Department of Sociology
4285 Social Science Plaza
Irvine, CA 92697-5100
(949) 824-1417
(949) 824-4717 FAX

February 28, 2014

Sheryl Fontaine, Interim Dean
Humanities 211
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
California State University, Fullerton
P.O. Box 34080
Fullerton, CA 92834-9480

Dear Dean Fontaine:

Per your request, we are pleased to present our assessment of the Sociology Department based on our visit to campus and material provided by the department.

By virtually any criteria, the Sociology Department is a strong academic unit. It does an excellent job of serving large numbers of undergraduates, offering necessary courses, and being genuinely committed to varied academic needs (e.g., an on-line major, multiple MA exit options). It has made great strides in graduate education, scaling back enrollment to raise standards and improve supervision. The faculty members are first-rate, trained at leading institutions, and generally productive as teachers and scholars. There is high collegiality, genuine commitment, and admirable diversity in the faculty's background and interests.

Although the overall situation is certainly better than it was a few years ago at the depths of the budget crisis, the Department faces a number of challenges. Some are unique to the Department. Others are shared by other departments on campus. By and large, the problems do not seem to be of the Department's making.

Cohort Succession: Due to the retirement of senior faculty over a very short period of time, the Department now has very few faculty members experienced in departmental affairs. It has only one full professor. It lacks a deep bench of faculty members who have the qualities desirable in a chair and key administrative roles--experience in academic administration, an intimate knowledge of the campus and its policies, and a career stage compatible with heavy administrative responsibilities. This situation has contributed to rapid chair turn-over with some inevitable oversights in hand-offs. It has also led to reliance on untenured faculty for administrative work. With retirements leaving few senior faculty members to set expectations and maintain internal discipline, some believe the culture of the department has changed. One concern, for instance, focuses on faculty who limit their weekly time on campus to the couple of days when they teach—thus, being relatively unavailable to students or for meetings.

The succession resulted in the department identifying a number of areas of deferred maintenance. Almost everyone has been pulled into the heavy service and governance demands of developing

formal policies where none existed before or rethinking curriculum and programs in light of new departmental or campus priorities. Along with heavy service, the faculty is called on to restructure its teaching with high impact practices. The upshot is a demanding workload which is not proportionately rewarded with assigned time or in the RTP process. Given that there is just one full professor in the department, the high attrition among junior faculty and heavy faculty workload suggest that retaining and supporting faculty through tenure and promotion is a possible weakness.

Staffing: Staff support for the chair is essential for the smooth functioning of the department, but the transition has also taken a very serious toll on administrative functioning. The department has knowledgeable and committed staff of long tenure, but the staff is not on the same page as the chair and the faculty (and vice versa). There is something of a power struggle between the ASC and the department's academic administrators over who is in charge and who sets local policies and priorities. The staff, who see the students as their responsibility, regards the newer faculty as not being as devoted to students as the retired faculty were. While it's admirable that they feel so much regard for students, their bosses are not the students. Their bosses are the faculty and especially whoever is department chair. The staff continues to implement the priorities of a previous regime at the expense of current faculty and chair priorities, such as timely fulfillment of routine requests (e.g., travel reimbursements). This situation invites complaints that the staff is being passive aggressive or playing favorites. The chair has the obligation to communicate broad priorities and day-to-day decision-making to the staff, but cannot be held accountable for the department and its faculty if his/her authority is not accepted. This difficult situation contributes to rapid turnover in the chair and low morale for all parties.

The department has not been able to resolve the problem, which has been going on for several years. Given the transitions described above, it is not clear that the current administrative support set-up and practices are the best way to serve the department. We would strongly recommend a transfer of the ASC to another academic unit which would benefit from her considerable skills and experience. Because the ASC says she is not happy with the current situation, we believe a move offers a genuine opportunity that would improve her morale. Certainly, the ASC's supervisor (i.e., the Dean's Office) needs to take a more active role in mediation and in setting and enforcing expectations. More regular communication, clarified roles, and set policies which are understood and implemented would benefit all concerned.

Turnover in Higher Administration: The Department confronts a climate of great uncertainty due to numerous changes stemming, in part, from recent turnover in higher administration. The Department is making every effort to respond to administrative mandates, from HIP to retention. They do not always seem to have the information they need to respond effectively. They operate in a climate where policies are new and untested or in the process of being revised, where the administration is populated with unfamiliar faces with unknown management styles and priorities, and where the benchmarks by which performance will be evaluated remain unclear. Some faculty members expressed insecurity about the recent changes in higher administration and in the Strategic Plan, which have resulted in increased committee work and uncertainty about how to implement goals without support or resources. Some worry, for instance, that student learning and curricular innovation will suffer under performance-based budgeting.

In this vacuum, there is the risk of a conscientious Department moving too quickly to address what turn out to be non-issues, or misdirecting its efforts toward goals which wind up not to be the University's major priorities. Hypothetically, such misunderstandings could have costs. For example, a no-child-left-behind push to graduate all students could lead to pressures to reduce academic standards. Effort could be misdirected toward issues that will resolve themselves in the natural course of things. The committed and enthusiastic new faculty could burn themselves out with little pay-off for themselves or the department.

Resources: Like other units, the Department is short of resources. Critically, it lacks enough computer labs for its core courses in methods and statistics. Even with the planned return of some space, lab space will still be inadequate. The IT alternative would be networked remote access to software programs, but the current system is also said to be inadequate—too slow and not reliable or user-friendly enough for routine student use.

Successful recruitment has resulted in a faculty with strong scholarly orientations and performance. Surely, future recruitment will also want to aim for a diverse and highly qualified faculty who value teaching and research. Independent research benefits students, because it helps full-time faculty—many of whom can look forward to another 3-4 decades at CSUF—to maintain skills and keep up with their field. While committed to teaching and service, the faculty finds little or no support for its research role. The Department has lost 4-5 recent hires, in part because they did not feel supported as both teachers and scholars. A revival of programs cut during the budget crisis, such as the College-funded research grants, is a sound investment. To communicate reasonable expectations to future recruits and existing faculty, the Department needs a clear picture from the Administration on what the new normal for teaching and research support will likely be going forward.

Undergraduate Program: From all indications, the undergraduate program is running smoothly. At least some students have opportunities for internships, experiential learning, and participation in faculty research projects. Except for summers, advisement seems satisfactory. The Department appears to offer a full complement of on-line offerings, and we saw no evidence of bottlenecks (although the computer lab space situation poses such a threat).

Given the press to move students to degree, however, the Department needs to monitor grade distributions and academic standards carefully. Undergraduates saw some inconsistencies in their methods training, a lack of rigor in General Education SOC courses, and a lack of learning community/cohort experiences. Faculty members point to the SOQs as a mechanism that encourages grade inflation. The Sociology Department needs to set grading standards and review grade distributions to identify courses that have unusually high grades. Overall, student learning could be advanced through clarifying learning outcomes and improving curriculum development and summer advising.

Graduate Program: The Graduate Program has made impressive improvements since its last review. It admits a more selective cohort of students, smaller and in-line with its resources and strengths. Its curriculum better meets student needs, as the graduate students point out. The program bends over backwards to accommodate students with thesis, project, exam, and on-line options. Students appreciate the help they get from faculty, including the graduate director,

whom they acknowledge have many demands on their time. The program's strength is seen in its placement record at community colleges and in the high level of satisfaction voiced by students we met.

There seem to be inconsistencies within and across cohorts in mentoring experiences and achieved learning outcomes. Supervision is a problem. Despite smaller cohort size, some students have trouble finding a mentor for their required project or thesis. This seems to be due, in part, to the reluctance of some (admittedly busy) faculty, which results in an inequitable distribution of the mentoring workload. Important decisions, such as the choice of a quantitative versus qualitative thesis, seem to be driven by the (un)availability of advisors rather than by substantive interests or career needs. Further reducing the number of students admitted is an option, but reduced enrollment could make it more difficult to offer electives, which students see as already too limited. Additional FT faculty members, especially those who can supervise quantitative projects, are needed to relieve the problem.

Motivating everyone to take on the uncompensated task of good mentoring is a worthy goal. Required courses might better support student progress, too. Students expressed concerns about course sequencing, such as the logic behind offering the statistics course in the second year after projects had already been chosen. The professionalization seminar might also be reconfigured to give students the concrete tools (e.g., data sources), assignments, and experiences to move on independently with their proposal and project/thesis. This first year 585 course – Professionalization Seminar – seems to be a good idea. Each session has students read articles by faculty members who come to talk about their research. Students wished that they had been asked to do more in the course. If they were asked to do more writing (e.g., a lit review, prospectus) to integrate their own interests with the approaches of faculty, they would feel less like 'spectators' and be able to ramp up for their own projects.

Part-time Adjunct Faculty: The Sociology Department does a good job of managing a large cadre of part-time adjunct faculty, who appear to be dedicated and up-to-date. The part-time faculty seems to be just as committed and caring about their work as the full-time faculty. Although morale appears good, the lecturers express some insecurity.

They are concerned about timely notification about the availability of work (which impacts their ability to piece together employment semester to semester). They need earlier notification about their likely work status so that they can effectively teach their courses. Late teaching assignments impact textbook orders and discourage investments in course preparation (e.g., setting up service-learning partnerships). The Department is concerned about following the collective bargaining agreement and not creating expectations prematurely, but they may have more discretion to provide preliminary information than they have used. Reassignments should be minimized, and the rationale for changes should be clearly communicated.

The part-time faculty is also concerned about teaching evaluations, which it sees as emphasizing student opinion questionnaires too heavily (or perhaps exclusively). SOQs, some argue, actually hinder instructional improvements, because the possibility of negative evaluations discourages faculty from taking risks or trying innovative teaching methods. To its credit, the Department is working to improve its SOQ instrument. Also, each part-time instructor has a full-time faculty

member who observes the teaching each year. Along with faculty self-reflections, e.g., on instructional goals or innovations, this peer report ought to carry weight in teaching evaluations. This might be easier if it were quantified to also produce "hard numbers" like SOQs. Ideally, evaluations should be structured for both formative and summative purposes instead of just being customer satisfactions surveys that can stifle innovation and discourage rigor.

Given that they comprise the majority of the teaching faculty, the Department will undoubtedly want to provide the part-time faculty with timely communication about course assignments, information and input on how they are evaluated, and access to teaching resources and professional development opportunities, such as access to miscellaneous course fees and organized faculty meetings or workshops.

Communication: The need for greater communication emerges as a persistent issue. For example, the adjuncts would appreciate meetings with the chair as well as more constructive feedback on their evaluations. The staff would appreciate routine check-ins and to be copied on memos. The chair would benefit from regular accountability appraisals on the progress of staff work. With better all-around communication, the staff would not be put in the position of disseminating incorrect information to fill in the holes. Almost everyone would gain from a better understanding of administrative transitions at the University, new policies, and how new priorities will be weighted and benchmarked. As things now stand, one gets the impression of a strong and conscientious Department exhausting its resources in efforts to meet vague and shifting priorities. The College is probably in the best position to communicate the necessary information on campus issues, cognizant that many administrative and governance roles in the Sociology Department are necessarily filled by those new to academic administration.

Sincerely,

Judith Treas, Professor
Department of Sociology
UC-Irvine

On behalf of

Dennis Loo, Professor
Psychology & Sociology Department
Cal Poly Pomona

Eliza Noh, Associate Professor
Asian-American Studies Program
California State University, Fullerton