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To: Phyllis Wise, Provost
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From: Elizabeth L. Feetham, Acting Dean and Vice Provost
The Graduate School

Re: Department of Sociology 10-Year Review

Summary and Recommended Action

At its meeting of December 2, 2004, the Graduate School Council met with members of the team that reviewed the Department of Sociology's Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), Master of Arts (M.A.), and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree programs, and with the Department Chair and Graduate Program Coordinator, as well as the Divisional Dean for Social Sciences in the College of Arts and Sciences. The Council recommended that the continuing status of the degree programs be reaffirmed, with the next review scheduled in the 2013-2014 academic year. The Council also suggested interim communications from the department to report progress on areas of concern.

Because of the change in composition of the department's faculty brought about by the considerable investment by the College of Arts and Sciences in a number of distinguished senior faculty positions, the department intends to revise and update its strategic plan, a move supported by the Council. The Council suggested that the strategic plan address long-term hiring goals, particularly focusing on the balance of senior and junior faculty in the department. Reinvigorating the undergraduate program and creating an opportunity for graduate students' diverse career interests to be valued while maintaining high academic standards in the department were also seen as high priorities for the department's future plans. The Council also recommended attention to improving the departmental climate to ensure that the diverse intellectual interests in the department are valued appropriately, and the department has already begun to address this issue in a very thorough manner.

I concur with the Council's recommendations and comments.

Background

The Department of Sociology has had a distinguished history since the 1920's. During the 1980's Washington became acknowledged as a leader in quantitative methods, exchange theory, experimental social psychology, and macro-sociology. This prominence was reflected in the last two National Research Council rankings (1982, 1993) in which the department was ranked very highly indeed. Challenges appeared in the early 1990's with the death, retirement, or departure of several key senior faculty, impacting the recruitment of junior faculty and creating what has been called a "void in departmental leadership."

Happily, with the generous support of the College of Arts and Sciences, this situation has turned around in the last few years, with a number of important hires at both the senior and junior levels having been made. Many of these new faculty have put in place strong research programs, formed new links across departmental boundaries, attracted significant funding, and begun to assist in leadership positions. The department is now well-positioned for an upward trajectory in quality and national reputation.

Review Process

The review committee was composed of six members, three internal and three from the discipline of sociology at peer institutions. The committee Chair was Professor Stephen J. Majeski, Chair of the Department of Political Science. Other local members were Professor Ilene L. Bernstein, Department of Psychology, and Professor Shelly J. Lundberg, Department of Economics. The following individuals served as external committee members: Professor Neil D. Fligstein, University of California at Berkeley; Professor S. Philip Morgan, Duke University; and Professor Cecilia L. Ridgeway, Stanford University. The review site visit was conducted on April 29-30, 2004, at which time the review committee met with Department faculty, students, and staff and key University administrative faculty. Prior to the review site visit, the internal committee members held discussions with the current and immediate past chair of the department.

Review Findings

According to the review team, with the addition of the strong senior hires in the last several years, the department “now has all the ingredients for a high energy, active, and vibrant research environment.” The team notes that the faculty are engaged, highly productive, and successful in publishing and obtaining external funding, with a set of research groups pursuing cutting-edge research. After this period of rapid growth, the committee sees the need for the department to “take all the parts together, see what parts fit and how they fit, see where bridges can be made, and where gaps and disconnections still remain. . . . By consolidating and building bridges and developing a culture of inclusion, the department will make itself more attractive for junior faculty and graduate students and make retention of senior faculty more successful.”

One area in which this consolidation needs to take place is in the area of faculty hiring. The hiring choices of the last several years have focused on targets of opportunity at the senior level. Now it is time for the department to turn its attention to developing a faculty with a balance of junior and senior appointments that will be able to maintain areas of strength and create bridges across them, shore up weakened areas, and be nimble enough to target new areas as the discipline evolves.

The team also pointed out that more attention needs to be paid to the undergraduate program in particular. The addition of more internship and honors opportunities would be very desirable, and the committee believes that many important improvements could come about with a renewed emphasis on the undergraduate program committee and its activities.

The team commended the general good health of the graduate program and indicated that student morale seems to be good. However, the graduate students clearly reflected findings of recent national surveys that suggest a strong desire on the part of graduate students in all disciplines for more emphasis on professional development for a variety of academic and non-academic careers. The team offered a few specific recommendations with respect to the curriculum and time to degree.

Finally, the review committee focused its attention on department culture and governance practices that may have been useful in the past but need to be revisited in order to continue the trajectory of a strong department in the future. In brief, the committee notes that the departmental culture may be an “impediment to intellectual openness, tolerance for diverse perspectives, and overall intellectual vitality in the department.” This issue may pose particular problems for women students and faculty and for students and faculty of color. For all students and faculty, the culture can quickly lead to an unhealthy departmental atmosphere of distrust and lack of mutual respect.

Council Recommendations

The Graduate School Council supported the recommendation for a new strategic plan for this department, one that will build on the considerable strengths presented by the key senior faculty who have joined the department in the last several years and one that will chart a course for recruitment of junior faculty in key areas. Figuring out where there are current strengths, opportunities for enhancement, and/or new areas in the field to be explored will be part of this challenge.

Although the department has begun to work on improving the undergraduate program, more work remains to be done. Efforts to involve undergraduate students more in research, have already begun and should continue. The improved undergraduate committee also has the opportunity to initiate and develop an internship program and revitalize the honors component of undergraduate education in the department.

The Council also recommended that immediate attention be paid to the issue of departmental culture and perceived lack of tolerance for differing intellectual perspectives among the faculty. The Graduate School Council encourages the department to develop a value statement on issues related to departmental culture and a plan to address these culture concerns. To that end, the department, with the aid of the College of Arts and Sciences, has engaged a consultant who has conducted extensive interviews within the department. The department is to be commended for the seriousness with which they have approached this issue, and the energy with which members are working on solutions for the common good. The consultant's findings will be the primary subject of a departmental retreat in September 2005, after which action steps on this topic will be developed.

The Graduate School Council recommended program continuation, with the next full review in ten years. In the interim, the department will provide brief reports on the departmental culture issue to The Graduate School and the College of Arts and Sciences at three years and again at six years.

c: Mark A. Emmert, President
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