service) should focus on recruiting and garnering a candidate who will provide leadership for the multi-method strengths and range of sociological approaches of GSU’s Department of Sociology. The external Chair search is of significant consequence for the probability that the ideas we outline in this report can be achieved and further growth and strength in the GSU Department of Sociology solidified – this is a search that will have a deep impact on these processes.
Sociology is an extremely diverse field as indicated by the fifty-two (52) sections that comprise the American Sociological Association. Clearly, it is not possible to cover all these different fields in one graduate program of Sociology. GSU sociologists have wisely carved out three areas that focus their hiring, curriculum, research, and graduate admissions. We find the Gender and Sexuality, Race and Urban, and Health and Life Course concentrations particularly apt to describing the strengths and expertise of GSU Sociology. Additionally, and importantly for GSU, all three are essential to investigating and understanding the urban experience. These concentrations/areas reflect the traditional strengths associated with sociology at GSU (for example, the Gender and Sexuality specialty is widely recognized, and attracts the most prospective graduate students) and are key in the discipline of sociology nationally. However, there exists a danger that these “specializations” may become reified in ways that make them less workable. For example, graduate students are told they must do a preliminary or field exam in one discrete area, even though their interests may lie at the intersection of race and gender, or the intersection of urban sociology with the life course (e.g., the aging of urban populations). Most faculty and most students “fit” under multiple umbrellas. Given that the field of sociology underscores the importance of intersectional framings, we encourage the department to consider greater flexibility in preliminary exams and in graduate admissions in order to reflect both graduate student interests and the direction of the field.

Undergraduate Education

During our visit, we found the commitment to and quality of undergraduate teaching to be impressive – the sheer numbers of students who have transferred out of other programs in order to major in sociology speaks to the perceived relevance of what is being taught to the experiences of those in the classroom (55% of majors are transfer students). The courses required of the sociology major fit in line with national standards for sociology as a discipline. Indeed, the GSU Department of Sociology adds critical insights regarding inequality, institutions, and social change fundamental to the curriculum of an urban university. The small, poorly paid group of lecturers is well integrated into the department and heavily invested in the quality and mission of undergraduate education.

The proportion of sociology undergraduate majors who are minorities (71% - virtually unheard of in most R1 universities) underscores the Departmental mission to serve and train those who may be first generation (56%), minority, working class, or who are otherwise traditionally underserved by institutions of higher education. Sociology is particularly poised to provide significant and meaningful signature experiences through their highly successful internship program, providing opportunities for undergraduate students to do research with faculty, as well as study abroad. Bottom line, sociology majors at GSU get jobs. We see the in-house academic advisor funded by the Board of Regents as fundamental to both reducing dropouts and helping graduates obtain employment. Sociology service courses also appear to be excellent – winning over significant numbers of students who turn to major or minor in sociology. It is clear that the Department of Sociology not only serves a majority of College undergraduate students, but that it does so in an exemplary manner.

Clearly, the GSU Department of Sociology provides a huge service to the College and University through its undergraduate teaching program. It deserves high marks for its
contribution to the university’s first strategic goal: to serve as a model in higher education that all undergraduate students, regardless of background, can succeed.

The Graduate Program
The committee finds the graduate program in sociology to be equally impressive, training graduate students in theory as well as rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods – slightly ahead of the national trend in the discipline. Yet, the program is severely handicapped by several exigencies that should be attended to: 1) the faculty is too small and there is an absence of senior faculty given the burgeoning size of the program and its incoming cohorts (higher than any of the comparable peers or our own institutions), 2) the related paucity of faculty mentoring for the academic needs of the diverse graduate student cohort, and, 3) the minimal level of funding for graduate students (namely, low stipends -- $15000 for an unacceptably small percentage of the students). While the administration encourages increase the number of graduate students, corollary funding to support that growth has not been forthcoming. This poses a major problem for the training of the graduate students (many of whom, are unable to receive opportunities to teach in sociology – severely handicapping their ability to be placed in the very jobs that, at this point, they are qualified for) and who are forced to take jobs outside academia or incur major debt in order to survive financially.

Record enrollment in the graduate program is a result of perceived pressure by the department to contribute GSU’s goal of obtaining a 30/70 graduate/undergraduate student ratio. In meetings with the Provost and Dean, we came to understand that while this is an overall goal for the University, not all departments are to be held to this standard. This is not the message that the Department of Sociology has “heard,” however. As consequence, the Department has been admitting increasingly large cohorts of students, many of whom they are unable to fund. Currently GSU Sociology is at 13%, not because it cannot attract graduate students, but precisely because of the success of its undergraduate program. We view the increase in the number of graduate students without simultaneously growing its two key resources – faculty and financial support for graduate students – as a major weakness in the potential for the GSU Department of Sociology to enhance the quality of the graduate program. There are wide variations in the skill sets of those entering and moving through the program, possibly suggesting less selectivity regarding the pool of applicants who are accepted into the program.

But the graduate program in Sociology at GSU also has a very unique strength in that 28% of its student composition is African American, and, if more specific data were collected, we believe one of the most diverse graduate student bodies in the nation. The diversity of the department’s graduate students matters enormously for the College, the University, and the discipline of Sociology. Indeed, the GSU Department of Sociology could become an important pipeline for producing PhDs with diverse backgrounds who will serve as future scholars, educators, citizens, and community leaders. All top programs in sociology across the country are seeking to increase the diversity of their faculty, and would welcome the role of the GSU Department of Sociology as the premier graduate program serving as a pipeline. Yet this can be achieved only if the program is not too unwieldy in terms of ratio between faculty and graduate students, too limited in its funding, and limited in its training (e.g., funded students have historically been privileged in various ways, including the opportunity to teach, leading to a sense of two-
tiers in the graduate program, easily heading in the direction of structural inequality). Looking closely at these structures and their unintended consequences is important.

Indeed, there is much more potential than is being currently tapped for training graduate students who are of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and GSU could really shine in this respect. The GSU Department of Sociology has a strong record in placing its graduate students in teaching positions and non-academic positions. Yet, in order to be more competitive in research universities, graduate students need to collaborate with faculty on faculty members’ research and coauthor presentations and publications. Indeed, the absence of graduate student publications is one of the weaknesses identified by the self-study as well as in our interviews with graduate students. The development of programs of funded research will offer more research opportunities for graduate students, as recognized in the Self-Study.

The department is poised to play a major role in the second strategic goal of the college and the university: to provide strong graduate and professional programs that support and nurture the next generation of researchers and community leaders. It is unique in the numbers of underrepresented minority students it attracts, a major asset in an urban university. But such students should not be set up for failure by offering them insufficient (or no) financial support.

Faculty

The GSU Department of Sociology is known for its collegiality and for its commitment to teaching. Despite the limited support for research, the sociology faculty are very productive, especially at the assistant and associate ranks. GSU has attracted a highly motivated, highly skilled coterie of junior scholars and will only be able to retain them by providing a nurturing (and financially supportive) environment. Given the disparities in and overall low levels of salaries along with the demands of vigorous and growing undergraduate and graduate teaching programs in comparison to peers (student to faculty ratio is high - 33 to 1 for undergraduates and about 6 to 1 for graduates), the external committee was not surprised to find near universal low morale among assistant and associate professors, as well as lecturers.

One of the major themes that ran through our meetings with sociology faculty was the increased emphasis on external grants as a criterion for hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions. While there are many avenues for support for certain kinds of sociological research, these sources are increasing diminishing in the current federal political and economic environment. Furthermore, scholars whose sociological research does lend themselves to larger federal grants are best positioned to be successful in this endeavor once they have established a strong record of research and publication. This means that it may be better for junior faculty to be encouraged to spend their time turning their research into publications rather than writing federal grant proposals. It also should be noted here that successful grantees rarely receive awards on their first, or even second, application. This again disadvantages junior faculty who are on a rigid tenure clock. One of the problems we encountered in this regard is the contradictory messages that junior faculty are receiving in this time of transition. We encourage both the academic administration and the senior leadership in the Department of Sociology to be consistent in their message to junior faculty so that there is no uncertainty about what is expected of them as they move through the tenure process – uncertainty can lead to anxiety, anxiety
can lead to lowered morale, lowered morale can lead down many roads not befitting a university like GSU.

There was broad agreement among the assistant professors with the comment of one: “my success will come in spite of the structure of GSU, not because of it.” Members of the team noted and were concerned about the low percentage of the faculty reported in the Self-Study that feel their research is appreciated by the administration. It was evident from our on-campus visit that this feeling can be tied to the increased emphasis on external funding that does not reflect the diverse ways that sociological research is conducted and rewarded. For example, many emerging fields of inquiry (such as Sexuality Studies) or research relying on Ethnographic methods typically have a lower chance of funding than more established quantitative research on health, attitudinal research, and criminology.

We heard no consensus on what faculty members believe is required for achieving tenure as an Associated Professor or for promotion to Full Professor. However, many saw an external grant as required for promotion and tenure to Associate and/or promotion to Full, even though the guidelines do not explicitly state this as the expectation. All faculty we met with expressed great concern about the press for obtaining federal grants at a time when the government has drastically cut back on its support of research. It should be noted that we know of no sociology program that requires an external grant for tenure or promotion. This also contradicted the perspective of the Dean and Provost who indicated that, especially for junior faculty, there is recognition that funding is not the sole criteria for tenure. Too much of sociology does not “fit” with the research agendas of funding agencies. Moreover, Moen, who served at the National Science Foundation (NSF), recognizes that fewer than one in ten outstanding, competitive proposals receive a grant.

Yet, despite the extant federal funding shrinkage, with sufficient support in the mechanics of proposal writing and submission and time (faculty take on teaching in the summer because they cannot afford not to), we see the GSU Department of Sociology faculty as actually well poised to develop and submit (and resubmit) a significant number of collaborative proposals. This could include collaborative large-scale, multi-method, and multi-institutional, interdisciplinary proposals for federal funding. Indeed, they have already done so, as evidenced by the Public Housing Study (formally known as the Urban Health Initiative – see Appendix), a community collaboration that drew on a range of methods to understand and address the closing and relocating of Atlanta’s public housing population – this exemplar study was funded by NSF and the National Institute of Health (NIH), and importantly by early support from GSU.

This project stands as an exemplar of the strategic goal of GSU “to become a leading public research university with a deep culture of research at all levels [including] community-campus collaborations.” However, what is required is the other part of this goal “a plethora of structures to support innovation in scholarly research.”

**Possibilities for a Social Science Research Center (SSRC)**

Upon arrival at GSU, we were asked to consider several key questions including: Are the programs offered and program enrollments appropriate from a disciplinary perspective? Are the faculty number, composition, and research productivity sufficient to support the programs? How well does the department serve community, student, and professional needs? These questions have been addressed above. Another key question
we were asked was: What is the viability of a Social Science Research Center for promoting collaborative research, especially as it relates to the contribution of sociology to the broader university strategic plan?

Many of the most highly ranked research universities have established Social Science Research Institutes (see, for example, the University of Michigan, Pennsylvania State University, University of Iowa, and Rutgers). Some of the important functions of a SSRC include: assisting in research development in the social sciences from the initial stages of project development, the exploration and identification of public and private sources of funding, assessing potentials for collaborative and interdisciplinary projects, preparation of proposals, grant administration, and timely submission, post-award grant management. SSRCs can provide opportunities for the enhancement of faculty skills in proposal development and writing along with methods ranging across qualitative and quantitative types of data gathering and analysis, as well as encourage excellence in research through encouraging interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary, and innovative research. In particular, SSRCs can administer grants and contracts that traverse boundaries between the social sciences, the humanities, behavioral sciences, and other colleges.

In the context of GSU, the evaluation team did not hear evidence that many of these functions are being performed by existing units across the university, although there have been some efforts to expand services in regard to pre-award and post-award support. It is also clear to us as external reviewers that the Department of Sociology can be central to this new effort at GSU. The recent hire of nationally known researcher Eric Wright provides a key catalyst for the Department of Sociology to provide leadership in a new effort to coordinate interdisciplinary efforts to establish GSU as a model for collaborative social science research that can expand the support for external funding for faculty and enhance research opportunities for graduate and undergraduate research.

The SSRC is a significantly promising investment. The SSRC will need to have a full-time, dedicated, and disciplinary specific grant-writer support. The trajectory represented by the SSRC is immense and fits the GSU Strategic Plan in every way through graduate and undergraduate research experiences, community partnerships, graduate training in research conceptualization, and dissemination of findings through publications and research reports that are relevant to the policy makers and the broader community. The Department of Sociology and the nascent SSRC will provide significant support to the GSU Strategic Plan’s desire for the University to engage with and address the Challenges of Cities. We have no doubt that GSU, the College, and the Department of Sociology can be a national (and international) leader in this area – especially with a vibrant SSRC.

Conclusions

The development of GSU’s new strategic plan is one element of a broader transformation that includes revising criteria for hiring, tenure decisions, and allocation of funds. Decisions regarding supporting different aspects of the university in the face of a challenging economic environment needs to be informed by the ways that different academic units contribute to the diverse goals of the university. For example, a “one size fits all” approach to criteria for hiring, tenure, external funding requirements, graduate
education, and undergraduate programs will not do justice to the many different ways that disciplines are organized and external research funds are available.

To summarize our other key observations:

- The GSU Department of Sociology provides a major service to the College University through its undergraduate teaching program. It deserves high marks for its contribution to the university’s first strategic goal: to serve as a model in higher education that all undergraduate students, regardless of background, can succeed. The departmental advisor and the coterie of lecturers are key to the undergraduate program, and deserve sufficient pay and recognition to retain their valuable services;

- The department is poised to play a major role in the second strategic goal of the college and the university: to provide strong graduate and professional programs that support and nurture the next generation of researchers and community leaders. It is unique in the numbers of underrepresented minority students it attracts, a major asset in an urban university;

- Given its diverse graduate student body, the Department of Sociology at GSU could become a central pipeline providing a diverse pool of scholars and community leaders that would advance societal as well as higher education and disciplinary goals. But such students should not be set up for failure by offering them insufficient (or no) financial support. In fact, one would expect that area foundations might be receptive to supporting this potential role of GSU Sociology;

- Given its subject matter and strengths in the study of urban contexts and processes, race, gender, sexuality, health and the life course, the GSU Department of Sociology is central to the University’s and College’s Strategic Goals of advancing community-campus research collaborations with a focus on cities (using Atlanta as a laboratory) and global scholarship, as well as more generally becoming a leading urban public research university with a deep culture of research at all levels;

- GSU Sociology is well positioned to lead a Social Science Research Center as part of the larger strategic goals of providing a deep culture of research and structures to support innovation in scholarly research. Strategic use of seed monies and innovative grant awards could jumpstart collaborative and interdisciplinary proposals, as well as making unfunded proposals more competitive the second (or third) time around;

- Given that the field of sociology underscores the importance of intersectional approaches, we encourage the department to consider greater flexibility in preliminary exams, graduate admissions, and funding in order to reflect both graduate student interests and the direction of the field.
We view the Department of Sociology at GSU as a vibrant and dedicated intellectual community poised to lead in the university’s urban initiative and to play a significant role in the global mission as well as other strategic goals. Indeed, given the interests, strengths, and diversity of its faculty and with a few strategic senior hires, the Department of Sociology could become the linchpin in building the University’s reputation as an engaged urban university, using Atlanta as a template for study of the urban experience as well as a laboratory for social change. The Urban Health Initiative (Atlanta Public Housing Study - see Appendix) is an exemplar in how to maximize collaborative research that can contribute to GSU’s overall mission. GSU gave seed monies at key moments for the success of this nationally recognized project.

Indeed, the Department of Sociology at GSU has produced an honest and comprehensive self-study with key ingredients for future development that connect with the sincere commitment of the administration to support the development of the Department as a highly ranked research department. That said, we expect that the Department, the College, and the University will take seriously our external insights and recommendations to ensure a continued growth towards excellence in research, teaching, and service that will enhance the Department of Sociology’s contributions to the discipline and GSU.

Respectfully submitted on May 5, 2014
APPENDIX: Urban Health Initiative
(from www2.gsu.edu/~wwwsoc/1031.html.)

The Urban Health Initiative was formed in early 2008 with initial support from the Partnership for Urban Health Research (PUHR). The overall purpose of this initiative is to examine the health and quality of life implications for vulnerable, predominantly minority, low income residents in urban neighborhoods earmarked for redevelopment. Our approach is multidisciplinary, including a mix of methodologies, and attempts to capture potential inconsistencies between individual and neighborhood analytic perspectives.

Our first project, begun in 2008, focuses on public housing transformation in Atlanta (relocation and demolition). The overall goal of this longitudinal effort is to document residents’ experiences before and after the relocation, as well as assessing residential, socioeconomic, and health outcomes. Support for the Baseline wave of this study (pre-relocation) was provided by PUHR, the Center for Neighborhood and Metropolitan Studies, and the GSU College of Arts and Sciences. Wave Two (six month post-move follow-up) was funded by grant # SES-0852195 from the National Science Foundation (NSF). Other support was provided by University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research, and the American Sociological Association Funds for the Advancement of the Discipline. Wave Three (24 month post-move follow-up), which is about to begin, will also be funded by NSF.

An extension of this project, funded in 2010 by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant # 5P20MD004806-02, focuses on examining the person-environment-fit (PEF) of our former public housing resident cohort to their destination neighborhoods. Key components of this project include built environment audits, systematic observation, and interviews with longer-term residents in the neighborhood.

Since 2010, we have also been conducting a smaller scale project in Galveston, TX, funded by the Galveston Housing Authority (GHA). In 2008, Hurricane Ike destroyed most of the city’s public housing. But unlike New Orleans, Galveston is rebuilding all of it, a decision that has become politically contested. Our project examines the alternative plans concerning rebuilding, and how these will have varying affects on the former public housing residents.

Research Grants

"Health Impact Assessment (HIA) Rebuilding Galveston’s Public Housing after Hurricane Ike." Co-Principal Investigators Holly Avey and Deirdre Oakley; Co-Investigator (GSU); Erin Ruel; Co-Investigator (University of Texas Medical Branch) Alexandra Nolen. 2012-2014. $119,983. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Pew Charitable Trust.


Research Experiences for Undergraduates Supplement to SES-1123105. 2012-2013. $18,750. National Science Foundation. (Award Number SES-1123105-01)

“Housing Galveston’s Future Project.” Principal Investigator, Deirdre Oakley; Co-Investigator, Erin Ruel. 2011-2012. $50,000. Galveston Housing Authority.

“Patterns of Criminal Offending in the Wake of Neighborhood Transformations.” Lesley Williams Reid (PI), Deirdre Oakley, and Erin Ruel. 2009-2012. $146,105. National Science Foundation. (Award Number SES-0852195)


"Journaling the Public Housing Relocation Process" Principal Investigator, Erin Ruel; Co-Principal Investigator, Deirdre Oakley. 2009-2010. $7,000. American Sociological Association Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline (FAD)

“Geographic Trends and Neighborhood Context of Public Housing Relocation in Metropolitan Atlanta: A Longitudinal Analysis.” 2008-2009. $20,000. Principal Investigator, Deirdre Oakley; Co-Principal Investigator, Erin Ruel. University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research (UKCPR) Regional Small Grants Program