

GRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAM STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT, SOCIOLOGY

MISSION

The mission of the Sociology graduate program is to provide students with premiere doctoral training to prepare them for careers in research and teaching-intensive institutions. Our admissions procedures and curricula : (1) foster the development of cutting-edge research and teaching skills; (2) emphasize independent and collaborative research and teaching skills, close mentoring, and participation in service activities; (3) encourage the value of diverse research and learning environments; and (4) reflect responsible stewardship of our discipline's future by aligning enrollments with employment markets for sociology PhDs.

ADMISSIONS PROCESSES AND CRITERIA

Student Demand. From Fall 2004 through Fall 2008, applications averaged 46 per year; across the five years 26% of the applicants were admitted, indicating that the UI Sociology graduate program is in high demand, relative to the number of students we can admit. Of those admitted, 53% enrolled.

Criteria for Selection. These statistics reflect a strategic enrollment management policy that entails the following criteria: (1) strong qualifications (strong quantitative & writing skills demonstrated in personal statements, transcripts, and GRE scores); (2) expressed interest in obtaining a PhD as the terminal degree; (3) interest in programs of research being conducted by our current faculty; and (4) interest in a career in a research-intensive institution.

Success in Enrolling the Highest Quality Students Admitted. Profiles of enrolling students and the achievement and placement of our doctorates reflect the high quality of the students we admit. Since 2004 we have successfully recruited four Presidential Fellows, six Dean's Graduate Fellows, and two students with fellowships from their home countries. Our student GRE scores are significantly higher than the national average for sociology graduate students (+125 points for 2004-2007). There has been a significant uptick in GRE scores in the two most recent cohorts – the 2004-2007 mean verbal plus quantitative GRE was 1159; it was 1206 in 2008 and 1370 in 2009.

Success in Enrolling a Diverse Student Cohort. Faculty regularly participate in the Summer Research Opportunities Program (SROP) and in 2006, the DGS was one of only 2 faculty representatives from the University selected to attend the CIC workshop on diversity in graduate programs. These focused efforts have resulted in a marked increase in the diversity of our graduate students. In 2001, Sociology had no US-born graduate students from underrepresented groups enrolled in our program. Currently, about 30% of the US-citizen graduate students in Sociology are either African American or Latino/a, and 40% of all of our students are racial or ethnic minorities.

Financial Aid Commitments to Students. Since 2001, Sociology has supported almost all enrolled students for their first 4-5 years through research or teaching assistantships. We commit to renewing funding during the funding window (currently 5 years) contingent on adequate progress to degree. We believe every student should seek external funding (and internal, when available). Students seeking support beyond their 5th year must investigate extra-departmental funding. We also support a fund for graduate student professional travel, but students must apply for alternative funding (e.g., UISG and professional associations) in order to qualify. Faculty also monitor funding opportunities and help students apply for extramural support. This has created a highly successful culture of early grant writing and receipt among our students. After the 5th year, students may be extended research/teaching positions contingent on their availability and outstanding past performance in either teaching or research.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Degree Completion and Time-to-Degree. For students entering between 1996 and 2000 (the most recent year for which these data have been compiled), the completion rate was 48% and the prospective median TTD was 5.9 years. Among PhDs awarded between 2003 and 2008, the retrospective median TTD was 6.8 years. Most of our students must earn a master's degree before the PhD and the time toward the M.A. (usually about two years) is included in the TTD statistics. Our TTD compares quite favorably to the 8.5 median TTD for

PhDs in research-intensive sociology programs.¹ However, the data on degree completion speaks to our concern over recent faculty losses (see Weaknesses and Reorganization sections).

Publications. Our faculty members collaborate closely with students while also encouraging them to develop independent research programs. Since 2004, students graduating with a PhD have averaged two refereed publications at the point of graduation, a strong record of achievement in our discipline. Our current advanced students also have strong publication records. About 75% of students who began their 4th year in Fall of 2009 already have at least one refereed publication; the publication rate among this group is 1.6. In addition, the high level of participation in national and regional conferences – over 5 presentations per student among this group – indicates a strong pipeline of work in progress.

Fellowships, Awards, and Honors. Other signals of the accomplishment of our students (since 2003) include:

- 1 Spriestersbach Dissertation Prize Winner
- 1 Dean's Distinguished Dissertation in the Social Sciences Award
- 3 Ballard Seashore Social Sciences Dissertation Year Fellowships
- 7 Graduate College summer fellowships
- 8 other UI scholarships (Braverman, Graduate Diversity, and Hugh Vollrath Ross)
- 16 UI research or travel grants
- 7 UI awards (including Outstanding TA Outstanding Mentor awards)
- 7 extramural fellowship or research grants award winners
- 2 national paper prize winners
- 9 other extramural awards or scholarships

Placements for Students Receiving a PhD in Sociology. Between August 2003 and April 2009 100% of our doctorates obtained tenure-track academic positions as research scientists. Eighty-nine percent obtained tenure-track positions (compared to the UI social science average of 56%). Our high placement rate in tenure-track positions reflects the strong national reputation of our program for producing excellent PhDs and the success of our system of coursework, mentoring, and doctoral qualifying exams that ensure that students leave with both breadth and depth of knowledge in their specialty areas.

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Appropriate Size. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 10 percent increase in jobs in sociology from 2006-2016.² In addition, shortly before the recession, a report by the American Sociological Association found that there were more advertised tenure-track assistant professor positions in 2006 than there were sociology PhDs granted the same year.³ Thus, responsible and successful sociology graduate programs will grow modestly in the next decade and focus on preparing highly skilled doctorates to meet the growing demand.

Recognizing that faculty act as primary mentors to some students and as secondary mentors, advisors, and/or committee members for other students, as well as carrying out their own research and teaching programs, alongside serving the Department, Collegiate, University, profession, and community, on average, each FTE faculty member should serve as primary mentor to two students at a time. Given our current faculty size of 14 FTE, an appropriate average size for the graduate program would be about 30 students. Since 2006, the Department has experienced a reduction in faculty from 18.25 FTE to the current 14 FTE. This represents a 19% reduction in faculty size. While our current enrollment of 37 students is an indicator of a viable and strong program, we are seriously concerned about the short and long-term negative impact of the substantial reduction in faculty on both time to degree completion (fewer courses available) and the intensity of faculty mentoring – factors directly related to academic career success of our graduates. The ability to effectively grow an already nationally recognized program depends critically on the number and quality of research faculty. As many have

¹ <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/infbrief/nsf06312/nsf06312.pdf>

² <http://stats.bls.gov/oco/ocos054.htm#outlook>

³ <http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/PhDs%20Employment%20Brief%20%28FINAL%29.pdf>

noted, there is a strong association between program size and program ranking in academic disciplines. We are approaching the point where the sustainability of our strong but relatively small program is in jeopardy. Our faculty is the smallest among the sociology faculty of the CIC institutions which average 32 (range University of Illinois-Chicago 22, University of Wisconsin 51.)

Comparison with Similar Programs. Our Social Psychology specialty has a longstanding reputation as a premiere program, and is ranked 3rd overall and 2nd among public institutions (*US News & World Report*). The department is ranked 36th in the most recent *US News & World Report* rankings of graduate programs. UI Sociology is ranked 5th among small departments (20 faculty members or less) and only behind Johns Hopkins among departments with 15 or fewer full-time faculty members.

Strengths. Our greatest strengths are the quality of our students and faculty. We leverage these strengths through aggressive targeted recruitment of students and continuous curriculum improvement aimed at preparing students for research-intensive careers. Our success in attracting highly qualified students from underrepresented groups is an emerging strength. Our programmatic strengths are in three areas: Social Inequality, Crime/Law/Deviance, and Social Psychology, enhanced by the three anchor interdisciplinary research facilities founded by our faculty: Iowa Institute for Inequality Studies, Center for Crime & Sociological Studies, Center for the Study of Group Processes. Another strength is our commitment to managing our program size according to employment trends and the capacity of our faculty to effectively mentor students, while providing them with financial support. A 100% placement of students in tenure-track or research scientist positions is a strength of which we are particularly proud.

Weaknesses. Our biggest weakness is our small faculty size. With more faculty, we would be in a position to admit more highly qualified graduate students and better meet the undergraduate demand for our courses. All of these factors will substantially contribute to the national prestige and ranking of our program. We note that the average faculty size (full-time) for departments above our ranking is 28—twice our size. We too frequently lose top prospective students to more highly ranked programs (e.g., Wisconsin, Indiana, Stanford, and Duke) with larger faculties offering more specialty areas of study and better funding packages. The Graduate College's re-allocation of block funds has begun to help us improve in this area – we have attracted a very strong pool of Presidential and Dean's Graduate Fellows in recent years. We also seek improvement in our completion rate and time-to-degree. But we are concerned that recent cuts in TA lines may counteract our efforts to improve TTD and completion rate as advanced students take off-campus employment that delays completion of their dissertations. Another major element that has severely hampered our efforts is faculty turnover. When faculty leave, top students often follow them and their remaining students find their progress slowed as they seek new faculty mentors and/or committee members. Given the high quality of our faculty, it is not surprising that they are highly sought by other institutions. Competitive counter-offers will be critical to helping us retain faculty and thus, improving our completion rates.

Reorganization. In recent years we have made some changes aimed at improving our TTD and completion rate. First, a slight modification in our area exam system has decreased the failure rate, which should ultimately improve both of these program outcomes. Second, recognizing that time between exam completion and prospectus defense sometimes stretched out too long for students in the past, we now require students to defend their dissertation prospectus within one year of completing their area exams. Finally, we have instituted a prospective student visit day every spring that should improve our competitive position via other top schools, improve the fit of incoming student interests with faculty capabilities, and therefore lead to a higher completion rate and shorter time to degree.

CONCLUSIONS

Our students' strong record of achievement and job placement attests to the high quality of our graduate program. In addition, we have made important strides in increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of our graduate program in recent years while improving the quality of the graduate students we enroll. We have creatively used the resources at our disposal for improving graduate student outcomes and strengthening our academic program at the graduate level and will continue to search for alternative revenue streams for student support as budgets tighten in the University. We are well placed to continue to attract strong students and train them for successful careers in a growing discipline.