



**GPSS Program Review  
Department of Sociology  
Executive Summary – June 17, 2014**

On April 10, 2014, the GPSS President and Special Assistant to the President met with 10 graduate students from the Department of Sociology to conduct a focus group as part of the department's 10-year program review. The following themes emerged from the hour-long discussion and the survey answered by 25 students:

**Strengths:**

- Strong training in quantitative methods
- Availability of multiple pathways through the Ph.D. program
- Collegial environment among graduate students

**Weaknesses:**

- Highly inconsistent offering of required courses
- Few faculty carrying most of the advising/mentoring burden
- Overburdening of administrative staff leads to breakdowns in key processes for grant and fellowship application
- Stigmatization of career options outside of academia
- Cases of faculty egregiously violating union contract; impacted students fear retaliation if they bring these cases forward

**Academic Program:**

Students described an academic program of uneven quality and consistency. While they acknowledged that training in quantitative methods was rigorous and of high quality, they pointed to stagnation of course offerings in sociological theory. They noted that what few theoretical courses are offered in the department contain outdated literature, leading many students to look outside the department for this content. Other required courses are offered inconsistently, making forward planning and consistent progress toward degree difficult. One course singled out in this regard was the department's "teaching sociology" course required to be a TA or instructor in the department. Despite being required, students noted that it is typically offered every other year at best.

Students did appreciate the availability of multiple curricular pathways through the degree program, which were implemented in response to student feedback over a period of several years. They noted that this represented an opening up of content-driven courses, which encourages interdisciplinary learning. In particular, the major/minor organization of graduate exams allows students to craft flexible and versatile degree programs for themselves. However, they described a byzantine system of different sets of course requirements that apply to different cohorts in unclear and confusing ways.



With regard to mentoring, students agreed that access to faculty members was highly uneven, with a small group of faculty taking on the bulk of the advising burden in the department. They pointed to demographic reasons as a partial explanation for this phenomenon – as in many other departments, the faculty are skewed toward the senior ranks, with several members approaching retirement and therefore reluctant or unwilling to take on new advisees. Other factors contributing to the unavailability of mentoring and advising included a common trend of faculty joint appointments with other programs and departments. Students described faculty as being in general stretched too thin by commitments outside the department and expressed a desire for a faculty hire “100% dedicated to Sociology.”

Finally, students expressed deep gratitude for the department’s Graduate Program Advisor (GPA), Liz Collier. They recounted several instances of her going above and beyond her job description to proactively reach out to students and help them take steps to make timely progress toward their degree. On the other hand, students noted that department administrative staff, particularly those responsible for processing grant and fellowship applications, were overburdened. Additionally, they pointed to problems regarding the availability department’s IT resources, which are shared with Philosophy and Economics. This was noted as especially problematic given the heavy reliance of many students on statistics software packages hosted on the department’s equipment.

### **Department Climate and Diversity:**

Students expressed a strong sense of collegiality among themselves in the department, but noted that there was little effort expended by the department itself to foster opportunities for interaction among graduate students. They described these duties as falling almost exclusively to students themselves, and a few dedicated students in particular. Nevertheless, students felt mutually supported and noted that a strong informal peer mentoring network existed in the department, and that any sense of competitiveness between students was non-existent.

A highly problematic aspect of the department’s climate was what students described as a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding personal situations, including disability, pregnancy, family issues, and other circumstances potentially impacting academic performance and progress. This, in combination with a sense of a palpable “old boys’ club” attitude with regards to departmental social norms, contributed to a frustrating environment for many of the students in the focus group. One aspect of this attitude is the heavy stigmatization of students seeking careers or even temporary work experience outside of academia; students noted a total lack of mentorship and advice with regards to finding and securing non-academic internships, which was seen as highly problematic in combination with the unavailability of summer funding within the department.

Nevertheless, students noted that the department was making good faith efforts at recruiting a diverse student body. However, where these efforts were described to fall short was on the side of retention of students from diverse backgrounds. In addition to the departmental climate



issues noted above, the uncompetitive nature of funding packages [author's note: common to most departments in the social sciences and humanities at UW] and the near-total lack of summer funding were cited as reasons for the difficulty in retaining a diverse student body.

### **Labor Issues:**

A troubling aspect of the department was brought up toward the end of the focus group: compounding a lack of appropriate instructional training (see above) were several anecdotal cases of faculty consistently expecting student TAs to work far in excess of the 220 hours/quarter mandated by the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) between the UW and the UAW 4121. Additionally, some students reported very large TA/student ratios, reaching 1:150 in some cases. Most troubling about these violations of the CBA was the fear expressed by some students that they would be retaliated against by faculty in the form of being passed over for TA assignments if they brought forward labor grievances.

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