Summary of Major Findings

The Department of Sociology at Florida State University (FSU) is highly regarded nationally, ranked 24th among public universities and 39th overall. The faculty are productive, the graduate programs have a good record of training and student placement, and the undergraduate program has steady enrollments and offers an increasing number of enrichment opportunities.

Nevertheless, the department faces some challenges, and this evaluation summarizes these challenges and offers a few recommendations for meeting them. The department has experienced some faculty attrition, and, with additional upcoming retirements, needs a strategic plan for hiring to maintain its national ranking. While faculty publish frequently, grant activity is generally low, and a few steps could be taken to spur activity in this area.

With regards to the graduate programs, the PhD program is generally functioning well, though it currently has some mismatch between faculty strengths and the interests of the students. In part because of the decline in the number in faculty and steady undergraduate enrollments, there is increasing reliance on graduate students to teach undergraduates. This has implications for the structure of the graduate program that a department committee should fully explore.

The Master of Science in Demography (MSD) is a highly functioning program with very good placements. After a decline in enrollments for a couple of years, the program has rebounded this year in part through effective recruitment of FSU undergraduates. The Master of Applied Social Research (MASR) is a very small program that is having difficulty attracting applicants. It brings relatively few benefits to the department, though it also imposes only fairly small costs.

The undergraduate sociology program is functioning very well. It is effectively managed and is offering a growing number of enrichment opportunities for students. Collecting more information from graduating seniors and alumni would be useful for assessing and tracking the experiences of these students.

Finally, it has been some time since the department has devised a strategic plan. With changes in the faculty over time and some of the issues and challenge currently facing the department described in this evaluation, the time is ripe for the department to undertake a strategic planning effort to chart a course for the future.

In the following I review the faculty, the graduate programs, and the undergraduate program in turn. I conclude with a summary of major recommendation.

Analysis of Faculty Accomplishments

Faculty Overview
The sociology department faculty consists of 17 tenure track members and 3 teaching faculty. The number of tenure-line faculty is down from a high of 25 in the mid 1990s and 22 in 2006. The faculty
are evenly distributed across three major areas, with 8 in Health & Aging and 7 each in Demography
and Inequalities & Social Justice (some are double counted because they contribute to more than one
area). A fourth major area, Social Psychology, was eliminated as a specialty area in the fall of 2013
due to faculty losses. The number of faculty is below the average of five peer programs, and well
below those of five aspirational programs. The decline in the number of tenure line faculty has
occurred even as undergraduate enrollments have remained steady and despite a plan endorsed by the
Vice President to increase the number of faculty following the last program review in 2006-2007, but
before cutbacks in the number of faculty in the college due to new budgetary pressures.

The Center for Demography and Population Health (CDPH) has 11 tenure-line faculty who
contribute Demography Masters Program and one part-time research faculty member. The tenure-
line faculty belong to three departments: economics, sociology, and urban & regional planning, with
most (8) in sociology. The representation of sociology has grown over time. The demography
program lost two faculty members between 2007 and 2009 who taught demography courses and
mentored MSD students. Two additional members are nearing retirement. There are 11 additional
faculty who taught courses in the MSD curriculum between 2009-2013 who were not members of the
CDPH.

Scholarship and Reputation

A department's reputation is driven in large part by the strength of its faculty. FSU's sociology PhD
program is ranked 39 overall by U.S. News and World report (these rankings are largely reputation-
based), and ranked 24 among publics. The overall rank represents an improvement from 47 in 1998
and 42 in 2005. The National Research Council, which ranks programs based on a greater number of
criteria, ranks FSU in the second quartile among public universities and in the top quartile for
research activity.

These ranking reflect a productive faculty, who have collectively published 131 articles and 6 books
since 2009. The faculty average 1.9 articles and chapters per year during 2012-2014, including 1.3
articles and 0.6 book chapters, along with a small number of books. This level of productivity
represents an increase from the time of the last department review. Nearly every tenure-line faculty
member has an active research agenda, with some expected variation across individuals. Faculty have
published in the top journals of the discipline over the past few years, including American
Sociological Review and American Journal of Sociology, as well as a wide range of other journals
that vary in their influence. The faculty includes five individuals who hold named professorships,
though two of these professors will retire within the next two years. Numerous faculty members have
been officers of national and regional professional associations, served on grant review panels, and
been on journal editorial boards. Women are well represented on the faculty, though racial and ethnic
minorities less so. The department should continue its efforts to recruit minority faculty members.

Overall, the faculty are productive and many are well-known nationally. This contributes to the fairly
high rankings by the U.S. News and World Report and the National Research Council. However, the
gains in the rankings over the last decade are at risk because of the decline in the number of faculty
and the upcoming retirement of two named professors (Quadagno and Eberstein) who provide both
considerable intellectual and administrative leadership. Reputational rankings tend to be “lagging”
indicators, in that it can take a while for either a real increase or decline in faculty productivity and
quality to become widely apparent, but the decline in the number of faculty in the sociology
department does not bode well for future rankings unless the department is proactive in hiring.
Thus, I recommend that the department hire a mix of junior and senior faculty over the next few years. Senior faculty can provide leadership, assume vacant professorships, and provide mentoring to younger faculty, such as in both research and grant writing. Junior faculty can infuse new energy and innovative approaches to sociological issues. If the department is not proactive in strategic hiring, its rank (reputational and otherwise) will likely suffer.

Grants and Contracts

The sociology department has secured $2.5 million in funding, including $1.6 million federal research support since 2009. The self-study recognizes that a relatively small number of external grant proposal have been submitted and funded. Faculty submitted 27 proposals as PIs between 2009 and 2013, representing a per capita rate of 0.34 proposals per year. About 18 percent of tenure line faculty had funding as a PI over the five-year period, below a target figure of 40 percent. The low level of grant activity extends to the faculty associated with the CDPH. Grant activity has also declined over time, in part because of the departure of some grant-active faculty members. The increasing difficulty in obtaining external funding (a smaller proportion of NIH grant proposals, for example, are funded today than 10 years ago) may also play a role. In any case, this low level of external funding means that there are fewer resources for conducting high-quality research and for supporting the graduate program.

There are a few possible strategies that could be adopted to increase the number of grant proposals and the likelihood that they will get funded. These are often implemented within a research center (rather than a department), as one of the main missions of such centers is to generate interdisciplinary and fundable research activity. Thus, the CDPH could institute a seed grant program, where researchers could ask for a relatively small amount of money (e.g., 5-10k) to help get a project going and develop a full external grant proposal. This is an investment that is expected yield positive returns over time, both budgetary and in terms of research productivity.

As a way of instituting a culture of grant proposal writing, the CDPH, perhaps in collaboration with other units, could form a proposal writing workshop where people with experience securing grant funding can mentor young faculty seeking to write grant proposals. The mentors can meet periodically with early-career faculty to discuss proposal development and provide feedback on proposal drafts.

Finally, the CDPH should consider organizing working groups to meet and discuss research centered on particular topics. The idea is to foster grass-roots efforts by putting researchers interested in common themes in touch with each other to generate new ideas and projects.

Analysis of Graduate Program

Graduate Program Curriculum

The sociology department helps administer three graduate programs: the sociology PhD program, a Master of Applied Social Research (MASR), and a Master of Science in Demography (MSD). The sociology doctoral program curriculum consists of a number of courses in theory, methods, and three substantive major areas in the department: Demography, Health & Aging, and Inequalities & Social Justice. There were 50 students in this program in the fall of 2013. The required courses are regularly taught, and optional methods courses are available to students to augment these skills.
Graduate students are required to take a 3-credit hour course on teaching sociology and to design and teach a course on their own. Students typically teach at least required course, often more. Students work on the prospectus during the third year, with the goal of defending it in spring of the third or fall of the fourth year. The dissertations are ideally completed in the fourth or fifth years. The curriculum includes a useful proseminar that provides students with information about career options in teaching universities, research universities, and outside of academia. In the past several summers, a job-search workshop for advanced students has also been held. Overall, the curriculum is satisfactory and not unlike those of other R1 programs; it is especially strong in quantitative training, with less strength in qualitative training.

The MASR is a one-year program that emphasizes training in research methods and statistics, and the student’s substantive focus can include courses from within or outside of the department. The program does not require a master’s thesis or exam, though students are required to take a minimum of four methods or statistics classes. The curriculum is appropriate for its goals.

The MSD program is one-year program over three terms (fall, spring, and summer). Its curriculum is interdisciplinary, with courses offered through several departments (Economics, Geography, Sociology, Urban & Regional Planning, and Statistics). This multi-disciplinary approach is common in demography programs. There is a strong emphasis on the application of analytical skills, as students complete a minimum of 18 credit-hours of data analysis and statistics courses. The MSD also added a research practicum course in 2009 and a professional development seminar in 2011. These help students write a master’s research paper—the major milestone of the program—and in their professional development. The MSD is also offered as part of a joint program with the Department of Urban & Regional Planning that requires a total of 66 credit hours, 33 in Demography and another 33 hours in Planning. The MSD is a rigorous program offering an excellent array of courses that train students for research jobs that require advanced quantitative and demographic training. My only suggestion is that the program should consider making Introduction to Demography a required class rather than an elective one to provide a broad introduction to substantive issues in the field.

In Spring 2014, the CDPH began administering a combined degree program that allows qualified undergraduates to earn 12 credits toward their undergraduate degree and the MS-Demography simultaneously. This approach has been helpful in recruiting promising FSU undergraduates.

Program faculty have expressed concern about having adequate faculty to teach in the MSD program in the coming years, in part due to the loss of two faculty since 2007 who taught demography courses and also upcoming faculty retirements. Because the CDPH does not have any faculty lines, there is also a concern about being able to replace these contributing members, especially outside of sociology. One way to address this issue would be to draw up a formal MOU between demography and other programs to ensure there are enough faculty who can contribute to the MSD. At the very least, it is important for the College to monitor the balance of faculty in departments to continue this effective program.

Procedures

The PhD program has had a fairly stable number of applicants over the past several years (in the 57 to 78 range), with acceptance and enrollment rates each varying from the mid to upper 20s to the mid to upper 40s. The program has generally been able to attract high-quality applicants. The self-study notes that the highest acceptance rates and low enrollments rates have happened recently, which
could be thought of a worrying trend. It posits that the program is likely competing with other more elite programs in recent years, with admitted students accepting offers from places such as University of Michigan and University of North Carolina. From the data available, it is difficult to discern if such competition is the main culprit, as GRE scores for the PhD and MASR programs combined have also fallen in recent years. This trend in high acceptance rates and lower enrollments rates should be monitored. The program uses a number of strategies to recruit students, such as an open house in spring for all newly-accepted students with the aim of convincing them to accept the offer. The approaches used are in line with those of peers.

All eligible PhD students are fully funded at a rate of $20,500 per calendar year. Nearly half of funding comes from the college, approximately 40% from mentoring of distance learning classes, and another 10% from outside of the department, including grants. This level of funding is higher than that of peers, though once numerous fees are taken into account, the level of funding is more comparable.

The program relies quite heavily on students being funded through teaching assignments, and often through Distance Learning (DL). On the one hand, this amount of teaching provides students with ample opportunity to build their teaching skills. It also provides much needed support for the undergraduate program, which needs instructors to cover the array of fully-subscribed courses being offered, especially in light of the decline in the size of the faculty. In addition, without these teaching assignments, the PhD program would have to reduce the size of its cohorts if it would like to continue to fully fund its students. On the other hand, the reliance on teaching reduces the amount of time students have to work on research and scholarship. This could reduce morale among students, and, more importantly, affect placement. I thus recommend that the department convene a committee to review and evaluate the increasing reliance on these graduate student teaching assignments and consider possible alternatives, if any.

All graduate students are assigned a mentor based on their interests, and also receive mentoring from the Director of Graduate Studies, the Graduate Program Coordinator, and the Department Chair, who teaches the proseminar for first-year students. The PhD students receive effective teacher training. With regards to research, there is considerable mentoring by faculty, as evidenced by the fact that a high proportion of faculty publications (52 percent) are coauthored with students. The time to completion is currently about 4-6 years—a good range. The time to completion has declined in recent years and now compares favorably with those of both peer and aspirational programs.

The MASR program has had difficulty recruiting a sufficient number of applicants. The self-study mentions that the lack of student financial support and a track record in placing students, along with the competition from the demography masters program, may all play a role in this. The difficulty in attracting high-quality students is a distinct weakness of this program.

From 2009 to 2013 43 students graduated from the MSD program, including three who completed the joint MSP/MSD program. This represents a large increase from the previous five years. Despite the long-term increase, the number of students enrolled in the MSD program dropped in the last few years, from 13 in 2009 to 6 in 2013. The decrease in enrollments reflects a decrease in applications. The program is attempting to attract more students by offering an undergraduate minor in Population Studies that is open to FSU students in any major, and a combined degree program that enables students to earn credit towards the MSD, also open to students in any major. As a result, the 2014-15 MSD cohort included ten recent FSU undergraduates, and in fact the number enrolled in the MSD rose back to 12. This is a positive development; the program should of course continue to track the
number of applicants and enrollments.

The human resources available to administer the MSD program are slim. The director supervises 1.4 staff positions, including a full-time person who assists faculty across the College in submitting grant applications and managing awards. Notably, the MSD Director is also the CDPH Director. There is a one-course release for both of these duties, which in my view undermines the ultimate effectiveness of direction and/or the research productivity of the faculty member who agrees to serve in this capacity. I recommend that the program receive additional support, such as in the form of more staff support or an additional course release.

**Student Body**

The PhD program has had incoming cohorts ranging from 7 to 16 over the past five years, with the smallest ones in 2009 and 2010 due to college budgetary constraints. The size of recent cohorts (10-12) is appropriate given the current size of the faculty and the funding structure. Faculty members can provide adequate mentoring for a group this size (larger would be a problem), and the department fills TA and online mentoring positions with these students as described above.

About half of students who start the PhD program finish with a PhD, though it should be noted that a significant proportion who do not complete the PhD leave with an master’s degree. The rates of attrition are likely in line with those of peers, though the data are not available (such as in NRC data collections) to confirm this. Retention rates might be increasing in recent years, though again it is difficult to definitively judge because many students in recent cohorts are naturally still enrolled in the program. The student body is diverse, as nearly a third are nonwhite, mirroring the level of diversity in the university more generally.

Currently, it seems that well over half of PhD students have a primary interest in the area of Inequalities & Social Justice, even though about a third of the faculty fall in this area. This imbalance may result in fewer well-suited mentors and courses that appeal to these students, and thus threatens to sap student morale and program completion. I recommend that the department monitor and correct this imbalance in future admissions.

As noted above, the MASR program has few applicants and low rates of enrollment. There is low demand for this program.

The MSD program graduated 43 students graduated from 2009 to 2013, including three who completed the joint MSP/MSD program. Trends in enrollment were discussed above. Over 90% of students who enrolled completed the program successfully, indicating that retention is not a problem. The student body is 77% non-Hispanic white, representing a higher percentage than for the PhD program, though likely reflecting lower levels of diversity in demography programs than in sociology nationwide.

**Student Accomplishments**

The sociology program graduated 41 PhDs in the last 5 years. Over 80 percent of recent graduates published articles or chapters by around the time of graduation. This figure has fluctuated from cohort-to-cohort, but is generally high. Many of these are collaborative efforts with faculty, as just over half of faculty publications since 2012 include students as coauthors. A research practicum in the second year helps develop students’ writing skills. All students presented papers at conferences
within a year of graduation, and many students have won paper awards from regional, national, or international associations. Students get considerable experience teaching, and a number have won teaching-related awards, including the Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award at the University level.

Placements are good, with almost all graduate students (39 of 41) finding employment in the field. Thirteen hold tenure-track jobs, three hold post-docs, eight hold teaching positions, and 15 hold research jobs (e.g., at government agencies). However, relatively few students find employment in R1 departments.

All but the most recent two MASR graduates have found employment, which is a good record of placement. Ninety percent of MSD program graduates found employment in professional positions related to their training or went on to another educational program, with the remaining graduates employed but not working in the field—this also represents a good record of placement.

Strategic Plan

At the time of the last departmental review in 2006-2007, the stated goals for the doctoral program included increasing the applicant pool and enrollment, improving graduate student quality, increasing the diversity of students, offering more advanced research seminars, increasing stipend levels, and finding ways to support students in the dissertation writing stage. The goals of the MASR program were to increase the applicant pool and enrollment and to improve the program by developing specialty courses and internships.

The goals for the doctoral program are reasonable, and the program is doing fairly well in meeting them, though the goals could stand to be more focused. Specifically, I recommend that the department focus on one or two issues, and come up with strategies to attain them. For example, what is the underlying purpose of improving student quality? Is it to improve graduate student placement? If so, then the latter should be the goal, and the former is one of the strategies. In addition, the goals should be discussed in the context of constraints and/or tradeoffs.

The MASR program is a small and not altogether healthy program as described above. A case can thus be made for eliminating it. However, it should be said that while the programs brings relatively few benefits, it also imposes low costs. To summarize, its benefits include: 1) providing training for some students, 2) placing these students in appropriate jobs, and 3) allowing PhD students to leave after one year with a masters if they decide not to continue the PhD program. Its costs come in the form of faculty time spent recruiting and mentoring students. There are no course-development costs, since the courses already exist as part of the PhD program. I recommend that the department consider the usefulness and the viability of this program, in consultation with the Dean, in its strategic planning process.

Analysis of Undergraduate Program

Curriculum

The undergraduate program is organized around core courses in theory, methods, and statistics, along with five substantive major areas: Social Organization, Personality and Society, Population and Human Ecology, Social Issues and Change, and the Family. Students can also complete a general minor in sociology (15 credits) or a minor in health and aging, for which students choose from among a specific list of courses in this specialty area.
Some of the courses use innovative approaches to instruction, including a hybrid model that combines online and face-to-face delivery. Notably, the department is engaged with the University’s new Liberal Studies program and has developed five E-Series courses. The Department also offers a wide range of distance courses as part of the online Interdisciplinary Social Science program. About a third of undergraduate enrollments are through this on-line program. The department is striving to maintain a balance between face-to-face courses and on-line ones. Overall, the undergraduate curriculum is up-to-date and appropriate.

Student Learning Outcomes

The undergraduate outcomes of interest are concentrated in the program’s required core courses in theory, methods, and statistics. In addition, substantive knowledge of inequality is assessed through review of student papers in 4000-level classes. Student outcomes are generally good, with the percent “success” above the threshold goal in most cases. Some variability occurs across outcomes and over time, though performance has been stronger in in the last 5 years than previously.

Over one third of the current faculty have won University-level teaching awards, including two who have been recognized as the University Distinguished Teacher. Since 2010, two graduate students have also been recognized as Outstanding Teaching Assistants at the University level. This suggests that the department values teaching.

The department occasionally collects data on students in senior exit surveys. I recommend that the department conduct these regularly, such as annually or biannually. In addition, the department should work with college to collect information about alumni—this would be useful for tracking the experiences of these former students over time, and can later be used for development purposes as well.

Procedures

Until the fall of 2012, sociology majors were advised by staff in the College. Since then, students who declare a sociology major have been advised primarily within the department. The department has an undergraduate curriculum specialist, an assistant advisor, and a Director of Undergraduate Studies—a rather lean staff. The assistant advisor is the primary front-line advisor for students who seek advising on a drop-in basis. The DUS also advises students but focuses primarily on helping them resolve problems that affect their academic or personal well-being. The DUS also mentors students and helps them define goals for graduate school and careers.

Teaching effectiveness is assessed through the use of student ratings from anonymous class surveys. In addition, syllabi for classes taught by faculty are reviewed by the Personnel Committee, and those taught by graduate students and adjunct instructors are reviewed by the Chair. The department also conducts faculty peer reviews of teaching based on classroom visits. Graduate students receive considerable training for teaching (described above). The departmental has a culture that prioritizes teaching effectiveness. Overall, these procedures are very good.

Student Body

There is strong demand for sociology courses, with undergraduate enrollments over 3,000 per regular semester, though the department is somewhat limited by the number of seats it is able to offer. There
are approximately 350 undergraduate students with sociology as their primary major, in addition to a number with sociology as a second major. The number of majors has held steady in recent years, though a growing proportion has sociology as their first major. The student body is racially and ethnically diverse. Enrollments have remained steady or increased over time, even as the number of tenure-line faculty has declined. Because of this, an increasing proportion of students are being taught by graduate student instructors—an issue discussed in detail above.

The cumulative and term GPAs for sociology majors is relatively low but increased slightly over the study period, from around 2.7 in 2009 to 2.8 in 2013.

Student Accomplishments

The department has provided an increasing number of enrichment opportunities for high-achieving students in the form of courses (honors and capstone) and research (honors theses and undergraduate research opportunities). Faculty members have been active in developing an array of courses for the university’s new Liberal Studies program.

Between 2009 and 2013, 17 students majoring in sociology joined Phi Beta Kappa. Eight students have joined in 2014 so far, which indicates greater undergraduate engagement and suggests improved recruitment into the major. The FSU chapter of Alpha Kappa Delta was reestablished in fall of 2012 after many years of inactivity. Sociology undergraduates have been selected to receive the College’s Academic Leadership award the past three years. Five undergraduate sociology majors have been selected as Social Science Scholars since 2012 when the program began and two students were selected to serve on the College’s Student Leadership Council.

Over the past five years, 14 sociology students successfully completed honors theses. Three of those students were also awarded FSU’s Bess Ward Thesis Award. Seventeen sociology undergraduates presented at FSU’s Undergraduate Research Symposium between 2012 and 2014, with a growing number over time. Since 2009, at least eight students in the major were awarded funds to work with faculty mentors in the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program. All of these accomplishments (and increases in recent years) reflect highly on the undergraduate program and the faculty’s efforts.

Strategic Plan

While the department hasn’t devised a strategic plan recently, it does have a number of goals listed for its undergraduate program, including developing small seminars for a larger share of high-achieving majors, increasing collaboration of undergraduates on research with graduate students and faculty, recruiting excellent undergraduate majors into its graduate programs, and identifying opportunities for applied experience including internships, among others. These are all laudable goals (and significant progress has been made in achieving them), but as with my comments on the graduate programs, it would be useful to have guiding principles and then specific strategies to achieve them. The department should also consider appealing to alumni to support student enrichment efforts. Overall, the undergraduate program is well run and the needs of the students are well served in the process.

Overall Analysis and Recommendations

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 for its students. In this context, here is a summary of my major recommendations as the department moves forward to meet current and future challenges.

1) Because of recent and upcoming faculty losses—including prominent department scholars and leaders—the department should aim to strategically hire a mix of junior and senior faculty over the next few years. Senior faculty can provide leadership as well as mentoring to younger faculty. If the department is not proactive in this regard, its rank and reputation are at significant risk.

2) Efforts should be made to increase grant activity (perhaps in the CDPH) such as by: a) initiating a seed grant program; b) creating a proposal writing workshop; c) organizing working groups around particular general topics to generate ideas. These efforts would also increased the “centeredness” of the CDPH.

3) The MSD should maintain its interdisciplinary orientation. One way to address this issue would be to adopt an MOU between the CDPH and other programs to ensure there are enough faculty in the CDPH and who can contribute to the MSD. At the very least, it is important for the College to monitor the balance of faculty across departments.

4) The MSD program is understaffed, with considerable burden on the Director. Additional staff or another course release would strengthen the functioning of the MSD and CDPH, especially in light of recommendation #2 above.

5) The sociology department should craft a strategic plan to formulate broad goals and strategies. The plan should take into account the College’s goals.

6) The PhD program currently has a mismatch between the research and teaching strengths of the faculty and those of the graduate students. The department should strive for a better alignment.

7) The department is increasingly relying on graduate student teaching, especially Distance Learning, to meet programmatic and budgetary goals. The sociology department should convene a committee to evaluate this approach and its implications for the size of the PhD program, the training graduate students receive, student funding, and the functioning of the undergraduate program.

8) The MASR program is a weak one. Nevertheless, while its benefits are low, so are its costs. The department should consider the direction and viability of this program in its strategic plan.

9) The department should collect more systematic data on the undergraduate program in the form of regularly-administered senior exit surveys. It should also work with the college to collect information about the placement of alumni. This could help in future development efforts as well.

10) The department, working with the college/university development office, should seek to further engage potential alumni donors, especially to support student enrichment efforts at both the graduate and undergraduate level. Such funds could be used to support student research and training.