Dean’s Action Plan

College of Social Sciences and Public Policy

August 4, 2015

**Summary Title:** Department of Sociology and the Demography Program

**Applicable programs:**

**Accreditation:** NA

**Last Review Year:** 2007

**Major Changes since the previous review:**

**Sociology.** The sociology department has been a leader in the area of distance learning and has been the mainstay of the Interdisciplinary Social Sciences degree program. Through its use of doctoral students as mentors it has been able to support many more students in the PhD program and extend funding for a fifth year as recommended in the 2007 GPC QER report.

Sociology’s leadership in this area has spurred all other departments in the college to become more active in offering undergraduate courses via distance learning classes.

Since the 2007 review the department eliminated its social psychology specialty due to faculty losses in this area. Given the department’s size, there are advantages of concentrating faculty resources in a few areas in which faculty have a critical mass of colleagues and doctoral students can get excellent training. The department now offers Demography and Population Health, Health and Aging, and Inequalities and Social Justice. Many of the promising recent hires and potential hires are engaged in research related to health and aging, and most of the external grant activity since 2007 supported research on these topics as well.

Optimism prevailed at the time of the 2007 QER review and the Action Plan called for an expansion of the faculty that numbered 22 at that time. The ensuing recession dashed those hopes. The department enters the 2015-16 with 17 lines.

**Demography and Population Health.**

The curriculum took two years to complete when the previous QER was conducted and was changed so students can now complete it in one calendar year, a change that should attract more students to the program.

Center staffing has been cut since the last QER. In 2006 the staff consisted of two office positions and a half time librarian/programmer. Currently there are 1.4 staff positions; the full time person is scheduled for retirement in August 2015.
The faculty has fluctuated since the last QER. There were 14 faculty associates in 2006 to 8 in 2010 and 13 as we enter the 2015-16 academic year.

There have been four programmatic changes since the last QER. The undergraduate certificate program was discontinued in 2012 while a minor was instituted in 2013. A joint master’s program with the department of urban and regional planning was started and a joint BS/MS program was established.

**Program Strengths**

**Sociology.** The external reviewer writes that the “sociology department has an accomplished faculty, generally well-functioning graduate programs with good placements, and a strong undergraduate program that has been delivering an increasing number of enrichment opportunities.”

The department is ranked in the top quartile of public universities. The external reviewer noted that the department is especially strong in quantitative training with less strength in qualitative methods. Many recent faculty hires have targeted scholars who study health and aging and this may put the department in a more advantageous position when seeking external grants that address issues related to our aging population. Sociology will also play a pivotal role in the College’s proposed Center for Public Policy for Successful Aging.

The Pepper Institute on Aging and Public Policy is an interdisciplinary program that can promote research in this area of strength of the department’s faculty. Five of 11 core faculty are in sociology including Professor Anne Barrett who serves as the Institute’s director.

The department was the academic home of the Pepper Eminent Scholar Chair Jill Quadagno, a member of the Institute of Medicine. She was a distinguished scholar and a wonderful mentor to graduate students. She retired in 2015 and the department has begun searching for a replacement. It is expected that the person named to the Pepper ESC will play a leadership role in the Center for Public Policy for Successful Aging.

According to the external reviewer “the undergraduate program is well run and the needs of the students are well served in the process.” It is apparent that good teaching is valued and that the faculty excels in the classroom. At the 2015 faculty awards dinner five members of the faculty were recognized for excellence in teaching, mentoring and or advising.

**Demography and Population Health.**

The external reviewer writes that the master’s in demography program “is a rigorous program offering an excellent array of courses that train students for research jobs that require advanced quantitative and demographic training.”

Fall enrollment in the MS degree since fall 2009 has ranged from a low of 6 in 2013 to a high of 17 in 2009. Enrollment in 2014 was 12 and is expected to be 10 in 2015. In its QER report the program cites its greatest strength is the production of excellent students who have great
success in gaining employment. This reflects a commitment of the faculty to deliver a high quality degree.

**Program Weaknesses**

**Sociology.** At one time the department had 25 faculty; this number was 22 at the time of the previous QER and is currently at 17. Two faculty will be lost in May 2016; one to retirement and the other due to non-renewal. The external reviewer notes that the decline in the number of faculty in the department “does not bode well for future ranking unless the department is proactive in hiring.”

A search is on for the Pepper ESC and there is a possibility of a spousal hire in January 2016. In addition, the College budget request for 2016-17 includes additional lines that would go to sociology.

There is a mismatch between the areas of faculty research and the fields that graduate student want to emphasize. A disproportionate number of students are interested in the Inequalities and Social Justice whereas faculty are more heavily engaged in Health and Aging and Demography and Population Health.

The department’s QER recognizes that the department produces a relative small number of external grant proposals and these typically request a low level of funding.

The department’s last planning effort was in 1997, leading the 2007 QER to recommend that the department engage in a strategic planning exercise to guide its future development. Since the department has failed to engage in this process, this recommendation is repeated in the recent GPC report.

**Demography and Population Health.**

The program’s QER reports that a fundamental weakness in the Center is “a fundamental lack of “centeredness.” Since faculty are tenure earning in their home departments, it is understandable that their fundamental commitment would be to produce academic output and services that are most valued by their department colleagues. The center neither hires faculty nor dishes out rewards in the form of pay increases, so they are not well incentivized to serve the center’s interest.

As the QER report notes, there is “a dearth of grant applications” generated by the Center affiliates. This is no doubt related to the lack of “centeredness” in that despite some common intellectual interests, the faculty does not desire or feel a need to do collaborative work that would generate applications for grants from public agencies and private foundations.

Enrollments have been adequate, but below the level we should expect. Since 2010-11 the average enrollment has been under 10 per year. The faculty is reported to an excellent job of mentoring students during the summer when they write a research paper. However, they do
not seem engaged in recruiting students, advising them, and other administrative tasks that fall on the center’s director.

Recommendations

Improvements possible without the need for significant infusions of new financial resources

Sociology

1) In its March 2015 Action Plan the department states that “strategic planning is a high priority item on the agenda.” This is expected to commence in early fall 2015 after the new chair begins his term. The strategic plan should address all of the department’s weaknesses, develop a roadmap that can help guide future hiring, and create institutional incentives to increase the number and size of external grants. Some issues that should be considered follow.

2) Doctoral students are disproportionately interested in the Inequalities and Social Justice field whereas the faculty is more heavily represented in the fields of Health and Aging and Demography and Population Health. If the areas of faculty interests are those that have the best prospects for outside funding, it may be necessary to increase efforts to recruit doctoral students in these areas of study.

3) Increasing external grant activity should be a high priority for the department. Sociologists are heavily represented in The Pepper Institute on Aging and Public Policy and the Center for Demography and Population Health and these units similarly perform poorly in the area of developing external funding. The College is working to create a new interdisciplinary Center on Public Policy for Successful Longevity which should harness our formidable expertise in health and aging into a major generator of external funds.

The department has been a campus leader in distance learning and demonstrated to other units in the college about how it is possible to generate support for the graduate program through on-line education of undergraduates. Taking the perspective of the bachelor’s degree program, there should be a discussion of the appropriate mix of on-line and in-class courses.

Demography and Population Health

1) The department’s QER, the external reviewer and GPC all comment that CDPH needs more staff than the 1.4 that it currently employs. It is not obvious that more staff for the Center is warranted. Some departments in the College have only three staff. In this context, CDPH usually has fewer than 10 master’s students, no undergraduate students and very little grant activity, which would not seem to justify the current staff level much less an expansion.
The full time employee is retiring in August 2015. The College should investigate if it is possible to have many of the Center’s office functions transferred to the sociology department, thereby saving staff resources.

**Improvements that are possible with additional resources**

**Sociology**

1) The highest priority for the department is to increase the number of faculty. In 2007 the faculty numbered 22: getting back to this is an appropriate target at this time.

**Demography and Population Health**

1) The center should examine whether seed grants would help stimulate efforts to get external funds. Center faculty might be energized to engage in significant grant activity through the development of the Center for Public Policy for Successful Aging.

2) At this time the population library only functions as a seminar room, resulting in an inefficient use of this relatively large space. Dividing the space into a seminar room and work spaces for graduate students would be maintain its current use and better serve graduate students.

3) Developing Memoranda of Understanding between the Center and departments was suggested by the external reviewer as a way to assure that the relevant disciplines continue to hire faculty who can support the demography program. From a college perspective, commitments to hire faculty in demography must be made in the context of the relative performance of units. Guaranteeing the hiring of demography faculty may be hard to justify if CDPH produces fewer students and modest grant applications relative to other units in the College.

C. **External Reviewer:** Professor John Iceland (Pennsylvania State University). Review date was October 7, 2014.

D. Reviews were conducted by the Undergraduate and Graduate Policy Committees.