

# **Graduate Students and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) Report Review of the Department of Sociology**

May 9, 2004

On April 22, 2004, the GPSS met with graduate students in the Department of Sociology to discuss their thoughts and opinions about the graduate program. Ten students in the doctoral program participated in the discussion. The group was composed of students from the various cohorts (first-year students through fourth-year students). Surveys regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the Sociology Department were distributed to the students to stimulate discussion. The discussion covered multiple topics that included curriculum, financial aid, faculty and staff, diversity, facilities, recruitment, and career development. Overall, students were pleased with the department and have noticed improvements made over the past few years. The students also expressed gratitude specifically with the assistance of Patty Glenn. She was mentioned as an invaluable resource for all of the students. They also viewed collaborative relationships with other campus entities such as the Center for Statistics and the Social Sciences (CSSS) and the Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology (CSDE) as a considerable strength. However, concerns were raised in both the survey and discussion regarding conflicts of interest between students and faculty. Students reported that faculty members often overlook student goals in favor of raising the department's prestige. This report will cover this issue in further detail. The strengths and weaknesses of the Sociology Department as identified by the students is detailed below.

## **Department Strengths**

The students that participated in the focus group hail from different parts of the country, including Washington, California, New York, Michigan, and Washington, DC. They came to the University of Washington with a variety of undergraduate majors, which includes Communications, Political Science, Sociology, International Relations, Women's Studies, and Psychology. The participating students identified the following as the department's strengths:

- There have been noticeable improvements over the past few years in statistical training and methods, academic resources, collaborations with CSSS and CSDE, and with computer resources. Patty Glenn was mentioned as an invaluable resource that assists the students with a variety of technical issues.
- All doctoral candidates are fully funded through RA/TA positions, grants, or fellowships. Other university departments actively seek Sociology graduate students for RA/TA positions. Students have noticed an increase in RA opportunities and fellowships, and have greatly appreciated the opportunities to publish with faculty.
- There is very open communication between faculty and students. Faculty members have, at times, allowed students to use their offices and computers when the computer lab is full.

- The graduate student travel endowment has received very generous donations and support from the faculty and department. The endowment covers various costs associated with the attendance of national conferences. This funding source has allowed more students to attend various Sociology conferences across the nation.
- Students appreciate the common spaces available to them. This includes the free use of classrooms (with keypad security), eating areas, and computer labs.
- The statistics sequence has greatly improved. The students recommend that faculty continue to monitor and evaluate the statistics series for further improvements.
- The department has done a remarkable job in retaining respected faculty members, and in recruiting new members. The students particularly mentioned that senior faculty members hired over the last five years have developed into exceptional instructors and mentors.
- The students are aware that many of the improvements in the department are due to increased faculty grant awards. They suggest that in order to maintain progress, the department should continue to find ways to improve the department.
- Career development and placement. Faculty members are very knowledgeable about the field and are excellent resources for opportunities in professional institutions. Students feel that they have gained, and continue to receive valuable experience that will make them competitive candidates for future jobs.
- Increasing strength of students. The entering cohorts of students over the past few years have been increasingly strong. The students admitted that they rejected offers to other prestigious universities in order to attend the University of Washington. Current students have been offered admission to other top-ranked programs including Ohio State University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Pennsylvania, and New York University.

Of the strengths that were discussed, the students emphasized the collaboration with CSSS and CSDE as a very strong asset of the program. Also, the fact that all graduate students are fully funded creates a more positive and collegial atmosphere. Students do not feel any pressure to compete against other students for funding opportunities. The students have all noticed improvements in the department over the past few years and hope these improvements continue.

### **Department Weaknesses**

Along with the major strengths of the department, the students also identified some weaknesses and room for improvement. The weaknesses are outlined as follows:

- Conflict of interest. The faculty appears to be grooming the students for prestigious and more visible roles, such as research positions at top universities. Students feel that this direction may conflict with individual student goals, and discourages future careers in applied sociology or teaching.

- Faculty members also tend to set lofty goals, but do not follow through in completing these goals. For example, students mentioned that the improvement of the quality of teaching among instructors was set as a top priority. However, instructors who are performing poorly as instructors are neither encouraged nor directed by other faculty members to improve. The students expressed that poor faculty instructors often do not distribute student evaluations toward the end of a course. This prevents student feedback, and allows poor instructors to continue to teach without any department oversight or enforcement.
- Mixed messages. The department is heavily dependent on graduate students to serve as TA's for the undergraduate courses. Yet, students are also pressured by faculty to conduct more research and to publish. Students sense faculty disappointment when they choose to stray away from solely conducting research.
- Overemphasis on recruitment of new students. Although the quality of incoming students has improved over the past few years, students feel that the department sometimes spends too many resources on the recruitment of new students and in first-year RA/TA positions. The money could be better used in developing current students and in providing them with summer funding opportunities.
- Better transition from pre-MA to post-MA. Students expressed a lack of transition from pre-masters work to post- masters work. They suggest that regular professional development workshops or courses should be taught to help with transition, as well as teach other useful skills such as research writing.
- Curriculum. Faculty tend to teach more "special topics" courses, which are usually based on faculty interests, versus teaching core graduate courses.
- Diversity. Students expressed the need for more tenured female faculty members. There is also lack of ethnic diversity among faculty, staff, and students. The number of international students has also decreased over the past few years. The students suggest that the increased effort of the department to recruit applicants from elite universities may contribute to reduced diversity.

Of the weaknesses discussed, the inability for faculty to follow through with goals was perhaps the one weakness universally felt by all participants. Students strongly feel that certain faculty members are disconnected with the overall goals of the department. This detachment from the department leads to poor teaching and mentorship, as well as poor evaluation and monitoring on the part of the department. The students feel that the department should have a more regular and systematic evaluation process. They also feel that the department should develop concrete goals for future improvement, and should elicit the full support and participation of the faculty in carrying out these goals.

### **Conclusions**

Having stated the above concerns, the students expressed that overall they are pleased with the department, especially with the recent improvements in collaborations with CSSS and CSDE, and with improvements to the statistical course sequence. The students have genuine concern for the department, and hope its faculty takes serious measures in improving the evaluation of instructors and in being more open to student

goals. The GPSS hopes that this report will serve as a reference and catalyst for the continued development and strengthening of the Sociology graduate program.

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