

ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT PLAN

AND

2023/2024 GRADUATE STUDENT ASSESSMENT REPORT

Department of Sociology and Criminology

Prepared by

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**ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT PLAN
DEGREE PROGRAM: SOCIOLOGY, MA
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND CRIMINOLOGY
(June 7, 2024)**

Statement of Mission: Graduate Program in Sociology

The mission of the graduate program in sociology is to provide the learning environment to meet the program goals and develop the skills listed below. Faculty members have been encouraged to tie the syllabi for every course into the program goals.

Program Goals

(Program goals are broad general statements of what the program intends to accomplish and describes what a student will be able to do after completing the program. The program goals are linked to the mission of the university and college.)

The discipline of sociology is characterized by its breadth and the diversity of its subfields and specializations. Hence, of particular importance to the Department of Sociology and Criminology are the following general goals included in our mission statement:

1. to provide knowledge and understanding of the historical, social, intellectual bases of human culture and environment;
2. to provide habits of thought and investigation useful in later life;
3. to encourage exploration and development of ethical values; and
4. to offer the necessary foundation for professional competence or further training in professional or graduate schools.

Student Learning Outcomes

(Student Learning Outcomes are defined in terms of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students will know and be able to do upon program completion. These student learning outcomes are directly linked to the accomplishment of the program goals.)

By graduation, MA students in sociology should be able to:

1. effectively use communication skills in writing, editing, speaking and listening;
2. effectively use analytical and computer skills to include the tools to analyze qualitative and quantitative data;
3. effectively conceptualize and solve problems, and engage in critical thinking, effective reasoning, and decision-making;
4. effectively use social skills to include cooperative learning and group problem-solving; and
5. be able to translate the sociological perspective into everyday life and problems.

The acquisition of skills listed above is the goal of the BA in Sociology. The masters' program in sociology seeks to develop the same skills at a more sophisticated level than that expected for the undergraduate student. Graduate work is expected to be more independent and self-directed than undergraduate work, as well as more analytical and theoretical.

Process for Assessing each Student Learning Outcome

(A process must be defined and documented to regularly assess student learning and achievement of student learning outcomes. The results of the assessment must be utilized as input for the improvement of the program.)

In the Department of Sociology and Criminology, the graduate director and the graduate committee have the responsibility for reviewing and evaluating our assessment procedures, and for offering suggestions to the faculty. The graduate director is also responsible for administering and reviewing and summarizing the results of the graduating student survey (i.e., alumni survey).

1. Timeline for assessment and analysis

(Must include specific timeline for collection and analysis of assessment data.) Data collection takes place on an annual basis during spring and fall semesters. In 2023/2024, data collection took place between May 20 and June 6. The analysis of assessment data took place between June 7 and June 10.

2. Means of assessment and desired level of student achievement

(Must include at least one direct and one indirect method of assessment for each learning outcome.)

The graduate director contacts faculty members who are supervising master's theses or comprehensive exams in December and May to determine how well our students are doing. In addition, the graduate director conducts annual graduate student evaluations in May and June (for continuing students). This is a formal process, using evaluation forms developed by the graduate committee. These forms are designed to determine if the student is making satisfactory progress.

The same forms are also used to evaluate assistantship performance of the students who have been awarded graduate assistantships. The graduate director shares the results of the annual evaluations with the graduate committee, and asks the graduate committee for guidance in difficult cases. Subsequently, the graduate director uses the annual evaluations to submit the formal annual evaluation of a student's performance to the graduate school as required by university policy.

In 2012, graduate faculty approved the addition of a new committee responsible for developing, administering, and evaluating the quality of comprehensive examinations. The comprehensive examination committee consists of three tenure-track or tenured faculty members representing our two areas of concentration: general sociology and criminology. After the student has completed the process, the examination committee reports to the graduate director regarding whether the student passed the exam. The graduate director shares the results with the student and departmental faculty.

3. Reporting of results

(Must at least report annually to the Dean of college/school.)

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Results will be reported annually by July 15th

**2023/2024 Academic Assessment Report
Master of Arts Degree in Sociology
June 7, 2024**

Evaluation of Student Performance and Learning Outcomes

During the 2023/2024 academic year, the graduate program and the evaluation of student performance was conducted by the graduate program director. Between May 20, 2024 and June 6, 2024, the graduate director reviewed program completion data (MA Thesis defenses and comprehensive exams) and post-graduation (PhD program admission and employment) data for the graduating cohort, as well as course grades and cumulative GPA for each graduate student. This information was discussed with the Graduate Committee with respect to students who were not making satisfactory progress toward degree. The director also contacted (where possible) faculty members supervising the graduate assistants and/or serving as faculty advisors/thesis committee chairs. The faculty were asked to evaluate graduate assistant performance and graduate student progress toward completing the degree. This is a formal process using evaluation forms. Subsequently, the graduate director disseminated evaluations to graduate students and opened discussion (where requested) of the review. The graduate director used the evaluations to submit the formal annual evaluation of a student's performance to the Graduate School (due July 15). In addition, the graduate director initiated exit surveys via online survey software, Qualtrics. All eleven (11) graduating MA students were sent links to the survey via email. Participation in the survey was voluntary and no identifying information was gathered.

Student Performance Outcomes: New 2023/2024 Cohort

The new 2023/2024 cohort consisted of 11 graduate students, although one student matriculated into the program in the spring 2023 term because of issues securing a visa in time for fall 2022 attendance. This student is, therefore, considered part of the new cohort that began in fall 2023 because of required course sequencing. Of those students, all were funded through research and teaching assistantships. In addition, the department supported two students pursuing degrees in Social Work. All first-year cohort graduate students received positive marks on their assistantship performance, as well as positive evaluations of their progress toward the degree. The department supported several graduate students presenting research papers at the American Criminological Society annual meeting in Atlanta, GA, as well as the Arkansas Sociological and Anthropological Association.

Student Performance Outcomes: 2023 Graduating Cohort (Alumni Survey)

A. Satisfaction with MA in Sociology Program

The 2023 graduating cohort included eleven graduate students. Six graduate students (54.5%) completed the program assessment survey. These respondents indicated overwhelmingly that they would recommend our program to others. The average response score was 4.67 on a 1 to 5 scale. Overall, on all items, the results of the survey show a slight increase from the previous scores. We discuss the specific results below.

The survey results on other items were mixed. On some questions, students were either more than or equally satisfied as in prior years, but some items indicate a decline in student satisfaction. Below we highlight several questions with overall high levels of satisfaction:

- (1) content of required courses (average of 4.67 out of 5.0)
- (2) number of courses offered (average of 4.33 out of 5.0)
- (3) their ability to find faculty members with whom they could talk about professional matters (average of 4.33 out of 5.0)
- (4) quality of graduate teaching (average of 4.83 out of 5.0), and;
- (5) quality of assistantship experiences (average of 4.0 out of 5.0)

In contrast, a major issue raised by the students was the variety of elective courses offered (average of 3.83 out of 5.0).

B. Evidence that Intended General Educational Goals and Learning Outcomes Are Being Achieved Program Completion and Post-Graduation Outcomes

The MA Program in Sociology currently offers three graduation options, including the thesis option, the non-thesis practicum option, and the non-thesis option/comprehensive examination. In 2022, we have made several changes to the program, including revision to the non-thesis comprehensive exams and their scoring, as well as to the non-thesis practicum option. While our program continues to train MA students for entry into Ph.D. programs and academic careers, we have expanded opportunities for more applied sociology and criminology placement options. As such, and in conjunction with the consistent feedback for more elective course offerings, we are working to introduce additional elective courses, particularly as they relate to technical skill acquisition, writing and communication, and emerging substantive areas in the social sciences. In the 2023/2024 graduating cohort, all eleven students pursued the thesis option. Among the thesis students, nine had successfully defended their thesis by the time of this report with two having matriculated to a PhD program, two securing analyst positions, and two others matriculating into additional MA programs.

In sum, these outcomes provide evidence that our MA program offers the necessary foundation for professional competence or further training in professional or graduate schools (Program Goal #4).

General Learning Outcomes

According to the survey results, the department is generally meeting its educational program goals and student learning outcomes. Specifically, our graduate students indicate that they learned (1) to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different theoretical perspectives; (2) to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different research methods; (3) to gather information and interpret the meaning of this information; (4) to identify ethical issues in sociological research; (5) important differences in the life experiences of people; (6) to view society from an alternative or critical perspective; and (7) to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different research methods. The means for all responses were 4.0 or higher out of 5.0.

Specific Student Learning Outcomes

According to the data, our graduating students indicated a satisfactory degree of consistency between our stated learning objectives and student learning outcomes in terms of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students know and should be able to use upon program completion. Specifically, respondents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with a set of statements under the prompt: “Courses in my program helped me develop the following general skills...” (Student Learning Outcomes #2 and #3): critical thinking skills; effective communication skills; effective problem solving; effective reasoning; making evidence-based arguments; and analysis and computer skills.

Finally, responses indicate that our courses helped students develop other skills and intellectual abilities identified as the key components of what the program intends to accomplish. These outcomes are measured by a set of statements asking to indicate the level of agreement under the prompt: “Courses in my program helped me to develop an understanding of...” (Program Goal #4 and Learning Outcome #5). Respondents expressed high level of agreement with statements related to understanding of the sociological/ criminological perspective; the overall theoretical foundation of the discipline; the overall methodological foundations of the discipline; understanding of quantitative data analysis; and the overall methodological foundations of the discipline.

Qualitative Responses:

Three graduating MA student respondents provided qualitative feedback. Qualitative feedback was uniformly positive, though there was some additional comment about the availability of faculty mentors and the instability in the department during the fall and spring semesters. For example, one student noted that “every student had one of the same three faculty members on their thesis committee” while another student indicated that “some faculty were uninterested in working with students either because they didn’t have time or didn’t want to work on something other than their own research ideas.” Regarding instability, one student remarked that “it was hard to find a routine this year when all of the faculty were interviewing job applicants and then Dr. Bradley was removed.”

Summary and changes to degree/certificate planned or made on the basis of the assessment and analysis

Without exception, all first-year graduate students in the new cohort who continued in the program through the spring 2024 semester are making satisfactory progress. Regarding satisfaction with the program, most respondents have had positive experiences with the professors, were largely satisfied with advising and mentoring, and benefitted from graduate courses. Our primary areas for improvement continue to include expanding the number of elective courses offered in the program, an issue that was also noted by our graduating MA students. We have struggled with this issue for several years due to the introduction of two concentrations (general sociology and criminology in 2012) and the increasing competition for SSCHs that has led to an inward-orientation of academic units. Our graduate cohorts by themselves are sometimes too small to fill our elective classes associated with our

concentrations, particularly when our cohorts are unbalanced (e.g., larger first year cohort, but smaller second year cohort). To address this issue, we began to cross-list our graduate and senior-level undergraduate classes. However, the graduate faculty have diverging perspectives on this strategy and the department has prioritized a curriculum review to strategically resolve this issue. In other cases, the department has sought to offer fewer electives in any one semester but better identify the cornerstone courses that can be taken by both criminology- and sociology-track students alike.

Summary of what we the department has done to address to areas for improvement listed

The department chair through the early spring term, Dr. Mindy Bradley, and advisory committee prioritized a strategic review of both graduate and undergraduate curriculum across our department-serving majors. However, the removal of our chair in spring 2024 paused this effort. Should a new review be implemented, attention will be paid to the allocation of tenure- and tenure-track teaching to assess the extent to which the department might better utilize its limited resources for graduate teaching. This would include identifying additional cross-listed courses at the graduate level that could serve both tracks, while highlighting areas of redundancy in our instruction that could free up graduate teaching to serve more elective courses.