

FINAL ASSESSMENT REPORT

Institutional Quality Assurance Program (IQAP) Review

Sociology

Date of Review: March 3rd and 4th 2016

In accordance with the University Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), this final assessment report provides a synthesis of the external evaluation and the internal response and assessments of the graduate and undergraduate programs delivered by Sociology. This report identifies the significant strengths of the program, together with opportunities for program improvement and enhancement, and it sets out and prioritizes the recommendations that have been selected for implementation.

The report includes an Implementation Plan that identifies who will be responsible for approving the recommendations set out in the Final Assessment Report; who will be responsible for providing any resources entailed by those recommendations; any changes in organization, policy or governance that will be necessary to meet the recommendations and who will be responsible for acting on those recommendations; and timelines for acting on and monitoring the implementation of those recommendations.

Executive Summary of the Review

The Sociology program submitted a self-study to the School of Graduate Studies in February 2016. The self-study presented the program descriptions and learning outcomes, an analytical assessment of these two programs, and program data including the data collected from a student survey along with the standard data package prepared by the Office of Institutional Research and Analysis. Appended were the CVs for each full-time faculty member in the Department.

- **Strengths**

The review team identified a number of strengths of the department. They were particularly impressed with the overall high quality of the department's graduate and undergraduate programs, the department's alignment with McMaster's commitment to community engagement, internationalization, and enhancing the student experience. The reviewers highlighted the vibrant research culture within the department among faculty and its graduate students. The review team also noted progress made in promoting diversity, enhancing collegiality and promoting a positive climate, conducive to working and learning.

- **Areas for Enhancement or Improvement**

The review team noted the challenges the department faces with high student enrolments and relatively modest faculty complement. The reviewers make a number of specific recommendations

regarding how the department should restructure its undergraduate program. The department has already flagged many of the same issues, and is in the process of drafting revisions to its program along the lines suggested by the reviewers. We expect to have a revised curriculum ready for department and broader faculty approval by September, 2017.

With the Graduate Committee, providing leadership, the Department is always seeking to improve the quality of the MA and PhD programs in sociology and to make the Sociology Department a supportive environment for graduate student development. The IQAP self-study and external review has recommended reducing the graduate student-faculty ratio and paying attention to the distribution of the supervisory load. The processes to address these concerns are already underway.

Faculty renewal and retention are central challenges. Securing replacements for retiring and departing faculty is essential to maintaining program quality. To this end, the department must continue to nurture a collegial and supportive environment, mentor its junior faculty, and make important contributions to Faculty of Social Science and University initiatives.

Summary of the Reviewers' Recommendations with the Department's and Dean's Responses

Recommendation	Proposed Follow-Up	Responsibility for Leading Follow-Up	Timeline for Addressing Recommendation
<i>Undergraduate</i>			
Convert 6 unit courses to 3 unit courses in undergraduate program	The department has discussed, and agrees that it should convert its level I, II, and III 3 6 unit courses to three unit courses	Undergraduate Committee and department faculty	Sociology 1A06 and Sociology 3H06, faculty approval for September, 2016. For level II courses, September, 2017.
Offer more level II and III courses, and reduce offerings at level IV	Proposal is under consideration as part of ongoing broader undergraduate program review	Undergraduate Committee and department faculty	September, 2017
Offer more sections of required courses	Proposal is under consideration as part of ongoing broader undergraduate program review	Undergraduate Committee and department faculty	September, 2017
Fall orientation for undergraduate students	Agreed	Department Chair	September, 2017
Establish two streams	Proposal is under	Undergraduate	September, 2017

within honours program	consideration as part of ongoing broader undergraduate program review	Committee and department faculty	
Careers workshop and additional steps to provide undergraduates with information concerning careers, skills, links with institutions offering vocational programs (e.g., Mohawk College)	Agreed	Undergraduate Committee, Department Chair and Sociology Students' Society	March, 2017
Bringing community into the classroom	Agreed	Individual faculty	Ongoing
Look into student complaints that social science counseling is not always informed and helpful to their concerns	This issue only surfaced during site visit. Undergraduate Chair and Department Chair will follow-up with FSS counseling office to and with students to better understand issues	Undergraduate Committee, Department Chair and Sociology Students' Society	September, 2016 (initial information gathering)
Diversity in the classroom. Greater diversity (gender, race, ethnicity and other dimensions) among students and instructors can give rise to challenges over power and pedagogy. Supports must be put in place for all instructors, (especially junior faculty members) should these situations occur in the classroom.	Agreed. Because it is unlikely that this concern is not specific to sociology, the Department will bring this concern to the Dean of FSS and with chairs and directors in the Faculty. Within sociology, the Department will take steps to learn if and how these challenges are surfacing, and resources available (e., MIETL) in meeting these challenges. Plan for next steps will emerge from this assessment.	Undergraduate Committee, Department Chair and department faculty	September, 2016 (initial information gathering)
<i>Graduate</i>			
Monitor distribution of graduate supervision among faculty	Agreed	Graduate Chair, Department Chair	Ongoing
Reduce graduate student-faculty ratio	Underway - smaller PhD cohorts, larger MA cohorts	Graduate Committee	September, 2018
Standardize expectations for dissertation proposal.	This already exists in policy but is not enforced.	Graduate Chair, Department Chair	Immediately

	Graduate Chair and Department Chair will impress importance on supervisors.		
Consider reducing comps from two to one	Graduate Committee will review and consider recommendation to faculty	Graduate Committee and department faculty	September, 2017
<i>Departmental Faculty and Governance</i>			
Organize departmental retreats on a regular basis	Agreed	Department Chair and department faculty	September 2016 and thereafter
Continue ongoing efforts to clarify the roles of teaching professors in the department	Agreed	Department Chair and department faculty	September 2016 and thereafter
Consider a nominations committee, allowing department members to vote on committee membership	Agreed	Department Chair and department faculty	September 2016
Mentorship of junior faculty	In 2015, to enhance mentorship, the Department shifted to mentoring committees in place of individual mentors. We will monitor success and challenges of this recent change and continue to assess mentorship more generally.	Department Chair and department faculty	Immediately
Build on positive trajectory in regards to collegiality and climate	Agreed	Department Chair and department faculty	Immediately
Continued attentiveness to diversity initiatives	Agreed	Department Chair and department faculty	Immediately

Faculty Response:**Undergraduate Program**

1. *Consider creating two streams within the honours program.* This recommendation is consistent both with recent curriculum revisions in other departments in the Faculty, and with changes proposed within Sociology, which has already begun the process of creating a streamed honours program.

2. *Reduce the number of 4th-year courses and re-allocate resources to 2nd and 3rd-year courses.* Offerings at the 4th-year are excessive—few courses even reach the cap of 25 students—and this past year the department began reducing the number of such courses. Combined with the creation of a streamed honours program that includes some larger 4th-year courses for the more applied stream, it should be possible to re-allocate resources to the 2nd and 3rd years to reduce class sizes at those levels and increase choice and scheduling flexibility. These changes will also support the specific recommendation to split 3H06 (Research Techniques and Data Analysis) into day and evening sections.
3. *Reduce reliance on 6-unit courses.* At the encouragement of the Faculty, the department has already acted to reduce the number of 6-unit courses it offers.
4. *Reduce a sense of alienation by early-year students.* Multiple factors contribute to the feelings of alienation from the program for some early-year students, including large class sizes and a disproportionate number of sessional instructors in years one and two. The large first-year classes will not go away without substantially more resources to the Faculty. It is possible, however, to increase the number of full-time faculty teaching in those courses, and to create other activities outside the classroom to connect the students more meaningfully with the program.
5. *Increase professional development opportunities.* This theme reflects broader feedback that the Faculty has received from students. It is useful to divide our response into two types of activities, both identified by the reviewers. The first is the help the students understand the valuable skills and abilities they obtain through their social science training—in this case, through their training in sociology. The second is to provide opportunities for them to discuss career/professional issues and develop additional specific skills that will be valuable when entering the labour market. The Dean and Associate Dean's offices fully supports the need to do both, and has been investigating ways to do them better. We will be working with Sociology and other departments to implement in the near future both Faculty-wide strategies and program-specific strategies.
6. *Develop new ways to link the classroom and the community.* This is a large challenge, and I am grateful for the suggestions of the review committee. Social Science is a highly community-engaged faculty. Much of this engagement is focused around research and related activities, although it is increasingly being integrated into the undergraduate experience (within and outside the formal Experiential Education program). But as the reviewer notes, this can be very resource intensive and difficult to integrate into the curriculum. Again, this challenge extends beyond Sociology. The suggestion to bring the community into the classroom (e.g., through guest speakers) is a good one. As a Faculty, however, we need to experiment with and develop a fuller array of strategies that can be used by programs and individual instructors to integrate community engagement more thoroughly into our undergraduate programs.
7. *Improved academic counselling regarding the sociology program.* We were not aware of any problems with the counselling provided to sociology students, and are not sure how widespread the problem may be, but will investigate any such issues. Currently each program has a designated advisor. In some cases, for whatever reason, the students/advisor pairing doesn't work as well as it should. We are experimenting with a model in which students from a given program could seek advice from more than one advisor, therefore giving another option to a student in case they have difficulty with a particular advisor.

Graduate Program

8. *Maintain reasonable supervisory loads on faculty.* This touches on two areas: the total number of graduate students in the program and the distribution of supervisory responsibilities among faculty. As the reviewer notes, the department is passing through a period of unusually high PhD enrolments due to large intake cohorts a few years ago. This is a temporary problem that will work its way through the system, but it has created challenges at this time. The emphasis in the university on expanding graduate enrolment creates a tension with the desire of some in the department to reduce graduate enrolment. The department's plan to increase master's enrolment while holding steady on doctoral enrolment makes sense. This maintains graduate enrolment while changing the mix. It is easier to manage natural fluctuations in masters enrolment than it is for doctoral enrolment. Further, this provides a larger pool from which to draw PhD students, which should enable the program to increase average student quality in the doctoral program. It is perhaps more difficult to address the problem of imbalance across faculty in supervisory responsibilities. The specific sub-fields that are "hot" change over time. Further, when choosing supervisory committee members students naturally gravitate to subset faculty who teach in the core courses of the graduate program. Still, there are explicit strategies the department can implement to give greater exposure to faculty who might be less visible to first- and second-year students, such as events in which faculty talk about their research and the types of opportunities available to graduate students working with them. The department is exploring such strategies.
9. *Add professional development sessions.* Again, this is a theme that extends beyond Sociology, especially as increasing numbers of graduate students pursue careers outside of academia. Given this, the School of Graduate Studies has created a number of new opportunities for graduate students to develop better their professional skills and abilities. These are open to all graduate students at McMaster. While it makes sense for the SGS to do this, given the general need for such opportunities, it is also important for the department to complement these general sessions with discipline-specific opportunities available to sociology graduate students --- the specific challenges they face differ in some important way from even those faced by, for example, economics students within the Faculty. Again, the department is committed to providing such opportunities to its graduate students.
10. *Reconsider course and comprehensive exam requirements.* This is a perennial issue within graduate programs. The good completion times among students in Sociology's doctoral program indicates that the current requirements are not causing undue delays. Still, it is a situation that deserves examination, which the department is committed to doing.
11. *Increase opportunities for graduate students to teach in their upper years.* In the past, the collective agreement between the university and sessional instructors sometimes made it difficult to assign a senior PhD student to teach a course. The most recent collective agreement, however, includes an explicit mechanism to enable this by allowing a certain number of courses each year to be assigned to graduate students without going through the normal posting process. Each department in the Faculty receives an allocation of such slots each year, which should increase teaching opportunities for graduate students.

Governance

12. As noted by the reviewers, governance and collegiality have increased notably in recent years within the department. This is due to explicit efforts by the previous Acting Chair, Roy Cain, the current Chair, Greg Hooks, and a commitment by all departmental faculty to create a better work environment. This remains an area of focus for the department, and me as Dean, to ensure that it can build on the success to date. In addition to the specific recommendations of the reviewers, the department continues to examine aspects of its governance and operations to identify ways to improve its functioning.

Other Issues

13. *Pay attention to diversity.* I list the issue of diversity here because it cuts across both educational programs and governance. The reviewers identify two important, and quite distinct diversity-related challenges. One relates to the fact that diversity among the faculty complement is not changing nearly as rapidly as is diversity in the student body. This can create misunderstanding and tensions in the classroom. The second relates to the challenges faced by faculty members who are visible minorities (and predominately junior) in their roles both as teachers and as faculty members sometimes breaking new ground within the university. We have begun discussing these issues at the regular meetings of the Chairs and Directors, with a goal to develop strategies to address them in ways that reflect the sensitive nature of the issues involved and that provide support to both faculty and students as needed.

Quality Assurance Recommendation

McMaster's Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) reviewed the above documentation and the committee recommends that the program should follow the regular course of action with a progress report and subsequent full external cyclical review to be conducted no later than 8 years after the start of the last review.