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SUBJECT: Review of the 2019-2020 Sociology Program Self Study

The sociology chair and department are to be commended for their thorough and detailed review document. The self-study document makes an excellent case for the program's alignment with institutional mission and the fact that the faculty are working hard and contributing to the university and the larger community. Class enrollments overall are reasonable, neither so small as to be unsustainable, nor so large as to put the lie to UH Hilo's promise of small class sizes.

Assessment

As has been noted in the self-study report, assessment of student learning continues to be an issue. Several assessments of key outcomes are missing. I agree with the ALO that "the self-study reflects the ongoing challenge of developing programmatic assessment in individual departments." The department should not be faulted for this; maintaining the required annual assessment activities would be an extremely heavy lift for a department with only four full-time faculty and no dedicated clerical support.

The Rubric for Assessing the Integration of Student Learning Assessment into Program Reviews enumerates four levels of assessment performance. To score 3 out of 4 on this rubric, a department must meet these standards:

- Faculty are required to provide the program's student learning outcomes, annual assessment studies, findings, and resulting changes.
- Internal and external reviewers analyze direct and indirect evidence of student learning in the program
- The campus generally integrates program reviews into planning and budgeting processes

- A well-qualified individual or committee provides annual feedback on the quality of outcomes, assessment plans, assessment studies, etc.
- The internal and external reviewers examine samples of student work, e.g., sample papers, portfolios, and capstone projects.

These expectations presuppose the availability of:

1. A reliable and ongoing system of collection, storage, cataloging, and retrieval of student artifacts over the years
2. Faculty reviewers able and willing to commit hours of their time evaluating these student artifacts
3. Appropriate and ongoing training for these reviewers so that their feedback is consistent and usable.
4. Enough play in the budget that resource allocation can reflect the findings of program reviews.
5. An individual or entity dedicated to reminding and persuading faculty to produce the artifacts and conduct the assessments
6. Readily available information from the institution on such measures as student time to degree, employment outcomes, and course substitutions and waivers.
7. A continuity mechanism to ensure that existing artifacts and assessments are not lost during a personnel transition.

The two main types of assessments are “homegrown” and standardized. Standardized assessments enable comparison across institutions, have been tested for validity and reliability, and minimize the burden on the faculty. However they cost \$25-35 per student. “Homegrown” assessments can be purpose-built and internally administered. They may measure specific skills or knowledge, or, as in this case, they can rely on work already done by students in the classroom. Using class artifacts is intended to ensure that students are motivated to do well and that what is being assessed is authentically connected to the program. In addition, the costs of “homegrown” assessment are largely borne by faculty in the form of extra workload. The department currently appears to rely exclusively on homegrown assessment of in-class work.

The administrative overhead required to do this well is more than what can be reasonably expected from an individual program. In fact, no evidence of student learning outcomes has been collected in several years, and what has been collected is not sufficient for meaningful assessment or action.

The program, like the university, has small cohorts with large variance. Collecting small samples from an already small and heterogeneous cohort is unlikely to yield meaningful results.

For meaningful assessment to take place, there must be institutional support for collecting, cataloging, and retrieving assessment-related material including student artifacts. The size and variance of the cohort precludes sampling; artifacts should be collected from every capstone class. It should be possible for artifacts to be retrieved and

evaluated over a span of years and compared year-to-year to gauge improvement. Institutional support could even enable collaboration among related fields.

Other options for making assessment results centralized and retrievable are

- Rely on a standardized outcome measure such as the Major Field Test in Sociology ([\\$25 per student](#)), and/or the CLA+ (\$35 per student).
- Revisit the Tennessee Tech Critical Thinking Assessment mentioned by Dr. Millman in the 2006 self-study ([\\$300 annually + \\$9.95/head minimum 50](#)). Tennessee Tech provides the forms but still requires faculty to do the actual assessment work. This is a sort of hybrid solution between standardized and homegrown assessment.

With ready access to retrievable year-over-year assessment results, I believe the department will be well-positioned to address other issues, such as:

- How can varying expectations within the department be reconciled? In the 2013-14 assessment of Written Communication/Critical Thinking, ten final papers drawn from a 400-level seminar averaged 1.7 (of a possible 4) in critical thinking, and the average score on all measures was below competent. However the modal final grade in the class was B+, and there were only two D's and one F in a class of 24. This suggests that expectations for grading are inconsistent with expectations for assessment.
- If students are consistently performing below an acceptable threshold, what, if anything, should be done about it?
- What are the expected enrollment and retention tradeoffs in trying to raise student performance?

Providing institutional support to programs will reduce redundant effort, improve access to assessment data, and demonstrate the institutional commitment to assessment that is necessary to starting and sustaining a “culture of assessment.”

Course Scheduling

Course scheduling appears to be generally well thought out and responsive to student demand. Although the department offers a large number of different upper-division electives, those generally have sufficient enrollment. Some internship sections enroll fewer than ten students, but internships are labor-intensive. Sociology's long-standing internship program is an exemplar of the hands-on learning at the heart of the university's mission.

To improve efficiency, the department has reduced the lower-division statistics/methods course, SOC 280, from twice to once a year. However, this does not hinder student progress because the SOC 280 requirement can be fulfilled with PSY 213. PSY 213 is taught at HawCC so students in the 2 + 2 path take the course at HawCC. PSY 213 also taught at UH Hilo, allowing SOC students to complete the requirement in either semester. The Criminology course is cross-listed with Political Science. These are two examples of student-friendly and resource-conserving collaborations among Social Sciences departments. There are no other collaborations or cross-listings at the moment that have

obvious potential, but I commend the department for arranging these and encourage them to keep alert for future opportunities to cooperate with other academic units.

Financial

Most of the expense of this department is personnel. The courses offered have attained sufficient enrollment, with very few single-digit enrollment courses. Some of these low-enrolled courses are internships, which are central to the identity and mission of the program and the university. SOC has experienced only a slight decline in major headcount and SSH, less severe than in other departments in the college. SOC is at their 2006 enrollment numbers, while some other units are below their 2006 numbers.

The department has relied on lecturers and an emergency-hire instructor over the past few years. While some use of lecturers can allow for fresh perspectives, the department's year-over-year reliance on an emergency-hire instructor indicates that a full-time position is warranted. The current instructor earns \$60,000 annually. The minimum annual salary for an I-2 is \$54,084 and for an I-3 is \$64,896. Having an assistant professor or continuing instructor in that position would be approximately budget-neutral and would provide a sense of stability to the department and the students.

I do not see much opportunity to cut costs or increase efficiency without compromising the reasonable class sizes and unique offerings (such as internships and the Island and Indigenous Sociology option) that distinguish the program and make it attractive to students.

Student Success

In 2019, The UH Foundation commissioned a report from EMSI on UH Hilo graduates' outcomes. They showed good outcomes for the Sociology graduates. In their sample, 99% of sociology graduates were employed. Thirty-eight percent of sociology graduates were employed in field at an average wage of \$77,344, and 61% were employed out of field at an average wage of \$50,508.

In the past two academic years, SOC has graduated 28 and 35 majors. UH Hilo does not have an agreed-upon formula for departmental graduation rate, so the department has used the ratio of graduates to current majors. They show a large proportion of majors graduating relative to other departments.

Faculty Service and Productivity

There are no concerns with faculty productivity. The junior members of the faculty are actively publishing. The senior faculty members are engaged in university and community service, internship supervision, and mentoring. All faculty members appear to be appropriately productive within their ranks and specialties.

Recommendations

The Sociology Department is to be commended for its thorough effort in this program review and for its thoughtful and innovative approach to curriculum. The department has

managed enrollment well, keeping courses at a reasonable size and finding opportunities to cross-list or substitute across departments. Since going from five full-time faculty to four, the department has relied on an emergency-hire instructor; this position should be converted to a continuing instructor or assistant professor. This would be budget-neutral and would restore stability for the students and the department.

My main recommendations have to do with effectiveness of, and institutional support for, assessment. The most striking finding to me in this process has been how much each small department is expected to do on its own. The institution should provide the following, preferably via a self-service dashboard:

- Time to completion. Time to completion graphs are supposed to be available in STAR student management but reports come up blank.
- Graduates' employment outcomes. The 2019 report I got from the Foundation was a one-off and there will not be updates.
- Information on overrides and substitutions. This can signal the need for a required course to be offered more frequently.
- Current and regularly-updated enrollment numbers
- The connection of artifacts to student records. With nameless, detached student artifacts, faculty can only guess at what is and isn't working in the curriculum, what specific issues transfer students might be having, the effect of a recently-introduced prerequisite, etc.

In addition, the institution should provide a central mechanism for collecting and archiving student artifacts and assessment results. There should be secure storage for artifacts, but storage is not enough. Assessment does not just happen. Someone has to remind faculty (often repeatedly) to collect and submit papers. Someone has to schedule getting faculty together to assess student artifacts. Someone has to store the artifacts in a meaningful, interpretable form. Someone has to be able to retrieve assessment results from previous years.

Finally, sampling only makes sense when there are large numbers to draw from. To obtain meaningful results from a program of this size, it makes sense to come as close as possible to assessing every graduating senior. Because there is no 400-level course that all SOC majors have in common, it is not obvious how the program can systematically assess most or all of their graduating seniors. This is something the program needs to work out unless there is a centralized assessment administered at the college or university level.

Once meaningful assessment results are available, these can and should be used in decision making, and the results of any changes should be evaluated. This is the "closing the loop" stage at which institutions often get stuck. Closing the loop is difficult when budgets are lean, when some stakeholders have a louder voice than others, or when goals may be in conflict (e.g. student learning vs. speed of degree progress, or scheduling efficiency vs. offering a uniquely mission-aligned degree option). But assessment must be more than an intermittent collection exercise. The most important thing UH Hilo can

do to cultivate a *culture of assessment* is to provide the tools and support to make meaningful assessment achievable and sustainable.