ACADEMIC PLANNING COUNCIL
Minutes of September 23, 2013
3 p.m., Holmes Student Center – 505

Present: Alden, Boutin, Brantley, Chandler, Damodaran, Dawson, Douglass, Falkoff, Goldenberg, Gordon, House, Kolb (for Birberick), Molnar, Shortridge, Than

Guests: Stephanie DeCicco, Assistant to the Dean, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; Kirk Miller, Chair, Department of Sociology; Chris Parker, Associate Vice Provost for Academic Outcomes Assessment, Office of Assessment Services

The meeting was called to order at 3:05 p.m. Kirk Miller the chair of the Department of Sociology was introduced.

It was moved and seconded to approve the minutes of August 26, 2013, and the motion passed unanimously.

The APC needs a representative to serve on the University Assessment Panel (UAP); this item was deferred from the last meeting. Nominations were sought for a representative of the APC to serve on the University Assessment Panel. A motion was made to nominate Ibrahim Abdel-Motaleb to serve on the UAP pending his willingness to serve, and the motion passed unanimously.

Miller thanked the APC members and the Provost’s staff for their attention and engagement in the program review process. The feedback we have received has been very helpful, and I look forward to completing the review.

The meeting was turned over to Geoff Gordon for the presentation of the subcommittee report. Gordon thanked his subcommittee members; everyone contributed to the review process.

Overall, all the sections of the report were well written and responsive to the comments in the previous document. The department responded to all of the items the Office of the Provost brought up.

The department context section has many strengths. The department should be applauded for its efforts in reaching out to non-traditional students or those unable to travel to DeKalb. It offers numerous off-site courses (Rockford, Hoffman Estates, and Naperville) in a variety of formats, which is a great service to the northern Illinois region. The advising system supports students with a dedicated undergraduate advisor, and kudos to the chair for serving as a backup when the advisors are busy. The department has been productive in making contributions to the region through its interns’ work. The focus throughout the document on student writing is commendable. Writing develops critical thinking skills. Faculty members are active and productive in their leadership, research, and scholarship efforts. Faculty value engaged learning,
interaction, and work closely with students through independent studies, honors capstones, Study Abroad opportunities, and extra-curricular service projects. The department enjoys a good deal of student diversity and has an equal proportion of male and female students. The department should be commended on having 35 percent minority enrollment.

One item for discussion is how successful is the department in gaining support from external funding, alumni giving, and fundraising? The department should be more active. There are more opportunities with alumni in general. Each fall the department holds a sociology week event where we talk about career pathways. This fall we plan on having our first alumni advisory committee meeting. This will provide us more interaction with our alumni, but I’m not sure how this translates into fundraising. The department would like to capitalize on this. One issue is that many of our alumni work in human and social services careers where they are engaged in different community services, and the gifts we receive are small. The challenge is how to invest our limited resources. I am not optimistic that this will change moving forward. Engaging more with alumni is probably the best we can do. The engagement side is very important to focus on. This results in value added. Internship opportunities sometimes are created, and this builds enthusiasm among our undergraduate students. It allows students to chart a pathway in how they are going to use their degrees. Sometimes you don’t know the capacity of your alums.

The temperature regulation in DuSable was mentioned in the report. This issue is discussed on a regular basis, and I get comments from students and faculty every semester that the learning environment has an impact. It affects the students’ ability to focus and how courses are delivered. The subcommittee members felt like it was important to include this issue in the report. Unfortunately there is not a lot as a department we can do about this issue. We use fans to increase air circulation. For the most part, it is too hot, but on certain days it can be quite cold.

Are students capable of meaningful research? Is it possible to recruit better students or do we have to change our methods of teaching? We would like to see the quality of students increase. We highlight engaged opportunities in the undergraduate program. This has powerful appeal for high-quality ambitious students. This is largely about communication, so people hear it and respond to it. I don’t have a good response for whether or not we need to change expectations. Some faculty want to keep the rigor, they argue that students will rise to the occasion. This is based on their personal experiences. Whether this is the case for all the students, I don’t know. We can definitely recruit better students in large numbers, and this is a matter of communication. We have a lot of people applying and being admitted, and then they don’t enroll. We know they are looking for engagement opportunities and getting a job when they get out. When you have a population that is admitted, interested, and high-quality, we need to focus on this population. The department does try to reach out to admitted students.

You mention in the report that there are no full professors in the department, and you also mention you need more funding for research support. Could you talk about moving along folks? There has been one change since the report was written; the department now has one full professor. She is also the director of the Women’s Studies Program, which is her focus. The department has had a lot of demographic transitions during the review period. There have been a lot of retirements, and we are hiring at the assistant professor level. The department has a lot of fresh new associate professors. There is a core of four to six more senior faculty who have been
carrying the bulk of the department’s service work. As a result, this has had an impact on their productivity. Now that we have a critical mass at the senior level, we will share this load more. I am optimistic that there are a couple of faculty who are close to becoming full professors. The department is working more closely with the Office of Sponsored Projects, and we have taken advantage of the resources available. Maybe there are still resources that are not as fully actualized as they should be. One thing that will come out of this review process is more engagement on my part to help with this goal.

You mention resources and engagement and the POL. Can you talk more about this? The POL is a research oriented organization. In the 1990s the director of the POL was a sociology faculty member, and this produced a lot of external funding for the department. When this faculty member retired, there wasn’t something else of that scale to pick this up. Since then, the department has not been as engaged with the POL. We do have engagement with the Center for Governmental Studies.

There are several recommendations for the future. Consider growing administrative capabilities across more faculty members so as they come up in the rankings, so specialists in criminology can return to more active teaching roles. Continue and grow efforts aimed at retraining young faculty and getting associate professors promoted to full professors. As we talked about, keep growing the amount of alumni engagement activities in order to increase alumni support. The department would also benefit from fundraising activities to support faculty research, undergraduate scholarships, and engaged learning activities. Continue working to create an advisory board. This is a great idea and could be used to support the fundraising efforts of the unit. Consider going to a cloud computing environment where students, faculty, and graduate assistants can access resources anywhere. You mention in the report that the physical space seems to be OK now, but it could become a problem. Start exploring options for additional space.

The B.A./B.S. part of the review has many strengths. The programs seem to be doing well in terms of enrollment stability after a slight downturn even though the university enrollment has declined. The program provides good training in the process of designing, conducting, and evaluating research, with a requirement for engaging in, as well as learning about, research. The amount of experiential learning opportunities help prepare students for careers in sociology. The research symposium allows students to engage in active learning activities. Faculty members and staff are very active with students as evidenced by participation in student honors projects, symposiums, and involvement in other activities. Students have achieved a high level of recognition, garnering academic honors and other awards. The program serves a significant role in providing course work to non-majors (averaging more than 6,400 credit hours in general education enrollment hours between 2008 and 2012). Faculty members are active in scholarship. The program appears to be cost effective (near or below the statewide average for four of the past five years.

What is the split between the B.A. and B.S. students? Are both B.A. and B.S. students underprepared for courses? Approximately 30 percent of our students are in the B.S. program and 70 percent are in the B.A. program. I don’t have comparisons in terms of GPA or other measures of quality. The math requirement for the B.S. major in difficult. There is a lot of math phobia, so some students pick the B.A. program. The foreign language requirement for the B.A. can be
completed within two semesters by taking one five hour course each semester. The core requirements for the major are identical. We don’t have a lot of control over this. Are there differences in terms of job placement? No, the department does not make a distinction between B.A. and B.S. students. One of the things that may come out of this process is to look at this in terms of moving forward. We could look to see if there are distinctive pathways. Certain opportunities require certain types of skills. This might be a question in terms of employers. I don’t know to what extent the employers see this as a consideration. I think there are some data you could look at in terms of this. Look at the data in terms of the question what are they prepared to do, and what they are doing. You could also look at the differences in terms of the required courses outside the major. We haven’t looked at this. Maybe we could look at the courses over time. Even if you don’t have a chance to change this, it is important for the advisors to know. The undergraduate and graduate advisors are familiar with opportunities across the university.

What exactly is a pre-sociology major? What percent of pre-sociology majors go on to become sociology majors? Are there any advantages to having pre-sociology majors? A major in our department in terms of our practices is a student who has expressed an interest in sociology. The pre-sociology majors have expressed an interest in declaring the sociology major but they have not met our limited admissions requirements, which are quite modest, to become a major. The requirements are to complete two sociology courses, one English and Math course, and to maintain a 2.0 GPA. We count pre-sociology and sociology majors together. Sometimes it is a problem to get the pre-sociology majors to fill out the paperwork to declare the sociology major. The department has strong advising, but students are not compelled to complete the paperwork. We have more degrees awarded than enrollment because students declare the major from pre-sociology to sociology during the last semester. This begs the question about whether or not limited admissions is needed. The faculty have talked about this and in the current environment where we want to grow the enrollment, limited admissions is appealing. Limited admissions went into effect when our enrollments were much higher, and it was used as a management tool to manage enrollment. We still have this policy. We feel like on the one hand limited admissions requirements are so minor they really don’t impact students seeking sociology as a major, but maybe not as much to make a purposeful case to eliminate limited admissions. For the department the pre-sociology versus sociology is awkward, but it is not difficult for us to know what our student population is. Are pre-sociology majors less engaged if they are not admitted until the last semester? The fact that they don’t come into declare, means they are a little less engaged. This is a distinction that is meaningful to me and our advisors. My perception is that it is meaningless to the students.

Approximately 54 percent of your enrollment is from minority groups, but for degrees awarded it is around 38 percent. Do you know what is going on here? Not exactly, we are working with cross sectional data. In a given year we have 425 majors at different stages in terms of their progress. This may have to do with the length of time it takes them to graduate. Maybe some of them are changing majors. I don’t really know. This is not the six year graduation rate. It is degrees per FTE. Yes, you really need cohort data that follows students through the progression of the program. Then you would lose transfers.
We have a 15 hour undergraduate criminology certificate. Why is this a certificate instead of an emphasis? This was what I could broker. We have 30 students in the certificate, and we expect to have six graduates in December. These are sociology majors. Would having a certificate get someone a career in criminology? It depends on the career path. Less than 1 percent of the police departments in the country require a bachelor’s degree despite the fact that education is valued in this field. A lot of students are going into law enforcement as a career path. As they advance in law enforcement, a bachelor’s degree is important. In some larger departments a college degree is important. To be an analyst or to do policy work the degree is critical, and the criminology certificate would help.

The APC turned to the recommendations for the bachelor’s programs. Gather more information from employers of NIU graduates of how NIU faculty and staff have done a good job of educating and preparing graduates for careers. Keep working on a means to further differentiate NIU’s program from competitors and better publicize why NIU’s program is better than other programs. Work on a means to increase the number of students participating in internships. Increase efforts to improve the graduation rate. Given the focus on experiential learning, consider increasing the GPA admission requirement. Find and fund tenure-track faculty to teach and promote the program, especially in the criminology area.

The final degree program to be reviewed today is the M.A. in Sociology. The program has many strengths. The document is well researched and well written. The program is flexible and well run. Faculty members, with limited resources, are able to meet the needs of a variety of students seeking a good number of career objectives. There is good assessment of program objectives, and good student demand for the program. The program supports student career aspirations in a good variety of professions. The program’s efforts to recruit students from underrepresented groups via the McNair program are to be applauded.

Given staffing shortages at the undergraduate level, we asked you if the department can adequately support a master’s program in sociology. Why not focus on either the B.A./B.S. or the M.A. degree? Having a graduate program attracts high-quality faculty and enriches the overall quality of the department and the undergraduate program as well. We offer our graduate students core courses, and these are not difficult to provide, and they are not in competition with each other. Both degrees draw from the same pool. The department sees this as a mutually enriching relationship. Without a master’s program, the quality of our faculty would diminish and the attractiveness of the department would also be diminished. Should there be a non-thesis option? What percent of students go on to Ph.D. programs? Should this program be more research focused? About one-quarter to one-third of the master’s graduates go on to doctoral study somewhere. This is a fairly substantial number. We really have a doctoral oriented program in terms of our expectations. The emphasis is on the courses and how the program is structured. This is evidenced by the thesis only option. I would argue that the capstone project benefits students. The other thing is that graduate students can pursue internships and often internships provide access to data collection opportunities that students can turn into theses. The faculty are committed to the doctoral preparation in the master’s program.

If you divide enrollment by the number of graduates, it appears from fall 2008 through fall 2012 the numbers were 4.42, 3.25, 2.66, 3.10, 4.83, and 5.8. Is time to completion a concern? Perhaps
either the comprehensive exam or the thesis could be eliminated. The rigor in the master’s program is very strong. Comparable schools don’t require both of these. Can the time to degree completion be decreased? Yes, we are working on this by implementing changes to the comprehensive exam that do not damage the structure of the program. It appears that students are spending a semester or more on the comprehensive exam, and this was not the intent of the comprehensive exam. We have revised the comprehensive exam by asking students to address broader issues about topics. We believe that this will move up the thesis process. We looked at the time to degree completion number, and it depends on how you are calculating this. On average, our time to degree completion is around 2.8 years; this is probably a semester too long. The thesis takes a while to complete for many students. A lot of our students are interested in doing ethnographic work, and this type of work is time consuming. We try to talk to students about secondary analyses instead of ethnographic work. In terms of success, this is limited, but 2.8 is a pretty good number. This information has been reported to the faculty, and changes in program structure have been made. Most of our students are funded for two years. After two years most students are done with the course work requirements, and are not around as much. Are these students working? Some of them are. I don’t know that I have a solution for this. We recruit new students and fund them to get them into the program.

What are the job prospects for students who don’t go on to Ph.D. programs? Our placement is pretty good. Some students are working when they come into the program. Our students work in a variety of research settings. We do a pretty good job in terms of placing students. The doctoral orientation of the program does not have a negative impact on our students. Are the minority students persisting or leaving the program? A little of both. The numbers are small. We were not as aware of the pattern until this review, and we were surprised by this. The department is looking at ways to address this by looking at peer mentoring and other ways to provide support. We hope this will be successful.

There are four recommendations for the future. Conduct your own survey of alumni and/or employers to better gauge the effectiveness of the program. Try to get alumni more involved in recruiting and placement efforts. Continue to develop and implement plans which we talked about for increasing overall and minority enrollments and graduation rates. Determine the effectiveness of staffing a terminal M.A. program and whether to limit it to full-time students versus part-time and full-time students. As the program review discussed, keep pairing graduate students with faculty as early in the program as possible in order to improve graduation rates, especially given the rigor of the program.

These are great programs. I appreciate everyone’s attention. This process has been helpful to us.

The next agenda item is to discuss the Program Review Process Task Force recommendations. We are trying to make the process more streamlined. We are asking for a motion so we can discuss these recommendations. A motion was made and seconded to accept and approve the Program Review Process Task Force recommendations, and the motion passed unanimously. We are moving toward a more real time evaluation of programs. The focus will be on programs that have problems and aligning the program review process with the accreditation process for programs that have accreditation. It will also change the process of this group over time. This was a lot of work for the individuals who served on this task force. The task force came up with some good
recommendations. The nature of the work for the APC members may not be easier, but it will provide more real time evidence. Are there any comments, questions, or suggestions? The hard part is implementing these recommendations. The implementation will not happen overnight. The data warehouse should help with this process. This group will focus on when a program doesn’t focus on the information and address the issues. The APC may have to make recommendations to the programs.

The meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Carolyn Cradduck