14 January 2016

TO: Pam Oliver, Professor and Chair, Department of Sociology
    Gary Green, Professor and Chair, Community and Environmental Sociology

FROM: John Karl Scholz, Dean (L&S)  
      Kathryn VandenBosch (CALS)

RE: Completion of Review of Graduate Programs in Sociology, including:
    Master of Science-Sociology
    Doctor of Philosophy

On November 17 and December 1, 2015, the Academic Planning Councils of the Colleges of Agricultural and Life Sciences and of Letters & Science considered the materials submitted in fulfillment of the mandated review of the graduate-level programs offered jointly by the Departments of Community and Environmental Sociology (CALS) and of Sociology (L&S). These materials included the departments’ self-study of the programs, the review committee report, and comments offered to correct errors of fact in that report.

Before we summarize the councils’ discussion, we would like to thank you and everyone else who participated in the review. Though the review process has been streamlined (as has our colleges’ approach to jointly considering review materials), it still requires effort and attention to prepare the self-study, to discuss it, and to work with the review committee. Thank you.

In the case of the Sociology graduate programs, council members and observers were impressed by the quality of the self-study you and your colleagues prepared. In it, you conveyed a wealth of information with careful attention paid not only to the nuts and bolts of the degree programs, but also to the intellectual and environmental contexts in which the programs are offered. The councils appreciated your collective ability to reflect constructively on the current state of the graduate programs, as well as how and how well they serve students — and, of course, we also appreciate and share your pride in the quality of your students and in the program overall. Further, the Councils were generally impressed by the constructive partnership between your two departments, which was described by observers as a “model” for cross-college partnerships.

The self-study provides a useful explication of the many ways in which graduate-level education is engaged in frequent opportunities to assess individual student learning, which is used...
effectively to evaluate their progress. The details provided about these milestones are appropriate to graduate education, and from the perspective of the student, they provide frequent opportunities for feedback, mentoring, and adjustment. From the perspective of program-level assessment, however, it is unclear whether the program faculty monitors more generally patterns related to student progress, examining the behavior of students as a whole. This sort of assessment might inform the approach the program committee may take to address some of the issues identified in the self-study (such as reducing time to degree) and on which the review committee also offered advice.

The APCs regard the review committee report as thorough and fair; they find in it useful counsel about matters the program faculty should monitor and, if necessary, work to improve. Indeed, you and your colleagues are already taking action on several recommendations: development of a comprehensive Graduate Program “Handbook”, articulating more clearly grievance procedures, revisiting the work of the proseminar and the assignment of first-year mentors. The councils noted your response to the committee’s recommendations related to master’s thesis guidelines and preliminary examinations, and would suggest that while the review committee’s specific suggestions may not be adopted, it could be useful for you and your colleagues to continue to examine these matters and seek to understand and address any underlying issues you may find (as it appears you are already doing).

We encourage you to continue working on your long-standing (and laudable) efforts to recruit and retain minority students; we hope you will also continue to examine and clarify policies and practices that may be confusing to your students. As always, we anticipate that you will discuss concerns about hiring priorities and facilities with your Associate Deans.

The CALS and L&S Academic Planning Councils were pleased to consider this review complete. We join them in thanking you and your colleagues for helping us to better understand the past, present, and future of the outstanding graduate programs offered through this important partnership between the departments of Community and Environmental Sociology and Sociology.

xc:
Greg Downey, Associate Dean for the Social Sciences, L&S
Marty Gustafson, Assistant Dean for Academic Planning and Assessment, Graduate School
Elaine M. Klein, Assistant Dean for Academic Planning, L&S
Daniel Kleinman, Associate Dean, Graduate School
Jocelyn Milner, Director of Academic Planning and Institutional Research
Richard Straub, Senior Associate Dean, CALS
July 28, 2015

To: John Karl Scholz, Dean, College of Letters & Science

From: Patricia Devine, Psychology (Committee Chair)  
Steven Deller, Agriculture and Applied Economics  
Tracy Schroepfer, Social Work (GFEC Representative)

RE: Review of Sociology Graduate Program

CC: Greg Downey, Associate Dean, College of Letters & Science  
Elaine M. Klein, Assistant Dean for Academic Planning, L&S  
Daniel Kleinman, Associate Dean for Social Studies, Graduate School

This report responds to an invitation by the Dean of the College of Letters & Science to provide an evaluation of the Graduate Program of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Sociology. The review committee was made up of Patricia Devine of the Department of Psychology, Steven Deller of the Department of Agriculture and Applied Economics, and Tracy Schroepfer of the School of Social Work, who also served as the GFEC representative on the committee.

As part of our process, committee members reviewed the Department’s recent self-study and additional departmental materials, and met with the representatives of the Department staff who support the graduate program, faculty from all ranks (including representatives of the committee who prepared the self study and the Department Chair) and students at various stages of their progress through the program. These meetings occurred over a four-week span (specifically we held 11 separate meetings on April 7, April 8, April 15, April 20, April 21, April 23, and April 29). Overall, the department was accommodating in helping to schedule our meetings. Though we met with a wide range of department members, we would have liked to meet with a greater number of both faculty and graduate students. Those with whom the committee did meet were thoughtful, clear, and forthcoming about their views on the program. Our review prioritizes attention to the graduate program level, as well as key strategic issues for the Department.

Department of Sociology Graduate Program
Currently there are 36 faculty members in the Department of Sociology and 13 faculty members in the Department of Community and Environmental Sociology (formerly the Department of Rural Sociology). At the present time, there are 150 students enrolled in the program. Only students who intend to pursue a Ph.D. are considered for admission; students are not admitted
they are only interested in obtaining a Masters degree. Review and decisions about admission to the program are centralized and are made by a committee of three to four faculty members. The goal is to admit the highest quality students who have the potential to design and carry out primary social science research without regard to prior experience in the field of sociology or specific scholarly foci. All degree requirements are detailed on the website with suggested completion dates. Students are expected to complete course work by the end of the 8th semester, their Masters Thesis requirement prior to the 5th semester, and their preliminary examinations by the end of the 8th semester.

The Graduate Program has a long and distinguished history of excellence. For decades, the program has been one of the top ranked programs in the United States. The committee was impressed with the evidence that suggests that this tradition of excellence is continuing (e.g., quality of publication outlets, quantity of publications, citation counts, research funding, etc.). The program’s strong reputation stems largely from the high quality and influential scholars who make up the faculty (pages 5-17). The primary goal of the Graduate Program is to train students for scholarly careers and reflective of these goals is the organization of the course work and major degree requirements. The degree requirements are intended to provide students with the flexibility necessary to create individualized programs to suit their specific interests and goals.

The program is also well known for providing a breath of opportunities for students to develop their scholarly interests. Owing to the extensiveness in scholarly foci of the faculty, students are exposed to a wide range of sub-disciplinary areas. Students are encouraged to sample broadly, both within and outside the department, and the department supports students changing fields and advisors as their interests develop. The faculty has created a very strong curriculum that provides students with a solid foundation in theory, methods, and a wide range of content areas. The mentoring philosophy in the department emphasizes “collective responsibility for students rather than an apprenticeship system” (p. 1 of Program Self Study). For students entering the department who are well prepared and who have clear goals, this set of circumstances creates an ideal context for enabling independent and innovative scholarship.

The program is experiencing a number of challenges, some of which are common to graduate programs across the university and some of which are unique to Sociology’s graduate program. Against a backdrop of budget cuts, Sociology, like many departments, has decreased in size. To date, despite the decrease in the faculty size, the department has maintained a competitive edge as revealed in recent national rankings. It will be important to ensure that further downsizing of the program does not jeopardize the integrity of the program or the program’s national ranking. The program continues to attract high quality graduate students. We met with students who spanned years in the program. The committee was impressed with these students; they were bright, thoughtful, reflective and highly professional. Like other departments, the sociology graduate program faces challenges with regard to the level of the university funding available for graduate student stipends. Our University’s packages (fellowships, TAs, etc.) are quite small compared with many of the Sociology program’s competitors. Combined with other relatively recent changes in the department’s student funding, most notably the shift to a full funding model, the program is concerned that it may lose its competitive edge in graduate student recruitment.
Funding. Prior to 2009, students were admitted with quality of scholarship being the primary consideration and funding a secondary consideration. Under that model, some students were admitted with funding guarantees, whereas other students were offered no guarantee of funding. Even without the guarantee of funding, the vast majority of the students secured funding of some sort, sometimes outside the department where their skills sets made them attractive candidates for positions across campus. Since 2009, all students are now being admitted with a guarantee of five years of financial support through a combination of teaching, research and project assistantships. Furthermore some students secure university fellowships and national awards. To ensure that all incoming students have university or departmental funding, the department also made the decision not to allow self-funded students to enroll.

Although general consensus exists that moving to this funding model was necessary, this change has proven to have both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that incoming students are guaranteed funding for five years and so need not spend time finding their own source of funding. A disadvantage, however, is that the funding change has led to a dramatic reduction in the number of students admitted to the program and has placed the program in stiffer competition with other programs for a comparatively smaller set of students. Faculty are concerned that because fewer students are admitted, the program may be losing out on potential superstar students who would have been admitted under the old funding model. At this time, the first cohort of students admitted under the full funding model have not completed the program and so the overall benefits and challenges created by this change have not been fully evaluated.

Recruitment and Retention of Minority Faculty and Students. Despite efforts to diversify the Department’s faculty and student populations, challenges remain; these challenges are not unique to the Sociology Program. Indeed, recruitment and retention of minority scholars and students remains a perennial challenge for our campus. Both a relative lack of financial and other resources, as well as a fairly homogenous campus and city, combine to create challenges for recruitment of minority scholars and students. The Department’s and indeed the University’s, relatively low success rates for faculty recruitment fails to insure that the minority students we do recruit have a ready supply of role models. As a result, minority and first generation students can feel isolated and disenfranchised. From what Review Committee members could surmise from the majority and minority students’ perspective, the variability in faculty and students’ cultural sensitivity to the minority and first generation student experience sometimes results in microaggressions. Though these challenges are not unique to Sociology, the Program recognizes in the self-study the importance of continually working to address these issues.

Departmental Climate. Amidst these changes and challenges, the overall climate in the department appears to be positive. All department members (faculty, students, staff) appreciate that the culture is not strongly hierarchical. Students report that faculty members are open and receptive to meeting with them and the faculty appears to be equally open and encouraging of student contact. Students we met with generally agreed that most faculty members have an “open door” policy that helps create a stronger sense of community within the department. The staff we met with experience the environment to be collegial and report feeling respected and appreciated. They feel they are supporting an important program and they like the faculty and students whose work they seek to support.
Concerns Regarding the Sociology Graduate Program

Although we were able to validate many of the strengths and challenges in the Department’s self-study, some overarching concerns not noted in the self-study emerged from our review. First, the Graduate Program is large and complex and not as integrated as the report suggests. Second, the Program’s model of collective responsibility for graduate training does not adequately take into account the variability in students’ preparation for graduate study. Third, aside from required coursework, there is minimal structure and guidance early on in the program with regard to the professional development of students such as writing grants, research and preparation of scholarly writing. Fourth, the Review Committee noted that though the guidelines for progression through the program are clearly specified on the Program’s website, inconsistency exists with regard to the faculty’s adherence to these guidelines resulting in confusion for students. Fifth, our program review highlighted issues with the prelim examination processes. Sixth, communication in the department, particularly from the students’ perspective, is problematic. Seventh, overall, the department has been a bit slow to adjust aspects of the Graduate Program to the changing landscape of the academic job market, relying perhaps too strongly on its long-standing reputation of being the top 1 or 2 program in the country. Together these concerns may conspire to create the relatively long time to degree (i.e., average of 8 years) and the perception that students are not fully prepared to be competitive on the job market. We will elaborate on these issues below and offer some recommendations.

Department Integration

The graduate program is large and, as expected, complex; however, what students noted as challenging is the lack of integration across the programs that make up the Graduate Program: Community & Environment Sociology, Demography, and Sociology. Although faculty and students regard the breadth and depth of the program as a strength providing a wide range of scholarly opportunities, students spoke of how the lack of integration can lead to unnecessary confusion for them, particularly for incoming and minority and first generation students. For example, students expressed the view that program offerings (e.g., seminars and brownbags) outside their stated areas of study are not always open to them, though faculty felt these opportunities were available to all students.

Recommendations: To address the issue of integration, we recommend that in orientation or in the fall of the first year proseminar that students be made aware of the three programs that comprise the Graduate Program and that the boundaries between the programs are permeable. For example, a discussion of how the brown bag seminars in each program are available to all graduate students and where to obtain information about these opportunities would help to eliminate confusion. Due to the complex structure of the Graduate Program, it is important that students have a clear conceptual map of the interrelationships among the three programs.

Need for mentoring early

The central theme that emerged from our discussions with faculty, students, and staff is that what are perhaps the program’s biggest strengths – the breadth of coverage and flexibility – create the biggest challenges for students, particularly during their early tenure in the program. This challenge is exacerbated by the program’s model of graduate student mentoring and the considerable variability in students’ preparation for graduate study.
Review and decisions about admission to the program are centralized and made by a committee of three to four faculty members). The goal is to admit the highest quality students who have the potential to design and carry out primary social science research without regard to prior experience in the field of sociology or specific scholarly foci. Though this strategy leads to the admission of bright students with enormous potential, students do not enter the program on equal footing. For example, some students enter the program having obtained a bachelor’s degree and others have also obtained a Master’s degree. In addition, some students have majored in sociology whereas others have no background or coursework work in sociology.

When students arrive, they are not assigned an individual advisor. The Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) serves as the advisor to the entire cohort of first students during the first year of graduate study. The model of collective responsibility for graduate training follows from the working assumption is that each faculty member would be willing to supervise any student with whom they have overlapping interests. It is the students’ responsibility, with the support of the DGS, to explore their interests and to identify one or more faculty members to serve as mentors to supervise their research and facilitate their professional development more broadly. The DGS is meant to meet with all first year students and to guide them toward faculty members with whom they may share interests as a way to encourage students to begin working on research related activities.

The DGS’s role as an advisor to all first students is not working as envisioned. The committee found it dubious that one person could effectively mentor a large cohort of first year students (range of 13 – 25 in recent years). Moreover, it became evident that meetings with the DGS outside the first year pro-seminar (see below) rarely occur. As such, many students flounder amidst the broad set of enriching opportunities available to them. Though students are required to select a mentor by the beginning of the second year, students often do not feel prepared to make this decision and the requirement is not always met.

**Recommendation:** The committee recommends that the model of first year mentorship be changed and that students be assigned upon admission to a faculty advisor the first year. We want to be clear that we are not recommending an apprenticeship system. We do not believe that a match in specific scholarly interests is essential for the student to benefit from having a faculty advisor the first year. Indeed, we would envision much of the first year exploration of students’ interests to unfold as the program encourages (e.g., students spend time exploring the field and figuring out what kind of research interests them). The goal of the recommended change is provide students with a bit more guidance and structure during the first year to enhance their socialization into the department and to ensure that students are making progress toward identifying their scholarly interests and mentors who can later serve the role as the primary research mentor.

As a corollary recommendation, we encourage the department to evaluate its distribution of students to advisors in years following the first year. Though all faculty are eligible to serve as advisors to students, the distribution of students to faculty is decidedly uneven with some faculty having 0 advisees and one faculty member having 19 advisees (see files titled Table 1 Distribution Advisees among Faculty.xlsx and Table 2 Distribution of Dissertators among Faculty.xlsx). Of course, some of this likely reflects student interests overlapping with faculty
interests. It is worth considering whether this distribution serves the students most effectively and whether there is reason for concern over uneven workload for faculty. This latter concern would be particularly important for the junior faculty who may be distracted from their scholarly pursuits and progress toward tenure if they have too many advisees.

**Need for professional development earlier in program**

In efforts to provide students with background in the field and exposure to faculty research interests, first year students are required to enroll in the first year pro-seminar. The pro-seminar meets weekly during the first semester of graduate study and is organized by the Director of Graduate Studies. The DGS invites faculty from throughout the department to participate in the pro-seminar. From what we could gather, participation is a bit uneven. Whereas some faculty members regularly participate others rarely, if ever, participate. The pro-seminar was created to introduce students to the faculty and to the breadth of research being conducted in the department, with a secondary goal of fostering a sense of being a cohort and a community. Though the goals are laudable, neither goal seems to be achieved as envisioned. Several of the people we met with, including students and faculty, suggested that the pro-seminar could be revamped in ways that would be more immediately useful to students and in ways that may address a perceived lack of attention to professional development early in the program.

In an apprenticeship system, these issues are attended to through direct mentoring of the student by an assigned advisor. Given the commitment to collective mentoring, it is important to create the infrastructure that will ensure that students receive this information early and have it reinforced throughout their training. The Review Committee got the sense that the students did not have a clear roadmap for what it means to be (1) a successful sociology graduate student or (2) a successful professional in the field. By year 4 or 5, students are starting to develop an idea about these issues but it would behoove the department to create the opportunities early so that they can make progress toward these objectives much earlier in their graduate careers.

There was a general sense, again from students and faculty, that the time spent in this seminar would be more effective if it addressed themes of professionalization, including but not limited to how to conceptualize a research question, how to make contacts with faculty, what is expected to be a scholar in the field, what is needed to get a job, how to apply for funding, and what is involved in the publication process. Students expressed concern that they may not be competitive on the job market because they have too few publications, grants, and conference presentations. As such, students would benefit from information that may more directly help them understand how to be an effective student, scholar, and successful professional.

We should note that there are efforts underway to enhance students’ professionalization, such as the writing course recently proposed. The course is designed to help students convert their Master’s Theses or other work into publishable articles and to provide students with an understanding of the publication process. The timing of the proposed course is fairly late in the curriculum (e.g., third year) and students stressed need for attention to such professionalization activities earlier in the program. Details on this course proposal were provided to the committee and the proposal was to be considered in a Department meeting at some point in the late spring semester (see documents titled Professional Training final.docx and Writing Course Proposal draft.docx). The Review Committee is unaware of the outcome of these deliberations.
Another related professionalization issue is the concern expressed by faculty and students regarding long-term plans to ensure the offering of the teaching and proposed writing courses. Currently, there is a single faculty member close to retirement who is committed to teaching these two professionalization courses. Interviews with faculty revealed that there is no plan in place for the continuation of these critical courses.

**Recommendation:** We recommend that the department revamp the first year pro-seminar to more effectively meet the students’ professionalization needs. This could be achieved in a variety of ways. One possibility might be creating a year long pro-seminar that blends faculty research presentations with sessions addressing professionalization. Another might be to focus the first semester pro-seminar on general themes that cut across sub disciplines but are critical to becoming a professional in the field as well as professionalization. Department members are in a better position than the review committee to map out the new pro-seminar.

The committee also recommends developing a plan to incentivize the teaching of the professionalization courses. In addition, we recommend that these courses be offered early enough in the program to enable the students reap the benefits in building their scholarly profile.

**Guidelines for Progression through the Program**
We found that though the guidelines for progression through the program are specified on the Program’s website, students expressed concerns. These concerns include 1) no graduate student handbook exists that encapsulates all guidelines; 2) information on the Department’s grievance policy is minimal and lacks sufficient detail; and 3) inconsistency exists with regard to the faculty’s adherence to guidelines for the Master’s thesis.

*Handbook for Graduate Study.* The self-study (pages 2, 3 & 4) outlines the general thesis, prelim and dissertation guidelines for graduate students and detailed information is located on the Sociology Graduate Program website. In interviews with first through eighth year students, it was reported that currently no graduate student handbook is available to them such that all information can be easily located and printed if desired. When interviewed, the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) reported that a handbook should be ready by this summer; however, the other faculty members and staff we spoke with were not aware of this.

**Recommendation:** We recommend that a Sociology Graduate Student Handbook be prepared. To this end, the Department could consult the graduate program handbook template that is available the Graduate School's Knowledge Base (http://kb.wisc.edu/gsadminkb/page.php?id=34123).

*Grievance Procedure.* Faculty members and students who were interviewed by the Review Committee reported a lack of guidance regarding a grievance process. We could find no information in the self-study addressing grievance process issues. A number of students noted that some information was available online addressing misconduct and grade appeals; however, they felt the information lacked sufficient detail regarding the steps students must take in order to file a grievance. Other students reported a lack of awareness or knowledge as to where they would find such information. Students also spoke about instances in the Department of
microaggressions, sexual harassment, sexism, classism and racism, and felt they lacked information on what to do when these issues arise. Faculty report that the Department’s grievance process is informal, and that each course syllabus specifies that issues should be taken to the student’s major professor and then the department chair, if necessary.

**Recommendation:** Based on these interviews, we recommend that the department more fully develop their grievance process and include it in the new Sociology Graduate Student Handbook.

**Adherence to Master’s Thesis Guidelines.** Students also reported that the details regarding the Master’s Thesis are on the web; however, often faculty members do not follow the guidelines, leaving students confused and their progress through the program impeded. For example, incoming students who have completed a thesis in another master’s program can go through Sociology’s Primary Master’s waiver process (see page 3). The guidelines state that the student will submit their thesis to a three-member waiver committee selected for their expertise on the subject. What is not clear is who selects the committee members and how the process unfolds. According to students, it is the incoming student’s responsibility to find faculty members to serve on the waiver committee; however, this process is reported by students to be arbitrary. Students reported that they could “shop around” for faculty who would both agree to pass the thesis. As such, there appears to be unevenness in the standards for what is considered an acceptable thesis. In the self-study, it is stated, “the committee evaluates the thesis and determines whether it meets departmental standards” (p. 3); however, what those standards are is unknown to newly admitted students. Furthermore, nowhere in the thesis waiver guidelines are these standards detailed. Students reported spending an inordinate amount of time in their first year attempting to work through the waiver process.

**Recommendation:** Therefore, we recommend that the Master’s Thesis guidelines be revised to include the following: (1) more detailed information on who creates the Master’s Thesis Waiver Committee and (2) clearly articulated standards for what constitutes an acceptable thesis that warrants an exemption from the formal Master’s Thesis requirement. The new standards should be delineated in the Sociology Graduate Student Handbook and be adhered to by all faculty members.

**Preliminary Examination Process**

Several issues concerning Sociology’s prelim process surfaced in interviews with faculty, staff and students. Similar to the thesis process, there is variability in faculty adherence to the prelim guidelines posted on the Department’s website. Students interviewed reported a lack of transparency concerning the process and lack of consistency across faculty members in how the process unfolds. Whereas some students are provided with guidance in developing an appropriate reading list, others receive none. In many cases, committee members are not known until close to exam time making it difficult for students to properly prepare for the exam. Though students have access to old exams, this is often not helpful because the committee has changed and, hence, the content of the exam may change. Students report that they found the grading of prelims to be uneven. In reflecting on the prelim process, students and faculty agreed that students often get bogged down at this juncture in the program and, as a result, their progress toward degree completion is impeded.
Our discussion revealed an additional concern with prelims, one that focuses particularly on first generation, minority and international students. Students and faculty noted that the prelim failure rates are higher for these students as compared to majority students. The Review Committee requested additional data from the Graduate Advisor on the prelim failure rates and this concern was verified (see filed titled Table 3 Prelim Pass and Fail Rates 2010-2014.xlsx and Table 7 Additional Prelim Information 2014-15.xlsx). We also noted that failure rates were higher for some topic areas (e.g., gender) than others.

A related issue reported by faculty and students is that there are too many prelim topic categories and often too few faculty members knowledgeable in some of these categories to create or evaluate the prelim exams.

Finally, our discussions with faculty revealed a lack of consensus amongst them with regard to how the preliminary examinations should be conducted. Many faculty members agreed, however, that a major overhaul of the prelim process is necessary.

**Recommendation:** We recommend that the prelim process be overhauled to ensure that there is transparency and consistency throughout the process. We also recommend that informational sessions on the prelim process be held for those students preparing for prelims in hopes of reducing the significant failure rate. Furthermore, we recommend that the faculty review the current list of prelim topic areas and streamline the list based on available faculty expertise.

**Communications**
Communication in the department, particularly from the students’ perspective, is problematic. Students consider the breadth and depth of the department a strength; however, communicating the resulting breadth of opportunities appears to be challenging for the Department. Communication appears to have a hit or miss quality as many students reported being unaware of available funding opportunities, brown bag seminars, guest speaker, and job opportunities. The traditional use of a single “blast e-mail” does not appear to be sufficient due to the large volume of email received by students. Students reported that the lack of clear communication often leaves a void that is filled with speculation and rumor, which can lead to misinformation and greater confusion amongst the students. It can also unwittingly lead some students to feel disenfranchised. Based on interviews with faculty, the faculty appears not to be aware of the communication problem, as many faculty members felt that current practices were sufficient for sharing opportunities with students.

To illustrate the lack for faculty awareness of some communication issues, the self-study celebrated the graduate student “intranet” and indicated how important it was in facilitating students’ access to important information. Through discussions with students, we discovered that few students had visited the site and those who had visited the site reported that it lacked any content. Though potentially a useful tool for sharing information, it appears to be a missed opportunity. Furthermore, there appears to be a perceived lack of ownership of this resource and thus no one has assumed responsibility for populating, updating or maintaining it.

Another communication issue reported by students centers on knowledge on and participation in department committees. Students reported that they are unaware of what committees exist in the
department or the potential role they can play on a committee. Furthermore some students noted that if an invitation is extended to serve on a department committee and the student responds expressing interest, communication is often problematic. For example, students report that they do not receive information regarding their committee assignment and if they are aware of the committee to which they are assigned, they do not receive communication regarding committee meetings.

**Recommendations:** For the department to meet its goals of ensuring that students are informed and aware of opportunities, we recommend that the department devote effort to creating effective communication strategies across the programs within the Graduate Program. We also recommend that they develop a strategy to be more complete and consistent in communications with the students. While it is understandable that each program area (e.g., CES, demography, Havens Center, etc.) maintains its own identity and web presence, it is important that the department’s homepage be a central clearinghouse for all events and announcements.

For the intranet to achieve its intended role, it might be helpful to assign a faculty member to serve as a consultant. The faculty consultant can assist students in determining the types of information that can be shared on the intranet, as well as provide advice on how to best use the site.

To encourage students to participate in department committees, we recommend that in the first semester proseminar, students be provided with a list of all department committees, as well as information regarding the committees on which they can serve. Students could be encouraged to serve on departmental committees as part of their professional development. Furthermore, we recommend that a communication system be established that allows for notification to students of the need for committee student representation, confirmation of their committee assignment, and notification by the committee chair of meeting dates and times, etc.

**Changing Job Market for Graduates**
The department has a strong tradition of placing students into R1 universities and this remains the faculty’s primary target for current and future placements. The academic job market has been changing over the past few decades and other top ranked sociology departments have become more competitive in placement of recent graduates. The Sociology Graduate Program, however, has been slow to adjust to this changing market and increased competition. Students interviewed indicated that the Department’s current approach to job preparation and placement is problematic in two ways. First, those students who do wish to be employed at a R1 university do not feel that their professional profiles are competitive. Consistent with the students concerns, several faculty members expressed similar concerns, noting that other top programs in the nation have made adjustment to their training programs to ensure that their students are successful in this highly competitive market. Faculty and students both expressed the need for more attention given to the number and quality of publications necessary for them to complete on the job market. Second, students and faculty noted that the market, by necessity, has been broadened to include other non-R1 academic positions and non-academic positions. Students reported that when they show interest in these types of positions, they feel that many faculty members are disparaging of these opportunities. In addition, they feel that training for success in these types of positions is lacking.
**Recommendations:** The Review Committee believes that students and faculty members’ concerns regarding students’ competitiveness for R1 positions could largely be addressed by the recommendations included earlier in this report concerning the revamping of the proseminar and need for earlier professionalization opportunities.

Against the backdrop of a broadened job market, the Review Committee recommends that the faculty show respect for the full spectrum of job opportunities through the provision of sufficient training and support for these opportunities. For example, the program could provide students with exposure to a broader range of professional employment opportunities earlier in their program, as well as invite alumni in non-academic or predominately teaching positions to present career advice in brownbags. Students entering the job market could also be coached on how to interview effectively for non-academic and teaching positions.

**Summary and Recommendations**
Our overall assessment of the Sociology Graduate Program is that it continues to be a vibrant and strong program. Although the self-study was compelling with regard to the quality and productivity of the faculty, it was less specific or clear on a number of issues related to student development and progress through the program. Comments from staff who support the graduate program, faculty, and students led the Review Committee to offer a number of recommendations. We strongly believe that these recommendations will enhance the overall experience for students and insure their timely progress through the program, as well as enable them to develop a professional profile that results in their success both on the job market and in their post-graduate school careers.
TO: John Karl Scholz, Dean, College of Letters & Science  
FROM: Pamela E. Oliver, Chair, Department of Sociology  
        Gary Green, Chair, Department of Community & Environmental Sociology  
CC:   Greg Downey, Associate Dean, College of Letters & Science  
        Elaine M. Klein, Assistant Dean for Academic Planning, L&S  
        Daniel Kleinman, Associate Dean for Social Studies, Graduate School  

Dear Dean Scholz,

This letter is written in response to the Review of the Sociology Graduate Program conducted earlier this year. We appreciate very much the careful and thoughtful review of our program by Profs. Devine, Deller, and Schroepfer. We welcomed this opportunity to continue to consider improvements to our graduate program.

We also wish to call to the attention of the review committee, the College of Letters and Science, and the Graduate School the unfortunate language used throughout the program review of referring to the sociology program as “the department” when it is, in fact, a joint program run by two departments. We quote the language of the review when it uses the word “department” but in our response use the correct language “program” or “departments.”

The Review was read by members of the Sociology Graduate Program Committee, chaired by Prof. John DeLamater, and by many of the faculty. The Committee prepared a summary of the issues raised by the Review. This summary was the focus of an extended discussion by the Joint Departments (Sociology and Community and Environmental Sociology) Faculty on September 16. We explored various options, and reached consensus on many of the issues. The consensus was summarized in a subsequent document, and reviewed by interested member of the faculty. In the interest of brevity, we limit this reply to listing of the recommendations by the Committee (in italics) and our response.

Recommendations: To address the issue of integration, we recommend that in orientation or in the fall of the first year proseminar that students be made aware of the three programs that comprise the Graduate Program and that the boundaries between the programs are permeable.

The proseminar has already been including more professional socialization content in recent years. In response to this and other recommendations, we agreed that we will further revise the content of the first-year proseminar. The proseminar will devote explicit attention to the structure of the Graduate Program and its various components (Sociology, CDE/CDHA, CES), the importance of brownbags [training seminars] and participation in them, and the permeability of the boundaries of various area and units.

One of the great strengths of the sociology program is that it provides a single flexible umbrella under which students may pursue diverse programs of study that are typically housed in different degree programs (particularly Demography and what used to be called Rural Sociology). This flexible umbrella allows students to combine areas of inquiry from different programs.
**Recommendation:** The committee recommends that the model of first year mentorship be changed and that students be assigned upon admission to a faculty advisor the first year.

We will assign a faculty mentor to each student at the time s/he is admitted to the Program. We will attempt to assign one of the faculty the applicant mentions in his/her materials, subject to availability, but the faculty named in application materials tend to be a small subset of the total faculty, so this works against the goal of spreading advising more broadly. The mentor will maintain regular contact and provide orientation and guidance during (at least) the student’s first year in the program. We will continue to encourage students to pick a faculty advisor by the end of the first-year in the Program. This may be the mentor, or another faculty member. Some faculty and students expressed positive experiences with having a faculty mentor who was NOT their main advisor.

The Review suggested that we evaluate the distribution of students to advisors. We have recognized that there is an imbalance for some time. This results from our policy that students choose their own advisors and the fact that the proportions of students interested in specific specialty areas does not match the proportion of faculty in each area. It is exacerbated by leaves in specific years. We are mindful of the problem, and encourage students to have a second advisor. The advisor with the largest number of advisees (Erik Olin Wright, a past president of the American Sociological Association and a professor known for his enjoyment of intellectual involvement with students) typically arranges for his advisees to have a co-advisor as well, so the distribution is not as imbalanced as the statistics would appear.

**Recommendation:** We recommend that the department revamp the first year pro-seminar to more effectively meet the students’ professionalization needs. This could be achieved in a variety of ways.

As noted above, we are already evolving the content of the proseminar to focus on orientation to the Program and professionalization topics of specific relevance to first-year students. We prepared and fielded a weekly Professionalization seminar (Soc. 995) this fall which was taught as an overload by a senior faculty member, but had to be canceled due to lack of student attendance—only one student enrolled and no more than three students ever attended. We are revisiting the content and format. Plans are to require such a seminar in the second year after we find a content and format that meets student needs.

The faculty also approved a proposal in 2015 to provide an elective course focused on professional writing and publishing. We are attempting to implement this in Spring 2016, but budget reductions and a large number of faculty leaves are making this difficult. We are still investigating working models for this.

**Recommendation:** We recommend that a Sociology Graduate Student Handbook be prepared.

The information about various requirements and timelines that the report references has been available online for several years. We are pulling it all together and will post it prominently as a “Handbook” as well as make it available in printed form for those who want it. We hope to have this completed by January 1, 2016.

**Recommendation:** Based on these interviews, we recommend that the department more fully develop their grievance process and include it in the new Sociology Graduate Student Handbook.
We are aware of the issues that the Review discusses under the umbrella of grievances, which in our view combines two different issues: individual student grievances and more systemic issues (grievances) involving matters of race and class and overall climate.

Regarding the more general issue of creating grievance procedures when an individual student has grievance, we agree that this should be done and will take steps to create clear language regarding appropriate steps for a student to take. The grievance procedure will likely involve the steps of first appealing to the faculty member or committee who made the adverse decision, then to the graduate director and/or the Academic Standing Committee, then to the full faculty of the graduate program.

Regarding the more general issues of climate, the Minority Recruitment and Retention Committee (MRRC), which has worked hard for more than a decade to address these problems. It has worked for changes that benefit all students but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We had an outside evaluator work with us five or so years ago, and more recently completed a climate survey. The MRRC puts on a town hall meet to the joint program faculty every spring which reports on the state of the department with respect to faculty hiring and student recruitment and retention. Some minority students have expressed the desire that there not be public discussion of issues of disparities in prelim passing rates and other matters of concern for underrepresented groups for fear of worsening stereotypes about minorities. These are delicate issues and we continue to work with them in full collaboration with the MRRC.

**Recommendation:** Therefore, we recommend that the Master’s Thesis guidelines be revised to include the following: (1) more detailed information on who creates the Master’s Thesis Waiver Committee and (2) clearly articulated standards for what constitutes an acceptable thesis that warrants an exemption from the formal Master’s Thesis requirement. The new standards should be delineated in the Sociology Graduate Student Handbook and be adhered to by all faculty members.

We have a written statement of general standards in our current rules. We also specify the procedure for seeking a waiver. As the Review Committee notes, we have a variety of programs and sub-areas within the two departments that make up the program. Each has its own standards of scholarship. A student doing a Master’s thesis or seeking a waiver of the Master’s in a specific subarea needs to meet the standards of scholarship in that area. The methodologies and standard ways of writing vary across the diverse subfields of sociology which include but are not limited to social psychology experiments; quantitative analysis of survey, Census, and public data; comparative historical research using archival materials; machine processing and quantitative analysis of textual materials; qualitative depth interviews; and deep immersion ethnography. Some subfields of sociology are characterized by high levels of coauthorship and collaboration, while in others single scholars collect data alone in the field and write sole-authored manuscripts. Inevitably, standards vary and faculty information and advice to students reflects the area of the field in which they work. This is a point which will be emphasized more in the proseminar. We have reminded the faculty within each sub-area of the need for consistent interpretation and advice.
We will seek to do outreach to clarify that a master’s thesis is to be a “small” article-sized project that can be completed within a year, either a pilot or pretest or part of the student’s larger research agenda they intend to pursue for the dissertation, or a smaller stand-alone project, or a project that is part of a faculty member’s research agenda. It is explicitly legitimate for the master’s thesis to be on a question proposed and designed by the supervising faculty and destined for publication as a coauthored article. We believe that the students who have the most trouble defining a master’s thesis are those funded as teaching assistants working in areas where the usual model is the lone scholar rather than research teams. Students funded as trainees, RAs, or PAs typically develop thesis topics related to their research experiences. Students funded as TAs lack this path and have a harder time getting started on research. Further, students funded as TAs are more likely to be in areas characterized by “lone scholar” research. This is a structural issue we are increasingly recognizing that we did not highlight in our original report and are seeking to address within the constraints of University graduate funding systems.

The normal path into the PhD program is the successful defense of a master’s thesis that persuades the examining committee that the student is capable of doing independent research and should be continued into the doctoral program. The faculty at the master’s oral explicitly votes on whether the student should be continued for the PhD based on the thesis and the student’s entire record. Although it is rare, students can be and some are terminated at the master’s level. The inability to conduct research and write a master’s thesis is considered a bar to advancement in the program. We added a terminal non-thesis master’s degree option several years ago so that students who are unable to satisfy this requirement are more able to be advised out and exit the program gracefully.

The standard for a thesis waiver is the same standard as for successful defense of a master’s thesis: based on the thesis and the student’s other work, the examining committee is convinced that the student does not need to go through the experience of writing a master’s thesis and is capable of pursuing the PhD. Waivers of the thesis requirement may be granted to students who already have a master’s degree. A primary waiver is made in the first year based on work done by the student prior to arriving at the University of Wisconsin. A secondary waiver is made in the second year and may include additional work done after arrival at the University of Wisconsin. In both cases, the presented include a thesis or other papers written elsewhere, and the standard is that the work would be acceptable as a demonstrating the quality and independence expected of a master’s thesis in our program.

We will clarify the procedure for appointing a committee to review the thesis for a primary waiver, which officially is appointed by the ASC but is typically faculty recommended by the student. The secondary waiver committee is chosen by the student, as is the master’s committee.

**Recommendation:** We recommend that the prelim process be overhauled to ensure that there is transparency and consistency throughout the process. We also recommend that informational sessions on the prelim process be held for those students preparing for prelims in hopes of reducing the significant failure rate. Furthermore, we recommend that the faculty review the current list of prelim topic areas and streamline the list based on available faculty expertise.

While we recognize some concerns about our prelim system, we do not believe it needs an “overhaul.” This program has debated the prelim system periodically for decades and it receives continual and ongoing attention, including several reforms that have occurred in recent years that students may not fully recognize. We have prelims in a wide variety of areas, with standards of
scholarship that vary by area. In this context “consistency” is hard to define. We are striving for transparency. Under existing policy, each prelim is governed by a stable standing committee that is responsible for the exam’s content and format. Each faculty member selects the prelim committees s/he is prepared to serve on. The chair appoints prelim exam committees from among those who have indicated a willingness to serve. The chair would not appoint a committee if there were not three faculty with relevant expertise available in a given semester. This standing committee is required to meet yearly with students preparing for the prelim in that area, so that recommendation is already current practice. This change was implemented about three years ago, so older cohorts may not have experienced it. Some prelim areas have developed written guidelines for the scope and expectations of the exam area. Prelims that have fewer than three faculty or whose faculty fail to adhere to the rule requiring annual meetings with students are suspended.

The faculty disagree with the recommendation to reduce the number of prelim areas. The current system is a balance between the view that there should be one common prelim for all students or a small number of prelim areas and the view (common in many other programs on campus) that each student should write an individualized prelim.

The faculty do not all agree that a prelim failure rate is itself a problem. The committee seems to believe that all students should pass all exams, and this belief is not shared by all sociology faculty. The sociology faculty are instead concerned about evidence that the passing rates vary by area and by evidence that some students who actually know the material may have difficulty with the format (timed closed-book exams). A report was presented to the faculty in 2012 documenting the varying pass rates by area and there have been ongoing discussions about whether different exam formats would be better. Under the overall supervision of the joint faculty, prelim committees are experimenting with alternate formats to determine whether there is a better model.

**Recommendations:** *For the department to meet its goals of ensuring that students are informed and aware of opportunities, we recommend that the department devote effort to creating effective communication strategies across the programs within the Graduate Program.*

We believe that the creation of a Handbook that is complete and easily locatable online and in hard copy will provide one such strategy. Increasing formal professionalization in the first two years should contribute greatly to improved communication. In the past year our graduate students have formed a Sociology Graduate Student Association, SGSA, which has pledged to work with us to improve communication and integration. We hope that will provide opportunities for more effective communication.

*To encourage students to participate in department committees, we recommend that in the first semester proseminar, students be provided with a list of all department committees, as well as information regarding the committees on which they can serve. Students could be encouraged to serve on departmental committees as part of their professional development. Furthermore, we recommend that a communication system be established that allows for notification to students of the need for committee student representation, confirmation of their committee assignment, and notification by the committee chair of meeting dates and times, etc.*
We will provide students with a list of all committees that have student members. The SGSA (see above) will recruit students to serve on committees. This procedure was implement this fall.

**Recommendations:** The Review Committee believes that students and faculty members’ concerns regarding students’ competitiveness for R1 positions could largely be addressed by the recommendations included earlier in this report concerning the revamping of the proseminar and need for earlier professionalization opportunities.

We noted above the changes made in response to these recommendations. The program also recognizes that there are fewer R1 jobs than PhDs and is improving its professional socialization for students across the full range of jobs.

In closing, we are committed to continuing to strive to provide the best possible training for our students. We will monitor the success of the revamped Proseminar, the second-year professionalization course, the first-year mentoring program, and the other changes described above.