

Appendix E

Sociology Subcommittee Super-Department Report

Vision for Forming a New Cross-College Sociology Super-Department Combining Sociologists in the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Human Ecology

Committee

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Vision

A new sociology super-department would combine sociologists in the College of Arts and Sciences (hereafter “CAS”) and the College of Human Ecology (hereafter “CHE”) into a new department. The goal of this department would be to position Cornell among the top sociology departments in the country with respect to recruiting and retaining the best faculty and graduate students and providing high-quality disciplinary training, and ultimately to realize a top 10 sociology department.

Forming a super-department is a necessary step in order to achieve this aim for both CAS and CHE sociologists. From the perspective of CAS sociologists, this is necessary because the current sociology department is strong but undersized and under-resourced. This has implications for both the breadth and the depth of the department, as well as for its capacity to manage administrative roles and faculty departures. From the perspective of CHE sociologists, forming a super-department could help in recruitment and retention of top faculty and graduate students, as well as providing a stronger disciplinary identity at Cornell. From both perspectives, the super-department will better realize synergies in sociology with respect to teaching and research foci, and enhance opportunities for scholarly recruitment, that are impeded by the University’s current institutional structure.

The purpose of this document is to outline (1) the main challenges associated with creating a super-department and, more importantly, (2) some solutions to those challenges. This document is intended to function as a draft for a sociology super-department that will be circulated to all CAS and CHE sociologists so that it can be discussed in the individual units and collectively.

Challenges Associated with the Creation of a Sociology Super-department

There are at least four core challenges that a super-department of sociology that is shared across CAS and CHE either creates or exacerbates: (1) imbalance in the new unit with respect to disciplinary focus; (2) issues around faculty contributions, membership, and governance in the unit (in the advent of many joint appointments); (3) the small graduate program in the new unit relative to peers; and (4) how to make sure that the undergraduate majors are enhanced through this new unit.

Subfield Balance in the New Unit

The current CAS department of sociology, which includes 15 lines (13 currently filled), has strengths in a range of areas, including economic sociology, computational sociology, social networks, and social inequality. However, given strategic recruitment of promising mid-career scholars, an influx of resources due to a recent \$10,000,000 grant to the Center for the Study of Inequality (hereafter “CSI”), and the recent donation of an endowed assistant professorship in gender inequality, the department is heavy in the study of inequality. The ten sociologists in CHE, nine of whom currently reside in the Department of Policy Analysis and Management (hereafter “PAM”) and one of whom currently resides in the Department of Human Development¹ (which is also engaged in conversations around becoming a super-department), are working at the intersection of policy, demography, and inequality. Combined with the tremendous strength in inequality in the current CAS sociology department, the merging of these scholars into one department has the potential to generate greater synergies and external visibility in the inequality space—a space that the Ideas Committee situated as one that was ripe for greater investment from the university. It also means, however, that key areas of strength in the current CAS department in economic sociology and computational and network methods will become a smaller share of the department, and other core areas within the discipline of sociology will remain unrepresented.

The skewed area distribution relative to the departments we would consider peers after forming a super-department (namely, Duke, Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford) will affect Cornell Sociology’s national disciplinary standing. We see at least three reasons why this is the case. First, there are major debates in sociology in which Cornell simply does not participate because we lack expertise. Second, the lack of broad strength inhibits the recruitment of graduate students who seek a broader introduction to the discipline, and it tends to produce narrower students. Finally, this imbalance will limit the breadth of intellectual conversations that occur within the new unit. In some sense this is no different from the current situation, where many of the core areas of sociology are not covered because the Sociology Department’s small size, relative to peers, has forced a strategy of unusually high specialization. The risk with a newly constituted department that is even more heavily skewed toward inequality and policy-related work is that the tendency of “like to attract like” will make it even more difficult for the department to broaden intellectually and to recruit graduate students and junior faculty working in other fields.

¹ Karl Pillemer has a PhD in Sociology. He is one of two members of HD who does not have a PhD in Psychology.

In order to address this issue, we see it is a prerequisite that:

1. The new super-department be allowed four to six hires to rebalance the new unit;
2. The new hires include a combination of junior lines (up to 4) and senior lines (up to 2).
3. These new lines and resources to fill them should not come out of existing Sociology or PAM line allocations or resources (i.e., these should be new, permanent lines).
4. The areas in which these hires occur be decided among the full faculty of the new super-department, such that all members of the unit can weigh in equally on the process, with an explicit and sole focus on “rebalancing” the new super-department of sociology; and
5. These hires happen quickly, during the two-year period in which the unit is formed.

Although these hires would ideally all be new lines, pushing the total number of lines in the unit to roughly 30, some combination of pre-fills for faculty who have decided to retire and new lines would be reasonable (i.e., 4 new lines and 2 pre-fills). (We note, however, because of the extreme imbalance across areas that a super-department could cause, some of the traditional methods of rebalancing a unit such as pre-filling lines for planned departures of faculty are unlikely to be effective.) We anticipate that, after rebalancing and natural attrition, the new department would hold at least 28 lines. This is reasonable given that a substantial share of members of the new unit (40%), will also be servicing a new policy entity in both teaching and service.

Faculty Contributions and Membership in the New Unit

There were several areas in this domain in which the committee members were in agreement.

For instance, there seemed to be broad agreement around departmental leadership. The committee agreed unanimously that an external chair search was a poor idea because: (1) in the initial years of a new unit, it is important to build on the trust and mutual cooperation among those who are already here; (2) in sociology, this is often interpreted as a sign of a department that is “in trouble;” and (3) as recent efforts in PAM have shown, it is exceedingly difficult to recruit a senior scholar who has the research profile consistent with Cornell’s standards, administrative experience, and the fortitude to enter a situation of structural uncertainty.

As a result, we suggest finding an internal chair and, possibly, an associate chair or some other organizational role whose charge includes coordinating across the new sociology unit and a new policy unit.

There also seemed to be broad agreement on the need for all sociologists in the new super-department to have identical policies in terms of: (1) leaves and modified duties as part of parental accommodations; (2) releases for administrative responsibilities; and (3) course buyouts for externally funded research projects.² Our sense based on earlier conversations with the deputy provost is that achieving alignment here is doable.

² There was also a sense that the total cost of a course buyout should be set at a level that would stimulate increased external funding. This would not be possible with the current buyout rate that is used in the social sciences in CAS.

Although there was broad agreement on some of these issues, the fact that many members in the new unit would also hold appointments in the new policy entity was an issue that we discussed at length. Any resolution to this issue would have to manage key concerns on both sides.³

For the CAS sociologists, there could be concerns about (1) individual faculty members who have joint appointments contributing little to the new unit but holding a full vote and (2) roughly 40% of the votes in the new department being held by faculty whose interests are split between the new department and another unit, and who may primarily identify and spend their time in the other unit. There could also be concerns about the voice of scholars who are not closely tied to the demography, policy, and inequality intellectual spaces being just a tiny share of the now-expanded unit's governance structure, and the formation of unhealthy, area-based voting blocs that do not currently exist in Sociology.

For the CHE sociologists, there could be concerns about contributing to a new super-department of sociology but not having a full voice in that new unit. CHE sociologists could also have concerns about managing teaching and service commitments. In particular, it may not be feasible for a colleague with a partial appointment to split teaching or service in the same proportion as the appointment in any given year. Relatedly, the committee worries about managing service loads across multiple units (as well as to the university and to the discipline).

Although the committee did not settle on a resolution to these significant issues, the committee felt strongly that the application of the following principles could situate the new unit for success. First, we will rely on some mechanism to coordinate effort at the aggregate level for faculty who hold commitments in the policy entity. Second, there will also be expectations at the individual level, assessed over some time window that allows for flexibility from year to year. Third, this coordinating mechanism will include an accounting of service commitments across units. Fourth, the addition of new "rebalancing" lines, discussed above, may help address some of the CAS sociologists' concerns about the consequences of area imbalance on governance and decision-making. Our joint goals in developing this coordination are to address concerns related to: (1) aligning faculty commitment to voting rights; and (2) managing burden of commitment to multiple units.

Finally, faculty on the subcommittee agreed that it will be important to incorporate some form of "grandparenting" for faculty coming up for tenure and promotion in the new department. We recommend allowing faculty who were not hired by the new department to be able to choose between their hiring unit and the new department for tenure and promotion, within a time limit anchored to the year of the creation of the new unit. For example, "grandparenting" would apply for the first promotion that takes place within 6 years of the creation of the new unit, with one-to-one extensions granted for any years "off the clock" due to parental accommodations or special circumstances (e.g., medical leaves) in those 6 years. Further, the subcommittee acknowledges that for all tenure and promotion decisions moving forward, the new department will need to recognize the importance of both sociology and policy audiences in the scholarly contributions of faculty jointly appointed in the policy entity.

³ We are aware of only one aspirational peer department, Princeton, that has a substantial share of faculty with appointments in another unit; here, however, the share is lower, the appointments were not all made at the same time, and every faculty member was voted on by all other members of the units at the time of the appointment.

The Size of the Graduate Program

Larger cohorts of graduate students would bring the new department more in line with top 10 departments and support research excellence of its faculty. Scarcity of graduate students, both as RAs and as TAs, is a core issue that could create significant tension in a new super-department and undermine both graduate training, faculty research, and the undergraduate experience. In order to ensure that this issue does not cause friction or undermine excellence in the new super-department, we propose to increase the graduate program to an average of 12 students per year (36 per three-year Graduate School funding cycle), all of whom would be guaranteed five years of funding through a combination of two-year Sage fellowships and TA/RA-ships. We further propose: (1) increasing the number of fellowship years included in our funding packages to be more competitive with top departments in sociology, several of which are moving to 6 years guaranteed funding with 3 years of fellowship; and (2) addressing cross-college differences that complicate coordination (i.e., in the cost of funding a graduate student for a semester, the baseline level of summer funding, etc.)

The Undergraduate Majors

There was general agreement on a number of issues around the undergraduate major(s). First, majors in both sociology and policy analysis and management—ideally with a name change to public policy—should continue to exist. Second, some of the CHE sociologists might want or be able to teach core sociology courses currently taught in CAS, although this would need to be managed carefully to reduce the number of new preps that CAS and CHE faculty need to do. Third, better coordination around undergraduate offerings could decrease some of the content overlap (both now and in the future), thereby releasing resources for other courses including graduate level seminars. Fourth, there was the sense that a curriculum committee would be needed to resolve some of these issues.

Finally, the committee agreed unanimously that the current disincentives to cross-unit collaboration around teaching built into the budget model would need to be addressed directly. These disincentives take two forms. One is the negative financial implications when majors take classes taught outside the hosting college, which reduces the unit's apparent contribution to the College's enrollment totals, budget, and—even if implicitly—to the legitimacy of their claim to scarce resources within college-level allocation processes. The second is that increased enrollment, especially from outside the college, can place enormous strain on TA resources, which tend to increase with enrollments at an elasticity closer to 0 than to 1. This has a negative effect on our undergraduates, for obvious reasons, but also on our graduate students, who spend more time on teaching-related duties than they do at peer departments, all of which have much greater TA to student ratios. We envision an MOU between the colleges that would eliminate the financial and pedagogical disincentives to collaborate on undergraduate programs, perhaps modeled on agreements like those in place in other cross-college departments.

Conclusion

There are both possible risks and possible benefits around forming a new super-department of sociology composed of sociologists in CAS and CHE—for both existing groups. We believe that if the issues that are raised in this document are resolved along the lines that we have suggested here, a new super-department of sociology could overcome these challenges and ultimately elevate Cornell sociology to one of the top 10 sociology departments in the world within the next 5-10 years.