



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of Sociology

TO: Dr. Su Swarat, Associate Vice-President of Institutional Effectiveness
Dr. Sheryl Fontaine, Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Dr. Jessica Stern, Associate Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

FROM: Dr. Berna Torr, Chair Department of Sociology

DATE: April 26, 2022

RE: Response to Dean's Summary and Evaluation of the Sociology BA and MA, PPR 2013-2022

On behalf of the entire Sociology Department, I express our gratitude for the careful attention of the Dean and Associate Dean to our department's self-study and external program review. We are pleased that they recognized and highlighted our department's strengths and greatly value their recommendations.

Student Recruitment, Retention, and Graduation

We share the Dean's office concern about declines in majors and minors that occurred in Spring 2022. From conversations with our students last semester, it was clear that for some students the uncertainty and concerns about Omicron along with the current economic situation and general pandemic fatigue and burnout have created challenges. Many students delayed enrollment, and some put it off for a semester. Our spring transfer numbers were also lower than in the recent past, and we share a concern about the ripple effect of lower community college enrollment from our feeder schools that may lead to lower enrollment in the short-term. We are hopeful that these are short-term blips caused by structural constraints outside our control and that some of these challenges will ease in the future and students will continue to recognize the strength of our program.

We have begun a more thorough program of outreach to our current students—sending emails with registration reminders, sending flyers with information on classes and opportunities, sending text reminders to unenrolled students, and providing group registration advising sessions to reach more students. We have also designed flyers about the program and its strengths. In sum, we are doing more outreach to current and admitted students than we have in the past. We do some outreach at the department-level to our community college partners and plan to explore doing more in the future. However, we also see opportunities at the college and university level to increase outreach to our community college partners. Improving outreach could improve the number of applicants, yield, and provide knowledge of changing enrollment trends to help better manage enrollments and scheduling. If this outreach already exists, or data and analysis of transfer enrollment trends, we encourage higher administration and the dean's office to share these resources with departments.

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With respect to the growing percentage of majors who are FYF, we have developed a First-Year Student Learning Community (FSLC) which will launch in Fall 2022 to help pilot a more structured program for FYF majors. We have designed the program, created flyers, and are currently contacting admitted FYF to encourage them to enroll. Again, going forward it would be great to have more data (e.g. census and enrollment trends and Tableau reports separated out by FYF and Transfer so we can see how we are doing with the two groups). We also recently developed a 200-level courses which is currently under consideration for GE approval. We would like to see some improvement in enrollment for this course before we add additional 200-level courses.

Modality, Curriculum, and Pedagogy

For Spring 2022, 38% of our courses are fully online and asynchronous, 40% are fully in person and 22% are hybrid. Therefore, 62% of our courses have in-person components. For Fall 2022, we have planned that to increase to 66%. That is, the percent of courses with all or most of the course occurring in-person will be 66% (34% online, 38% in person, and 26% hybrid, with all but one of the sections following the “mostly in-person” model of hybrid). This is just slightly below the college recommended average of 70% in-person and 30% online. Pre-pandemic, Sociology often led the college in online and hybrid offerings. For example, in Fall 2019, 27% of our courses were fully online, 77% hybrid and fully in person. So, between Fall 2019 and Fall 2022, this has been a less than 10-percentage point increase in online courses and a shift toward more hybrid courses as a percentage of in-person. The shift has been intentional, made desirable by several factors, namely the need to meet demands of a growing major without additional classroom space, student and faculty familiarity and ease with online and hybrid instruction, and by advances in technology and alternative pedagogical models that focus on equitable and inclusive pedagogy and experiential and active learning in the classroom.

Because of our experience building a fully online program we have been discussing modality and approaches to online teaching for many years prior to the pandemic and have built up substantial expertise and knowledge about best practices. I caution against conflating pedagogy and modality as some of our hybrid classes are shining examples of using classroom time effectively and are building community in more intentional ways than a fully in-person class focused on faculty lectures might. As the dean’s office notes there is a college committee on modality that one of our faculty (Carter Rakovski) is participating in; we look forward to hearing more about their findings and continuing to strive towards best practices in pedagogy across modalities.

Staff

Since the Dean’s response we have lost another staff member, our ASA II. This staff member was an amazing addition to the Sociology department for the last eight months and was, by his own account, very happy here, except in the areas of pay and work flexibility. Like the



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two others who left recently, he took a position that pays almost twice as much and has a substantially more flexible work from home policy. The lack of stability and turnover in staffing creates a burden on remaining staff as well as on the Chair and Vice Chair and hampers our ability to do things like outreach. The turnover also stresses our ability to provide permits, answers to advising questions, and other basic enrollment questions for admitted students at a crucial time. We continue to encourage the University to revisit pay for staff, figure out ways to create career ladders for staff, and expand the telecommute policy to be more in line with other local workplaces. In our view, the university's current pay and benefits policies for staff are an impediment to the strategic goals of the university as high turnover makes it more difficult to serve our communities in a variety of ways from addressing issues of equity to increasing graduation rates and reducing time to graduation.

Classroom Space

We look forward to hearing more about the AP analysis and new process for allocating space. We also hope that in this new process for allocating space there is a mechanism for the department to get access to classrooms in College Park, particularly for evening classes, as we see that these often remain empty. We encourage innovation with respect to classroom allocation at the college and university levels to alleviate these issues. Starting in Spring we are hoping to pilot using our hybrid classes to try to double-book classrooms and alleviate some of the space issues (though it's already clear it will create some other challenges, e.g. timing of finals, etc.).

With respect to Friday classes, as noted we have tried this in the past but have never been able to fill more than 2-3 classes on Friday. We are happy to talk to other departments but given the specificity of our student body who largely want Fridays available for work I am not sure this is particularly relevant.

Online Degree Program Revenue

We are encouraged by recent conversations with the dean's office regarding the coming changes to the ODCP revenue sharing and enthusiastic about the prospect of that money going directly into our operating expenses accounts starting in July. This change should help us to be able use the money to support programs like our TSLC and FSLC and advising as well as undergraduate and graduate research.

One question is whether it might be possible to move some portion of these funds into our foundation accounts which would allow us to do more to provide student scholarships and support from these funds? We are particularly interested in creating avenues to allow undocumented graduate students to have the same access to research experiences that other students have when they are not able to be hired as graduate assistants.

We appreciate the Dean's consideration of these issues and look forward to a continued productive working relationship in support of our department and students.

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