March 24, 2015

MEMORANDUM

TO: Nancy Marcus
Dean, The Graduate School

FROM: Ike Eberstein, Chair


The GPC review returned five recommendations. Each recommendation is listed below and is followed by our planned action. Please let me know if you need any additional information.

1. The Department of Sociology should prepare a strategic plan to guide the unit over the next decade. In the self-study, the department acknowledges that a planning effort was not pursued after the last university review in 2007. Developed by the faculty in the unit under the guidance of the Chair this plan should identify enrollment, teaching, contract/grant and research goals, and articulate a hiring strategy for the unit. It would also allow the current faculty to work together with knowledge and forethought, especially in light of the pending retirements of senior faculty.

The Department recognizes the need for strategic planning, and this view is shared among the faculty. There will be a new Department Chair beginning in August 2015, and strategic planning is a high priority item on the agenda. Specifics of the process and timing haven’t been decided, pending discussions following formal appointment of the new Chair and election of new members to departmental committees in late spring. It is expected that the planning process will include the topics mentioned in the GPC recommendations -- faculty recruitment, student recruitment, and graduate student funding.

2. To the extent that it is consistent with the mission and priorities of the College of Social Sciences and Public Policy and the University, the subcommittee recommends that additional faculty lines be granted to the Department of Sociology. The department's faculty expressed significant concerns about having too few faculty members, and the subcommittee shares those concerns. The current complement of 17 tenure track faculty as of August 2014 is down from 22 in 2006 and 25 in the mid-1990s, despite maintaining overall PhD program enrollments. Given that faculty members are collectively responsible for the department’s research mission and graduate program, such declines in faculty numbers will make it increasingly difficult to maintain the current high level of quality in the education and mentoring of graduate students in Sociology. In addition, to maintain the high ranking nationally, there is a need for signature senior hires especially in the Eminent Scholar position.

The Department agrees with the importance of hiring additional faculty. We are participating fully in the encouraging opportunities that have become available this year, and we look forward to new possibilities in the future. Since the GPC review, we have been able to take advantage of the FSU spousal hiring program to recruit an outstanding new junior faculty member who will add to our depth in the areas of health policy, inequality, and gender. In addition, the Provost has made three senior lines
available to the College of Social Sciences and Public Policy to establish an interdisciplinary Center on Public Policy for Successful Aging. We were able to attract a pool of outstanding Sociology candidates to forward to the College Search Committee, and two of the five campus visits so far are potential Sociology faculty, including one at the Eminent Scholar level. More generally, Sociology is enthusiastic in seeking to benefit from the campus-wide emphasis on growing the faculty in STEM disciplines. At the same time, it is important that future hiring be guided at least in part by local faculty priorities, including those priorities that might emerge in the departmental strategic plan referred to in #1 above.

3. We recommend that the Sociology faculty assess the issue of a "mismatch" between graduate student interests in the Inequalities & Social Justice area and the number of faculty that teach and undertake research in this area and determine whether adjustments can be made that are consistent with the goals of the department, which might include adjusting admission decisions to take into account desired areas of study or adjusting hiring priorities to augment study areas with fewer faculty relative to student demand. This problem, if it persists, could quickly result in longer "time to degree" issues for students as well as advising overloads for faculty in these high demand areas.

This is a longstanding dilemma with no easy solution. The faculty will discuss the issue and consider options in the process of developing the departmental strategic plan referred to in #1 above. Efforts in the past and ongoing include (a) actively recruiting students in all areas of the department and (b) clearly stating departmental strengths and faculty interests on publicity materials and in conversations with prospective students (“truth in advertising”). The perceived mismatch results mainly from a disconnect between undergraduate sociology programs where the emphasis is typically on topics and approaches in the Inequalities and Social Justice area, and graduate programs like ours that reflect faculty research and the field more broadly, including important topics like aging, health, and demography and advanced research methodology. Student interests broaden and change as they are exposed to new topics and approaches and as new opportunities open up that they may not have previously considered, so any mismatch at the time of entry is not necessarily problematic for student progress in the graduate program, placement, or career success. There is a lot here for discussion.

4. We recommend that the faculty discuss the potential impact, both current and future, of this heavy reliance on DL teaching for funding the graduate program, and attempt to identify any alternative options. Doctoral students currently teach a high load of distance learning (DL) classes for undergraduates which in turn supports stipends for graduate students. At present, this appears to be a very creative and workable solution as designed by the department chair. However, doctoral students might benefit from less teaching and more time for research, including the possibility of non-duty assistantships or fellowships that would enable them to give more effort to their dissertation research. Moreover, a greater concern is that the DL classes may not be a viable long-term solution, especially if state wide resources for undergraduate teaching on-line become limited or restricted.

Graduate student funding is a critical concern and will be considered as part of developing the departmental strategic plan referred to in #1 above. Alternatives should be considered in the event distance learning classes become less viable as a source of graduate student funding. Similarly, the Department needs to consider whether to define some number of regular assistantships (funded as part of the regular university allocation) to be non-duty fellowships and/or whether to try and raise funds for these kinds of positions from outside regular university sources. Using regular university funds for non-duty appointments is not without opportunity costs for the Department’s teaching mission or for faculty research, and doing so will require the support of the College.
5. The subcommittee recommendation is that the MASR and PhD programs should be continued.

No action is required by this recommendation.