

SOCIOLOGY GRADUATE PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Degrees

The Sociology program currently offers two graduate degrees:

- **Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology (Plan A)**

This is a traditional research-based degree program, requiring completion of a doctoral dissertation representing significant original research. The program normally requires four years of study beyond the MS degree, or a minimum of five years of study for those admitted to the program who previously have completed only the bachelor's degree. In addition to completing a series of core courses in sociological theory and research methods, students are required to complete coursework representing a major area of specialization, selected from one of the three major areas of emphasis (Demography, Environment & Community, and States & Markets (soon to be renamed Social Inequality)). Students also complete several courses representing a minor area of specialization. Course work follows a program of study developed in conjunction with the student's major professor and graduate supervisory committee. The program of study must meet the core requirements of the Sociology program and the School of Graduate Studies, and should include courses pertinent to the student's dissertation research project and career goals. Students must demonstrate a mastery of theoretical, methodological, and research-based knowledge in their major area of specialization by passing a comprehensive examination given by their supervisory committee, normally taken during the third year of study. They must also successfully defend their dissertation research as a significant original contribution to disciplinary knowledge, conducted in a methodologically appropriate and ethically sound manner.

- **Master of Science in Sociology (Plan A)**

This is a traditional research-based degree program, requiring completion of a thesis representing significant original research. The program normally requires two years of study. Students in this program complete several required core courses in sociological theory and research methods, along with a set of elective courses. Depending on the interests of individual students, elective coursework may involve a concentration in one or more primary areas of emphasis, or may represent a broader cross-section of disciplinary content. Course work follows a program of study developed in conjunction with the student's major professor and graduate supervisory committee. The program of study must meet the core requirements of the Sociology program and the School of Graduate Studies, and should include courses pertinent to the student's thesis research

project and career goals. Students must successfully defend their thesis research as a significant original contribution to disciplinary knowledge, conducted in a methodologically appropriate and ethically sound manner.

Assessment Plan

Graduate education is characterized by expectations that include mastery of subject material at a level greater than is typically associated with undergraduate education. The MS and PhD degrees have additional expectations involving scholarly activity and the completion of original research conducted in a methodologically sound and ethically appropriate manner. The learning objectives associated with each degree are described following this general description of our assessment plan.

Mastery of subject material by individual students in the MS and PhD programs is assessed in large part through their performance in required and elective courses, as evaluated by individual course instructors. For MS students, mastery of subject material and the ability to utilize theoretical and research-based disciplinary knowledge are also evaluated in regard to their ability to develop and complete an original thesis research project that is reviewed and approved by each student's thesis supervisory committee. For PhD students, further evaluations regarding mastery of subject material and the ability to synthesize and apply theoretical and research-based disciplinary knowledge occur in conjunction with two major program requirements: (1) successful completion of a rigorous comprehensive examination addressing theoretical, methodological, and research-based knowledge within the student's designated major area of specialization; and (2) development and completion of an original dissertation research project that is reviewed and approved by each student's dissertation supervisory committee.

The performance of all Sociology graduate students is reviewed annually by their major advisor and the Sociology Director of Graduate Studies to insure that adequate progress toward completion of degree requirements is being demonstrated. In April students are required to complete a student progress report; that report along with a written assessment of performance and progress prepared by the student's major advisor are submitted to the Director of Graduate Studies for evaluation. Program continuation and continued provision of assistantship and/or fellowship funding are contingent on demonstration of performance in course work and other assigned responsibilities that is consistent with requirements of the Sociology Program and the School of Graduate Studies, and indicative of adequate progress toward the timely completion of degree requirements.

The Sociology Program also collects various outcomes data (for example, post-degree employment outcomes) that are used to assess the overall performance of our students and our program, to augment the assessments of individual student learning provided by course instructors and supervisory committees. These data are reviewed by the Director of Graduate

Studies and the Sociology Graduate Executive Committee (three members, representing the three areas of specialization in the Sociology PhD program) to determine whether program objectives are being met and to guide data-based decisions regarding possible modifications to program structure. The Graduate Executive Committee engages in ongoing discussions throughout the academic year, and typically meets on several occasions to discuss program structure and to consider program modifications that may merit consideration as we work to enhance program quality and learning outcomes.

The Sociology Director of Graduate Studies, the Graduate Executive Committee and the full Sociology graduate faculty collectively review and discuss the graduate curriculum and the scheduling of course offerings on an annual basis. Such ongoing review is intended to insure that courses are offered in a predictable and appropriate sequence, and that the range of courses available to students is consistent with the expertise of our faculty and with what is needed to insure an appropriate range of content relative to training in sociological theory, research methods, and our three designated areas of specialization. We also periodically review and evaluate the designated areas of specialization in the Sociology PhD program (currently Demography, Environment & Community, and States & Markets; we plan to change the latter to “Social Inequality” in the near future) to insure that those areas are consistent with the expertise of our faculty, and with our efforts to maintain a nationally competitive position with respect to the recruitment and training of graduate students in selected areas of emphasis.

Student Learning Objectives

Sociology PhD program

- 1. Ability to demonstrate proficiency in applying key sociological theories, principles, and concepts in critiquing sociological scholarship and in developing and reporting individual and collaborative research.*
- 2. Ability to demonstrate proficiency in applying and interpreting appropriate quantitative and/or qualitative research methods in developing and reporting individual and collaborative research.*
- 3. Ability to produce, present and defend a doctoral dissertation representing an original contribution to disciplinary knowledge that is conducted in a methodologically sound and ethically appropriate manner.*
- 4. Ability to secure and succeed in degree-related academic, public-sector, or private-sector employment following completion of the PhD program.*

Sociology MS program

- 1. Ability to demonstrate proficiency in applying key sociological theories, principles, and concepts in critiquing sociological scholarship and in developing and reporting individual and collaborative research.*
- 2. Ability to demonstrate proficiency in applying and interpreting appropriate quantitative and/or qualitative research methods in developing and reporting individual and collaborative research.*
- 3. Produce, present and defend a Master's thesis representing an original contribution to disciplinary knowledge that is conducted in a methodologically sound and ethically appropriate manner.*
- 4. Ability to secure and succeed in pursuit of further graduate training at the PhD level, or in degree-related academic, public-sector, or private-sector employment, following completion of the MS program.*

Outcomes Data and Data-Based Decisions

Outcomes data for Learning Objective #1 and Learning Objective #2: Ability to apply key sociological theories, principles and concepts in scholarship and research; ability to demonstrate proficiency in applying and interpreting appropriate research methods in developing and reporting individual and collaborative research.

- ***Student participation in USU research appointments***
During 2016-17 eight of the nine full-time PhD students and nine of the nine students engaged in the Sociology graduate program were funded fully or partially through research assistantship or research fellowship appointments involving roles and responsibilities linked directly to faculty-led research projects. All students, including those on research-based funding as well as those funded partially or fully through teaching assistantship or instructorship appointments, were directly engaged with faculty in research activities involving either faculty-led research or students' thesis and dissertation research activities.
- ***Student participation in teaching related appointments at USU***
During 2016-17 five of the nine full-time Sociology PhD students were assigned to serve as instructors for undergraduate courses, and one PhD student was partially funded as graduate teaching assistant as a means of enhancing her level of preparation for future assignment as a course instructor. During this same time period four of the eight MS

program students were partially funded through graduate teaching assistantship assignments. For all of these students, the opportunity to become engaged in roles linked to undergraduate instruction provides them with experience in learning how to interpret and communicate information about sociological theories, concepts, and methodologies to USU undergraduate students.

- ***Student presentation of research and scholarship at professional conferences***
Evidence of program effectiveness in fostering professional engagement among Sociology graduate students is provided in part by their high levels of participation in conferences and professional organization activities, including both the USU Research Week event and a variety of regional, national and international professional meetings and conferences. The Sociology graduate program has committed funding to support student engagement in professional organization activities, including paying for one professional association membership for all first-year graduate students, and also providing at least \$500 in departmental funding per student each year to help support attendance at professional conferences. During 2015-16 all Sociology PhD students and most MS program students attended and presented a paper or poster at one or more professional conferences held by regional, national, or international professional associations. In total, Sociology graduate students authored or co-authored 45 conference papers or posters during that period.
- ***Graduate student scholarly manuscript submission and publication.***
Currently-active Sociology graduate students authored or co-authored a total of 13 manuscripts that were published or accepted for publication during 2015-16 in peer-reviewed or editor-reviewed outlets; a number of additional manuscripts were submitted and remain under review for possible future publication.
- ***Graduate student grant submissions and awards.***
All Sociology graduate students, and particularly PhD students, are encouraged to seek out opportunities to pursue both USU-based and external grant funds in support of their thesis and dissertation research. Information regarding dissertation grant programs is regularly disseminated to students by the Sociology Director of Graduate Studies. Students are also encouraged to attend grant writing workshops offered annually by the USU Office of Research and Graduate Studies. During 2015-16 one Sociology doctoral student was successful in applying for and receiving such a grant in support of her dissertation research.

Outcomes data for Learning Objective #3: Ability to produce, present and defend a doctoral dissertation or Master's thesis representing an original contribution to disciplinary knowledge that is conducted in a methodologically sound and ethically appropriate manner.

During 2015-16 a total of six Sociology MS program students successfully defended their master's thesis research projects, and two PhD students successfully defended their dissertation research projects.

Outcomes data for Learning Objective #4: Ability to secure and succeed in further graduate training or degree-related employment following completion of the Sociology graduate program.

Evidence of effectiveness with regard to preparation of students completing the Sociology PhD program for academic as well as non-academic careers is apparent through a review of employment outcomes for recent graduates. During 2009-16 we have had 17 students complete the PhD program. All 17 of those graduates have secured full-time employment in appropriate career positions – fourteen currently hold academic appointments, one is in a post-doctoral research appointment, and two are employed by federal agencies. Over the longer term, we cannot identify any former Sociology PhD student who has completed their degree since 1985 who was not successful in securing appropriate post-degree employment. We consider this as representing an outstanding, long-term record of both student and program performance.

Evidence of effectiveness with regard to preparation of students completing the Sociology Master of Science program for more advanced graduate-level training or for post-degree employment is apparent through a review of post-graduation outcomes for past students. During 2009-16 we have had 32 students complete the Sociology MS degree program. Twelve of those graduates have gone on to pursue additional graduate training either at Utah State University (six students) or at other major institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania State University, the University of Massachusetts, and the University of Arizona. Twelve others have secured employment that is clearly linked to their graduate-level training with a broad array of public sector organizations (for example, the Utah Department of Health, Utah Division of Workforce Services, Salt Lake County Criminal Justice, and the U.S. Veteran's Administration) or with higher education institutions (Xavier University, Snow College, Utah State University). Several others have secured employment in private sector positions (for example, Intermountain Health Care and the Gerson Lehrman Group research consulting firm) that are also linked to their sociological training. To the best of our knowledge only four MS program graduates from this eight-year period were at last report not employed in positions clearly linked to their graduate training, in most instances due to personal or family circumstances that have limited their mobility and employment options.

Data-Based Decisions

Based on ongoing program review activities and the types of data outlined above, we believe that the Sociology graduate program is highly successful in enabling students to achieve the learning objectives we have identified. Nevertheless, there is always room for improvements that can enhance program quality and student outcomes. We have therefore implemented the following recent program modifications and policies to enhance students' abilities to achieve the learning objectives in a timely, efficient, and productive manner.

1. The ongoing process of reviewing the Sociology graduate program curriculum has resulted in several modest curricular revisions. Beginning in 2014 we began to schedule the first in our series of graduate-level statistical analysis courses (SOC 6150) on an every-year basis, rather than on the every second year rotation that had been the practice in recent years. This was done to insure that all graduate students will be able to complete this course during their first year of graduate study, enhancing their preparation to engage in research assistantship responsibilities and to pursue thesis/dissertation research. The arrival of a newly-hired faculty member at the start of the 2016-17 academic year led to a decision to once again offer the Political Sociology (SOC 7350) course, which due to staffing limitations has not been available to students in recent years. Another course not offered in recent years (SOC 6640, Environmental Conflict) has been re-inserted into the graduate curriculum following adjustments of other instructional responsibilities for the faculty member who teaches that course. In addition, we added new graduate course offerings in the Demography specialization area (SOC 6270 – Global Migration) and in the States & Markets specialization area (SOC 6800/7800, Social Policy & Inequality) to strengthen the curricula in those areas.
2. Our review of the designated areas of specialization in the Sociology PhD program has resulted in a decision to re-name the area currently designated as the “States & Markets” specialization. The decision to pursue a different labeling of that area reflects a recognition that the current name is not fully descriptive of what we are offering in the way of coursework and research emphases, and also not entirely effective in clearly representing to potential and enrolled graduate students the range of expertise among faculty whose teaching and research contribute most directly to that specialization. A re-naming of this specialization as “Social Inequality” was proposed and accepted by the Sociology faculty in September, 2016; formal re-designation is expected to occur in late 2016 following submission of required materials for review by the USU Graduate Council and the USU Board of Trustees.
3. During the past two years we have increased the level of funding provided to support Sociology graduate student participation in professional association meetings and conferences from \$300 to \$500 per student, and have committed to maintaining that level of support for the 2016-17 period. This funding, combined with other sources of graduate student travel support such as grant-based funds and funds provided through the Office of Research and Graduate

Studies, will help to insure that our graduate students continue to have ample opportunity to engage in the professional activities of the discipline.

4. In each of the past two years we have increased graduate funding stipends to make our funding offers more competitive and to increase our rate of success in recruiting top applicants to the Sociology graduate program. The minimum level of funding provided to support PhD program students has increased from \$9,000 to a minimum of \$13-14,000 for the two-semester academic year period. In nearly all cases we have also been able to offer summer semester funding to PhD students, bringing funding levels to approximately \$20,000 over a 12-month funding period. In 2016-17 the funding levels allocated to provide support to MS program students were also increased slightly, from \$8,000 to \$8,500 for the academic year period.

5. In 2016 a program revision designed to allow for admission to the PhD program of exceptionally well-qualified students who had not previously completed a Master's degree was submitted to and approved by the USU Graduate Council. That move was based on a determination that direct entry into PhD-level training following completion of an undergraduate degree had become increasingly common in major U.S. Sociology graduate programs. After further consideration and following additional review of national disciplinary trends, we are planning now to implement further revisions to that policy to remove the current requirement for completion of all MS degree requirements (including a Plan A thesis) as part of this alternative PhD program track. Those revisions will be submitted for approval by the USU Graduate Council in late 2016.

6. During fall semester 2016 we initiated discussions regarding possible revisions to requirements for methods and theory courses for Sociology graduate students. Data on theory and methods requirements for graduate degree-granting Sociology programs at USU peer institutions have been collected to help guide future decisions. Review of those data and further discussions about possible program modifications will continue through the remainder of the 2016-17 academic year. Our goal in conducting this review is to insure that the structure of our graduate curriculum will continue to provide rigorous training that is consistent with broader disciplinary trends pertaining to graduate education.