The Sociology Department at SUNY Albany (University at Albany, as it’s now known) is an unusual success story. Over a period of several decades the Department has transformed from a divided one with its PhD program suspended to one that is highly regarded. It also became a group of colleagues with a wide reputation for warm, collegial relations. But most of us know little about the history of the Department: the recency of its establishment as a separate department, the turmoil it was in during the mid-1970s, and how it dug itself out so successfully. This brief narrative outlines some of the Department’s history, starting before many of the current members joined the Department and our collective memories could take over. It begins with the origins of Sociology at Albany, moves into the sometimes turbulent 1970s, and then follows the period of growth to its present status.

Early Sociology Courses at the Normal College

Although Albany’s first sociologist was indeed hired in 1943, sociology courses had been taught beginning in the early 1900s. A narrative, compiled under the supervision of Geoffrey Williams in the University Archives, by a student intern, Scott Saperstein, describes some of our early history:

*The first identifiable Sociology course, titled “The Evolution of Social Science”, was offered at the then New York State Normal College in 1904. Though no departmental structure existed at the school until 1909, the course, taught by Professor Groat, was listed with the History and Political Science course offerings. The Annual Circular describes the course as the study of “practical social problems and their effect upon the formulation of the science of sociology.”

As part of a series of changes initiated in 1905 when the Normal College became a four year liberal arts college with a special mission to train teachers, the College adopted a traditional departmental structure in 1909. Among the newly created departments was the Department of Government and Economics, headed by Adam A. Walker. The joint department offered courses in Sociology. In 1914 Economics and Government became separate departments. The Department of Economics, headed by Professor Walker, offered a two semester course titled “Principles of Sociology” and “Problems in Sociology.”

Sociology courses continued to be taught in the Department of Economics until 1934 when that department was renamed the Department of Economics and Sociology. No longer would the index state, Sociology: See Economics. In 1937 this joint department became part of the Social Studies division, still headed by Adam A. Walker. In the 1953 General Catalogue Sociology was listed independently as a program in the Social Studies department headed by Joseph T. Phinney. A much broader range of courses were now being offered. Sociology continued to be taught within the Social Studies Department until 1964, when that department was enlarged and renamed the Division of Social Sciences headed by Kendall A. Birr. That same year the Undergraduate
Bulletin, for the first time, stated that students in the General Program, but not in the Teacher Education Program, could major in Sociology and received a Bachelor of Arts.

More of this history was filled in by Kendall Birr, the University Historian and author of A Tradition of Excellence: The Sesquicentennial History of the University at Albany, State University of New York, 1844 to 1994 (1994), based on his research in the Archives (interviews, 4/18/99 and 1/4/00). He noted that in the 1920-21 catalog, Econ I was listed as Economics and Econ IV was listed as Sociology. In 1923-24 Adam Walker offered two Sociology courses, Sociology, and Economic and Social Problems. The 1939-40 catalog listed five courses in Sociology: Intro, Population, Social Institutions, Crime, and Labor. By 1943-44 a Graduate seminar was listed in Sociology—by then, some teachers were taking their master’s degrees, and apparently students could choose a research seminar in one of several social sciences. Ken explained that the formation of the Social Studies division was a response to the Social Science movement, which brought the study of the social sciences into the secondary schools. Thus, it was natural that the Normal College would organize a division to meet this need.

Ted Standing and other early figures in the Department

Theodore Standing, the first sociologist hired at Albany, arrived in 1943. A native of Iowa and educated in Friends Schools, Ted received his doctorate from the University of Iowa in 1932. Before coming to Albany, he had taught at Berea College in Kentucky, at Iowa State, and at Oklahoma A & M College. He was employed by the Federal Emergency Relief Agency in 1933, and from 1939 to 1943, he worked as a rural sociologist and regional director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Little Rock, Arkansas. There he met Mary Standing. They married and moved together to Albany.

According to Mary, Ted taught Economics as well as Sociology courses. This was not his preference; he told her he was learning more economics than the students were. His office was in Draper Hall, and one day he forgot his key, so he went to another office and climbed out onto the window ledge. President John Sayles saw him and said “Young man, that will get you into trouble.” Ted replied, “Yes, if I fell it would.” When Joseph Phinney, an economist, was hired, Ted and Joe shared an office. For those of us who remember Ted as a distinguished white-haired gentleman, it is amusing to imagine him as an irreverent young assistant professor.

Ted apparently got along with everyone. Ken Birr recalled that he had “remarkably few enemies, and never really became involved in academic politics, unlike others in the department.” He described Ted as a very relaxed, laid back, avuncular person, who smoked a pipe. He was very charming. During the 1950s Mary and Ted would host the annual department picnic at their farm. He was a civil libertarian, an old style sociologist reminiscent of the social reform movements. He was well informed in sociology and many other areas, and read widely. He was able to “go with the flow” but may not have been entirely enthusiastic about the quantitative emphasis in the 1950s.

Ken also pointed to a “very powerful streak of idealism in Ted’s teaching and thinking” which, apparently, sometimes led him into political activity outside the department. He recalled hearing about an incident in the late forties when Ted was a delegate to the Progressive Party convention, and was “tarred with the Communist brush.” Ted came under attack from groups in
the community, and students came to his defense. One of the most articulate students, Gerhard Weinberg, later went on to become a distinguished historian. Mary recalled a controversy in the 1950s over a Catholic magazine in the library (interview, 4/24/99). There was an article that offended Dean Nelson, who thought it should be kept behind the desk so that people would have to ask for it. Ted disagreed. He embarrassed the Dean by asking if he had read the article. He hadn’t.

Ken’s research found Ted first listed in the 1946-47 catalog. In the following year Ted was listed with three courses: The Community, The Family, and Social Control. In 1949-50 a course in Social Psychology was added. Paul Wheeler joined the faculty in 1950, and he and Ted were the only two sociologists until the early 1960s. Ken arrived in 1952, when the Social Studies Department numbered around 15, including the two sociologists, one economist, one geographer, two political scientists, and 8 or 9 historians. He says he soon learned that the department fell into three groups: the conservatives, the left-oriented group (including Ted, its leader, and Paul), and those moving in between. But, he says, tensions were never serious, and never interfered with the operations of the department.

Paul Wheeler, Ken recalled, was an interesting guy. His wife had died and he was raising a young son alone. Like most people fresh out of graduate school, he had aspirations to do research, but in the 1950s the college was not a good environment for serious research. He later became chair of the Division of Social Sciences in 1966, but quit that position when he became unhappy with the new Dean of Arts and Sciences. He spent some time in General Studies before retiring around 1980. Roberta Friedman (née Starr), the mother of one of our current faculty (Sam Friedman), was a student here and remembers enjoying classes with Paul.

A number of instructors came and went, but Arnold Foster was the first full-time faculty member to join Ted and Paul, in 1964. Arnold had served in the Maritime Services during WWII, and developed courses at Albany in sociology of art and of religion. Alicia Iwanska was hired in 1965 as an anthropologist, but gravitated toward sociology. Alicja had been active in the Polish Underground during WWII; following her retirement in 1985 she was involved with the Free Polish University in London.

**Becoming a Department: The 1960s and early 1970s**

Returning to the historical narrative quoted above,

*In 1966 the joint Department of Sociology and Anthropology was created, chaired by Paul Wheeler. The department offered the student body 28 Sociology courses. In 1969 the department reported to the new Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences. 1970 saw the joint department split into independent departments of Sociology and Anthropology. M.A.'s were first offered by the Department of Sociology in 1966, while a Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology was first offered in 1970. The purpose of this Ph.D. program was to “prepare qualified students for careers in teaching and research in colleges and universities.”*
Raymond Forer and Maurice ("Rick") Richter arrived in 1966. Ray had worked in intelligence during WWII and saw action in the Philippines, and had an early position in socio-epidemiological research with the Center for Disease Control. Rick had taught several places before coming to Albany, and recalled that the new campus was not yet open when he came for an interview, with the exception of the dorms in Dutch Quad. The Sociology Department was located in the attic of the Babyland Store on Central Avenue, within walking distance of Draper Hall. When he arrived in September they had moved to the new campus (with Sociology located in the new Social Sciences Building), and he got lost on his first day. He remembered that Ted Standing was just as lost! The new buildings were beautiful, gleaming white. Dutch and Colonial Quads were finished, but State and Indian Quads were not yet begun. The podium had been built, but there were no lecture centers yet. In the early years, faculty were doubled up, even in small offices (Richter interview, 6/3/99). Rick recalled that the Sociology-Anthropology Department at that time consisted of ten sociologists (Standing, Forer, Richter, Iwanska, Wheeler, Foster, Freddie Sabghir, Romolo ("Bam") Toigo, Chris Apostle, and Herman Israel) and two anthropologists (Bill Fenton and Walter Zenner) (Richter e-mails, 6/20-22/11).

Philip Lord (interview, 8/00), who was teaching for the combined Sociology-Anthropology Department as a graduate student during that period, also recalled the transition to the new campus. Before it was completed, he recalled the downtown campus being spread all over, including the offices in Babyland. The new uptown campus seemed "magical, all new and different, like desert architecture."

Faculty, according to Richter, were required to take attendance, and were expected to report students with three or more absences. This was part of a set of rules left over from the teachers-college years, when classes were smaller. Rick refused to take attendance (because he felt such data would be inaccurate, especially in large classes), to the annoyance of then-Chair Paul Wheeler. In the late 1960s, one outcome of the student revolt was abolishment of the attendance policy, but instructors were still required to report absences. The University was trying to recruit top people, but it was hard to do so with such problems as office sharing and these attendance procedures. There were no graduate students, so faculty were assigned by the administration to help each other proctor. Classes were held six days a week, and one could not miss a class, even for a professional meeting, without getting a colleague to take one’s place. Rick also remembered that, in those days before computers, Acting Chair Arnold Foster (when Paul Wheeler was on leave) had to bring his personal typewriter to the office because typewriters were allocated only to secretaries and the Department did not have one.

There was an outside search for a new chair, and Paul Meadows was hired in 1967, coming here from Syracuse where he had built what came to be known as “the Meadows Department.” Coming to sociology after entering the Protestant ministry, he is remembered as a wide-ranging intellectual, with scholarly interests ranging from industrialization and urbanization to the nature of science. Paul was recruited with promises of new lines that were not kept, reportedly a source of dissatisfaction for him, though he continued as Chair until 1972. Rick remembered that this was a time when many universities were seeking to expand. Some of the policies noted above, as well as ongoing campus construction, put Albany at a competitive disadvantage. Eventual faculty additions included Al Higgins (whom Paul brought from
Syracuse in 1969), Roland Liebert (who later went to NSF), David Jackson, Samih Farsoun, Bob Laufer, and Robert Guerrin.

Changes were also occurring in the university. Albany changed from a College for Teachers to a “University Center” in the SUNY system in 1962. Rick recalled that this engendered some tensions between established faculty whose careers centered around teaching and new faculty who were oriented to research, and that this was one of the factors in the turmoil in Sociology in the 1970s described below.

Other administrative changes occurred internally. A College of Arts and Sciences was created from three colleges in 1962; CAS would be split back into three colleges in 1977, only to be re-created again in 1993 (we seem to be going around in circles on this issue!). As noted above, the joint Sociology-Anthropology Department was created in 1966, and then split into separate departments in 1970; Rick recalled that this was part of a national trend toward viewing sociology and anthropology as distinct disciplines, though he thought that the departure of anthropologists was a significant loss for the Department. Sociology became a popular major, being seen as a solution to social problems of the late 1960s by student activists.

Building the New Department: the 1970s and 1980s

The 1970s

Paraphrasing Dickens’ references to “the best of times” and “the worst of times,” the 1970s were a time of transition, of conflict and threat, and of significant growth. The new uptown University campus opened on the site of a former golf course. It was designed by Edward Durrell Stone with what seemed an austere modernist architecture that became softened over the years as trees and flowering shrubs matured. Sociology (and other programs including Social Welfare and Criminal Justice) moved into Mohawk Tower in 1972 (reflecting a shortage of students wanting campus housing), surrounded by the Indian Quad dorm complex; in a few years as demand increased for dorm space, the Department moved back to the Social Sciences Building on the main academic podium.

By the early 1970s the Sociology faculty was growing: Ray Forer (Chair, 1972-75), Paul Wheeler, Alicja Iwanska, Arnold Foster, Art Richardson, Paul Meadows, Maurice Richter, and Al Higgins had joined the faculty earlier; Joseph Fichter, and Nan Lin came in 1971, Ron Farrell in 1972, Art Richardson, Mark LaGory, and Jim Nelson in 1973 (also Louis Bluhm, Gordon Knight, and Elizabeth Hanna at about this time, some as Lecturers), and Mark Levine, Russ Ward, and Bill Yoels in 1974. Frank Pogue, a sociologist, arrived in 1973, but became Chair of African and Afro-American Studies, with an adjunct appointment in Sociology. Al Liska, Rich Felson, and Mark Levy joined the faculty in the mid- and late-1970s. An early collaborative effort among several faculty and grad students was the 1975 “Tri-City Area Survey,” and subsequent “Conference on Community and Policy Research” to report findings from the survey.

Although the Department was growing, bringing in young scholars, this also became a time of division and threat. An external review of the Department had concluded that it was a “small but adequate program which should be continued and strengthened,” but a subsequent Graduate Academic Council report concluded that “the current faculty is inadequate to support a
quality doctoral program.” That report, combined with concerns about the ability of the Department to successfully undergo a State Education Department review, would lead to a suspension of recruitment for the doctoral program in 1975. Articles appeared in the student newspaper that reported dissension among the faculty (e.g., “Soc Department Chairman Faces Reappointment Turmoil,” Albany Student Press, 11/12/74), quoting (anonymously) faculty and graduate students who questioned then-Chair Ray Forer’s academic credentials and leadership, and who feared “reprisals” from someone who was perceived as vindictive toward those who criticized or questioned his management style and decisions. (The article reported, for example, the subsequent termination of junior faculty who had signed a petition two years earlier seeking a greater role in Department decision-making.)

Ray Forer was known for lengthy memos and reports that responded in very personal ways to anything he perceived as challenges to him and his authority. The “Annual Report 1974-75” reflects the flavor of that time, as he wrote at considerable length in an effort to deflect and discredit criticism. In response to the GAC report, he indicated that the Department was “shocked” at “fictions and myths presented as factual evidence.” Regarding the ASP article, he referred to “scurrilous, and obviously planted … personalized attacks on the Chairman,” and referred to the possibility of a “defamation” lawsuit.” He also sought to counter reports of dissension, arguing that it reflected a few “dissenters [who] had been ‘discredited.’” The Annual Report also mentions a possibility of Edgar Borgatta coming in as Chair.

On the occasion of celebrating Eileen Pellegrino’s thirty years as departmental secretary in 2000, Nan Lin recalled:

When I first arrived at Albany, it was in the summer of 1971, and I soon realized that the Department of Sociology faculty was engulfed in a “civil” (or non-civil) war. Most of the faculty spent their non-teaching hours in the Department complaining, “strategizing,” and writing memos (amazing how many memos were generated in the years when email was not yet invented “for the record”. I guess we still do, even with email available nowadays). In the midst of all the “battles” raging on, there was one person in the Department office who was calm, collected and quietly doing her work most efficiently—that was how I got to know and appreciate Eileen! Only after awhile did I realize that she arrived on the scene shortly before I did. A visitor could never tell she was new at her job and she was in an office surrounded by angry people.

Mark Levine, who was hired ABD in 1974 and stayed on for two years, recalled the financial situation of the State of New York during this period (interview, 8/8/99). Apparently New York City was threatening bankruptcy, the Empire Plaza was running over budget, and at that time Albany was the least powerful of the four university centers. This was when major cuts occurred in the university, including Nursing and Astronomy. There was a freeze in the Social Sciences. Rick recalled that despite program cuts, some programs were strengthened during this period, including Sociology, which was viewed as an essential discipline with large enrollments and actual and potential ties to state government.

Ron Farrell became Chair in 1975, Acting for a year and then continuing until 1979. He played an important role in healing the divisiveness in the Department. The doctoral program
was revised to create a “fundamentally new Ph.D. program” that was organized into four areas: Social Organization, Society and the Individual, Methodology and Statistics, and General Academic Offerings (from its prior focus that included Comparative Social Organization, Medical Sociology, and Social Disorganization). A set of by-laws were also adopted in 1975 (and amended in 2000). Faculty recruitment brought Richard Hall and Craig Brown in 1977. The addition of Dick Hall, who had achieved a substantial reputation at Indiana, Minnesota, and NSF, elevated faculty morale, and can be seen as marking the beginning of the growth in the Department’s stature. A further boost was the addition of Peter and Judith Blau in 1978. Chris Bose recalled (7-19-11) that Peter Blau “was the perfect person to pull together our older theoretically focused faculty, with the newer quantitatively oriented faculty--as both sides respected him.”

Ron Farrell recalled considerable administrative support for the Department’s hiring efforts, related to a growing policy emphasis for the University under new President Emmet Fields (interview, 6/28/99). Recruitment of major scholars was a critical indicator of the University’s commitment to Sociology and an important signal to those outside the University that this was a program “on the move.” After the suspension of recruitment for the doctoral program was lifted, the Department successfully passed an SED review in 1977-78. Ron credited affiliations with faculty in Criminal Justice, including Travis Hirschi, Michael Hindelang, and others, as valuable contributions to the favorable review.

Chris Bose arrived in 1978, following a joint recruitment effort between Women’s Studies and Sociology. Ron Farrell thus began to build a departmental strength in gender studies that continues to this day. Chris served as Women’s Studies Director for three years, becoming full-time Sociology faculty in 1981. Glenna Spitze and Steve Rytina (who would move on to Harvard) joined the faculty in 1979. Visiting faculty during this time included Adrian Hayes (who would also teach in the Department’s program in China in the mid-1980s), Leonard Beeghley, and William Rau.

A much less fortunate occurrence was an automobile accident in which Mark LaGory and Russ Ward were badly injured, causing them to miss the second half of the Spring 1978 semester. The accident was witnessed and aftermath photos taken by a professor in Atmospheric Sciences at UAlbany. Bob Athanasiou, a physician at Albany Med who had earlier taught courses in medical sociology for the Department, was a source of information and support. Visiting Russ in the hospital, Al Liska was taken aback by Russ’ creative explanations, stemming from a concussion, for being there (e.g., a plane crash in Austria!).

In the 1970s the Department benefitted from ties with sociological researchers in state agencies and other local organizations (“adjunct”) and in other university units (“affiliated”) – adjunct faculty included Henry Steadman and Joseph Morrissey from NYS Dept. of Mental Hygiene and Joseph Cocozza from NYS Council on Children and Families, and there was a research linkage with Bam Toigo, who had taken a position with the Berkshire Farm Institute; affiliated faculty included Joseph Woelfel from Rhetoric and Communication and David McCaffrey from Public Administration. Such connections have continued over the years, including Susan Sherman (Social Welfare), and most recently Kate Schiller (Education), Barbara Sutton (Women’s Studies), Aaron Benavot (Educational Administration and Policy), Jamie
Fader (Criminal Justice), and Erzsebet Fazekas (Public Administration and Policy). There have also been visiting faculty, including (in the 1970s) Roger Libby, a sex researcher, and Ron Burt, a network researcher who was then on leave at Berkeley and had received his MA from Albany. Ron was such a hard worker that Russ Ward recalled he came to campus one time in the midst of a blizzard so that he could get work done if he was snowed in!

The 1980s

The 1980s began with Nan Lin as Chair, to be followed by Dick Hall, Al Liska, and John Logan. The 1980s continued the turnover and growth in Sociology faculty. Early pioneers retired by the end of the decade, including Ray Forer, Alicja Iwanska, Paul Meadows, and Arnold Foster. Also by the end of the decade, Nan Lin had moved to Duke, Judith and Peter Blau to North Carolina, Ron Farrell to New Mexico State (where he could better indulge his passion for quarterhorses), and Art Richardson had semi-retired to California. Recruitment in the early 1980s brought to the faculty Richard Alba, and John Logan; the mid-1980s brought Marv Krohn, Karyn Loscocco, Steve Messner, Scott South, Steve Seidman, and Dave Wagner. Further recruitment later in the decade included Jane McLeod (who would move on to Minnesota), Kathy Trent, Gwen Moore, Stew Tolnay, Pat Akard, Nelson Pichardo, and Jim Zetka. Visiting faculty during the 1980s included Terry Blum and Kathy Daly.

Growth in the size of the Sociology faculty (reaching 23 by 1983) was accompanied by growth in the undergraduate (reaching 300 majors by 1980) and graduate (60 students) programs. There was also significant enhancement of the scholarly stature of the program. A 1982 survey named the UAlbany Sociology Department as the “most improved” department in the country (out of 92 programs evaluated). Another analysis reported that UAlbany Sociology ranked 8th in total authorship in the leading three journals of the discipline during 1975-86 (and 4th for the 1981-96 period). A site visit conducted in 1988, as part of a University review of the Sociology undergraduate and graduate programs, concluded that “improvement in the quality of the Department . . . has been truly phenomenal.”

One important development in the graduate program during the 1980s was the establishment of coteaching, whereby doctoral students would share teaching of a course with a faculty member to provide mentoring in the various tasks associated with university teaching. ASA teaching workshops were also conducted during this time, and attention to teaching in the Department would be further enhanced in later years through the creation of a Teaching Committee. An “Orientation to Sociology” course was also developed, focusing on professional socialization for graduate students. A Sociology honors program for undergraduates was established in 1989. Another enhancement to the undergraduate program in the 1980s was the resurrection of the internship program, which had been dormant since the early 1970s; this has proven to be a beneficial and popular option for students, growing substantially over the years.

The Center for Social and Demographic Analysis (CSDA) was established in 1981, with Richard Alba as founding Director. CSDA would grow to become a significant part of the infrastructure for social research at UAlbany, and has been closely linked to Sociology throughout its history. Subsequent directors from Sociology included Stew Tolnay, John Logan, Scott South, and Richard Alba (for a 2nd time). Walter (Chip) Ensel, one of our doctorates, has
been a long-time stalwart helping faculty put together grant proposals. Assistance with technical quandaries has also been provided by Patty Glynn, spouse of Stew Tolnay, and Sociology doctorate Hui-shien Tsao; helpful office support staff have included Kathy Vaccariello, Sandy Johnson, and Linda Lawrence. In the late 1980s a CATI facility was developed, used by some Sociology faculty for Capital District surveys. CSDA became an NICHD Population Center in 1997. Two other important research centers were created later in the 1980s: the Institute for Research on Women, with Chris Bose as the founding Director, and the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, for which John Logan, Richard Alba, and Nancy Denton would later serve terms as Director.

During the 1980s the Department, through the efforts of Nan Lin, established connections with sociology in China. The Department was visited by sociologists whose careers had been derailed during the Cultural Revolution, and who had been brought back to help in reestablishing the discipline. Sociology at UAlbany subsequently came to play a part in the growth of sociology in China. A joint program was begun with Nankai University in 1986. UAlbany faculty taught graduate courses in China during the summer; John Logan, Maurice Richter, and Arnold Foster taught the first set of courses in statistics, social stratification, and theory. A variety of other courses were taught in China over the next few years. Chinese doctoral students came to UAlbany to complete their dissertation work. The Department also coordinated the donation of many boxes of books and journals to assist sociologists in China. During one of his visits to China, Nan Lin found himself in the midst of the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989; after some complexities in exiting the country, he returned with stories and photos that became part of a fascinating presentation on the events taking place in China. Connections with China by UAlbany Sociology faculty continued into the 2000s with collaborative research efforts involving, for example, Steve Messner and Zai Liang.

The 1980s also saw the establishment of an annual series of “Albany Conferences,” beginning in 1981 and continuing into the 1990s. Each year different faculty would take the lead in putting these conferences together around a topic of their choosing, with leading scholars presenting and reacting to papers presented. Conferences included: networks (Lin), organizational theory and policy (Hall), urban theory and policy (Logan), ethnicity and race (Alba), women’s employment policy (Bose and Spitze), health and aging (Ward, with Shelly Tobin from Social Welfare), deviance and crime (Krohn, Liska, and Messner), social theory (Seidman and Wagner), aggression and violence (Felson), demographic perspectives on family (South and Tolnay), political sociology (Lachmann and Pichardo), and American diversity (Denton and Tolnay). Conference papers were published in edited books or journal issues.

In the early 1980s, several sociology faculty formed a local chapter of Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS), with the involvement of our graduate students, faculty from other local colleges, and state government employees. The group met monthly for a few years, gradually tapering to 1-2 times year and eventually becoming inactive. In the 2000s Hayward Horton organized “Capitalize on Community” conferences linked to his “Critical Demography Project.” And in 2002 the Department would host the 50th anniversary meetings of the NYS Sociological Association (with Dave Wagner as President).
Consolidation and Continued Growth: The 1990s and Beyond

The 1990s

John Logan was Chair as the 1990s began, followed by Richard Alba (for one year) and Marv Krohn. Recognizing the changes and growth in the program outlined above, the faculty participated in a Fall 1990 retreat that offered an opportunity to consider recruitment priorities, resource allocation, and curricular matters; a previous retreat in 1988 had reviewed the structure of the undergraduate and graduate programs. The first Department LAN was established in 1991, followed by the creation of the departmental website (www.albany.edu/sociology) in 1998. (Although in early years “Annual Reports” had been prepared for internal on-campus purposes, the first departmental newsletter was distributed in 1987.) During the 1990s and early 2000s the Department housed two journals: Sociological Forum (edited by Dick Hall) and Gender and Society (Chris Bose). Dick Hall had also edited Sociology of Work and Occupations in the 1980s.

Recruitment in the early 1990s brought Nancy Denton, Richard Lachmann, Glenn Deane, and Larry Raffalovich to UAlbany. Richard Alba resumed as Chair in the late 1990s, followed by Glenna Spitze. By then new faculty additions included Hayward Horton, Ron Jacobs, William Frey (who then returned to Michigan), Don Hernandez, and Dana Haynie (who would move on to Ohio State). Matilda Riley, a former President of the American Sociological Association and an undergraduate mentor of Karyn Loscocco, was presented with an honorary degree by UAlbany in 1997; she had also presented one of the earlier Standing Lectures.

Ted Standing, one of the founders of Sociology at UAlbany, died in 1991. The Department had also been saddened by the death of Paul Meadows in 1984 and by Allen Liska’s death in 1998. These scholar-teachers played a significant role in the development of the Department. The roles of Ted Standing and Paul Meadows were previously noted. Al Liska, whose scholarship focused on deviance and social psychology, contributed to the strengthening of the Department in the 1970s, and he was known especially for his mentoring of graduate students. The contributions of these scholars are remembered through important Department traditions: the annual Theodore G. Standing Lecture on the Human Community; the Allen E. Liska Award for Dissertation Research; and the Paul Meadows Awards for Excellence in Teaching and in Research by graduate students. Endowment funds have also been established in the names of each of these scholars. The Standing Lecture has been the Department’s major annual event since 1971, providing an occasion each spring to bring a major scholar to campus for an address and informal discussions. A partial list of speakers over the years includes August Hollingshead, Robin Williams, Kai Erikson, Mirra Komarovsky, William Julius Wilson, Joan Huber, Stanley Lieberson, and Frances Fox Piven; speakers have also included our former students (Jeffrey Goldfarb and Ron Burt) and members of our faculty (Paul Meadows, Arnold Foster, and Richard Alba). An interesting footnote from Rick: Early in his career Ted Standing had an agricultural economist colleague, Otis Durant Duncan, whose son, Otis Dudley Duncan, would become a prominent sociologist and present one of the early Standing Lectures.
UAlbany celebrated its 150th birthday in 1994, by which time the Sociology program had grown to about 400 majors. The entering cohort of graduate students in 1991 numbered 24, probably a record for the Department. Evidence also continued to appear of the growing stature and quality of Sociology at UAlbany. Following up on prior reports, Albany Sociology ranked 3rd in total authorship in the leading three journals of the discipline during 1991-95; and was 5th for 1997-99. UAlbany was 25th in a US News and World Report ranking of 92 sociology doctoral programs; and was 30th out of 95 programs (and 24th in “effectiveness of program”) in a National Research Council ranking. Further, an ASA Footnotes article suggested that the NRC ranking was “unduly low,” given the continuing record of UAlbany authorship in the leading journals.

After small and sometimes rocky beginnings, the UAlbany Sociology Department had now evolved into a strong and well-respected program. But for many of the faculty, what perhaps stands out even more is the congenial atmosphere. The Department developed a well-deserved, even national reputation as a place marked by friendly and collaborative colleagues who appreciate a wide range of sociological interests, both quantitative and qualitative, without the splits and camps found elsewhere. As noted previously, this was less evident in the early years. When Russ and Marjorie Ward hosted a December holiday reception for faculty and students their first year (1974), one faculty member commented that nobody had brought the Department together socially like that. Subsequent years have brought a number of such events. There have been Department picnics, for a while with faculty-grad student volleyball games (initiated by Dave Wagner and continued by Marv Krohn) – a competition for the Tycho Brahe Trophy (a “Great Dane,” which is the University’s mascot); Dave recalled that “the competition ended when the faculty kept getting older and more physically decrepit, and the graduate students (for some obscure reason) always seemed to be young and fit!” There were also faculty-student-staff bowling competitions in the Campus Center for several years. In the early 1980s faculty took turns hosting Halloween costume parties, based on the previous year’s winner of the Lester F. Ward Memorial Traveling Trophy for the best sociological costume; memorable outfits included Peter Blau’s pregnant jogger (in honor of Glenna Spitze’s then pregnant status) and Glenna posing as Peter the following year, the Wards as a Red Cross nurse (Russ)/vampire (Marjorie) combo, and Al and Jean Liska as a pile of leaves.

Nan and Alice Lin initiated a series of annual International Dinners (which have continued to the present), to which faculty, staff, students, and friends from around campus have brought their favorite ethnic delicacies. Art Richardson hosted gatherings at his place in the Berkshires. Dave and Nancy Wagner hosted Christmas parties for a while, complete with caroling. Dick and Sherry Hall also hosted a variety of events, including receptions to celebrate weddings and births. Other gatherings of sociologists over the years have included those hosted by John Logan and Gwen Guillet, Al and Jean Liska, Steve and Jill Messner, Glenn Deane (with bluegrass accompaniment), Nancy Denton and John Pipkin, Don and Lyla Hernandez, and Richard Lachmann and Lyn Miller-Lachmann. Faculty and grad students with shared sports interests have engaged in tennis, squash, noon-hour basketball, and softball (organized for several years by Stew Tolnay and Patty Glynn), at least until aging of the professoriate showed its effects (see volleyball, above). More recently, the grad students have organized some student-faculty kickball and wiffle-ball games.
The sociability among colleagues has been accompanied by collegial on-campus relations. This partly reflects our good fortune in recruiting people who were or would become excellent scholar-teachers and also good colleagues. After some of the internal issues evident in the mid-1970s, the Department has established a very democratic culture. Faculty meetings are characterized by open and candid discussion. Faculty at all ranks participate in all aspects of departmental business, from voting on personnel decisions to membership on the Executive Committee (whose ranks include at least one member from each rank). Discussions over selection of a new Chair are initiated via a preferential ballot, and it is expected that people will take their “turn” when it is deemed to be appropriate; this may entail a certain amount of cajoling and arm-twisting, often involving the current and former chairs, who have also served as a strong support group for new chairs. Decision-making about departmental arrangements and resources are handled collegially, including course scheduling (e.g., faculty trade off teaching MWF or TTh in alternating semesters, and faculty preferences for courses are generally followed closely), GA assignments, and research office space.

Departmental practices also serve to support junior faculty in a number of ways. Their course schedules are reduced initially, and new preparations are limited, to enable them to make a good transition. Some priority is given to junior faculty for travel funds and seed money for research. We seek to limit their departmental and university service to facilitate focusing on research and teaching; more is expected when people are promoted to Associate Professor, when they would take on major roles such as Undergraduate or Graduate Director. A historical footnote: It was early departmental practice for faculty coming up for tenure to appear at the meeting in which discussion and voting on their case would occur, to give a presentation summarizing their work and respond to questioning (grilling, some might say); this practice ended by the early 1980s.

The 2000s

The 2000s began with the end of Glenna Spitze’s term as Chair and the beginning of Steve Messner’s term; he was followed by Russ Ward, Don Hernandez, and Richard Lachmann. Early recruitment brought Thor Bjarnasson, Angie Chung, and Zai Liang. By then it was felt that the Department had become a bit “top heavy,” as faculty recruited in previous decades had advanced to Full and Associate Professor ranks. Subsequent recruitment efforts focused mainly on junior faculty – Kecia Johnson, Ryan King, Joanne Kaufman, Sapna Swaroop, Beth Popp Berman, Kate Strully, and Aaron Major – as well as Sam Friedman at the Associate level. By 2011 almost half of our department faculty are women, and we have received the SWS Seal of Excellence, reflecting both gender equity in faculty composition and gender scholarship.

The decade was marked by some significant transitions. The Department moved to occupy the third floor of the newly-refurbished Arts and Sciences (formerly Administration) Building in 2002, with faculty having opportunities to make some collective and individual office decorating decisions. This also provided more office space for graduate students, a graduate student computer lab, and research offices. In 2001 the Department began to have an annual Recognition Ceremony during the Spring commencement weekend, providing a more personalized event to celebrate graduating seniors in Sociology. One year an overflow in the
Performing Arts Center resulted in moving some audience to another site for “remote viewing,” yielding some understandably angry parents and a subsequent system of limited tickets to insure each student could have some attendees. The venue then moved to the Campus Center Ballroom and eventually to the SEFCU Arena, where students could have unlimited guests. The large university undergraduate commencement ceremony was marked over the years by rowdy behavior in venues like the downtown arena. The event was moved outdoors on campus, first outside the new Science Library and then to the new Entry Plaza, resulting in improved decorum. Sociology developed a rotation for faculty to attend the university commencement, yielding better attendance than by other departments – and a soggy experience for some faculty (and students) in 2011 when there was heavy rain.

Personnel transitions included the retirements of Maurice Richter, Al Higgins, and Dick Hall. Rick and Al were well-known for their Intro to Sociology courses. Rick was especially known for the connections he made with students, as reflected in hundreds of Facebook “friends” after his retirement. Al was something of a legendary lecturer/entertainer; indeed, some students were known to attend his classes (including Soc of Science, with his work on scientific fraud) even though they were not in the course. Reflecting his scholarly interests in organizations, Dick’s career in Albany included service as Dean of Social and Behavioral Sciences and Vice-President for Research and Graduate Studies, as well as leadership in Organizational Studies and in the athletics program. Later retirements included Richard Alba, Don Hernandez, and Gwen Moore. Other faculty were lured away from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s: Rich Felson to Penn State, Stew Tolnay (and Patty Glynn) to their home base at U Washington, Thor Bjarnasson to his Iceland homeland, Marv Krohn to UAlbany’s School of Criminal Justice and then to Florida, and John Logan to Brown.

Summer 2005 was marked by the departure of Eileen Crary Pellegrino – one month short of 35 years working in the Department office! Eileen was the first “face” (and a very friendly one) of Sociology for many faculty and students. She was the longest-tenured member of an excellent roster of departmental staff over the years. Rich Felson, who was known for his clever rhyming, composed “When Eileen Started” to honor her, and to reflect on department history:

- It was 1970, when Eileen Crary.  
- Joined the department as secretary.  
- The war was on, with campus dissent.  
- Richard Nixon was President.  
- It was before the arrival of the Wards.  
- Faculty were still using computer cards.  
- Some questioned the faculty’s prudence.  
- Smoking pot with graduate students.  
- While the students were into flower power.  
- Eileen worked hard in Mohawk Tower.  
- While her typing was known as flawless.  
- She was never known for going braless.  
- Now 35 years later, the story’s been told.  
- But is my math wrong, or are you getting old?  
- I’d be sorry to lose you if I was around.  
- However, you may recall that I left town.
But I join my former colleagues in hoping you are.
Happy working at the registrar.

Secretarial staff over the years have included Linda Schroll, Gloria Swigert, Joan Cipperly, Kay Flanagan, Sharon Baumgartner, Debbie Neuls, Linda Rogers, Regina Klym, Elleree Rivers, Ann Gwynn, Pat Cavanaugh, and Judy Adamchick. Cathy Rose, who joined the Department in 1998, has shown a remarkable capacity for juggling many responsibilities while remaining friendly and even-tempered. Melanie Lawyer joined the staff in 2008 as another very capable and friendly presence in the office. The Department has also benefited from the excellent support provided by Assistants to the Chair – who handle budgetary, personnel, advisement, and myriad other details of a large department! – including Peggy Patterson, Gail Gates, Louise Tornatore, and Christine Pearce, with Stacey Zyskowski adding her skills and diplomacy in managing so many faculty and students beginning in 2006. Their efforts have contributed, for example, to the Department’s reputation for well-prepared tenure/promotion files.

The entire campus was saddened by the tragic death in summer 2006 of University President Kermit Hall, who in his short 1½ years on campus had become very well regarded by faculty, staff, and students. The Department had had a very pleasant get-acquainted meeting with Kermit only a few months before his death.

By now Sociology was recognized as one of the leading programs on campus. The Department placed 25th nationally in the 2005 US News and World Report rankings of sociology doctoral programs (our peers in the rankings included programs at Penn State, Ohio State, NYU, and Yale), and was 20th for authorship in the leading sociology journals for 2003-05. The number of faculty reached the high 20s. The number of undergraduate majors (“full” or “intended,” waiting to complete entry requirements) topped 600, making Sociology the third largest major in the College of Arts and Sciences. To better insure student understanding and interest in a sociology major, rather than being a “default” choice, admission requirements for the major were established in 2000. Earlier (in the mid-1990s) capstone “senior seminars” had been added as a requirement in the major, enabling students to apply sociological concepts and methods within various focused topic areas from which students could choose. More recently the Department has begun to offer some on-line courses; these supplement evening classes scheduled to accommodate “non-traditional” student schedules (and in earlier times there had been some Saturday classes offered). “Assessment” and “learning objectives” were now becoming important considerations at UAlbany and other campuses around the country, resulting in more explicit departmental efforts to evaluate student performance and achievement via surveys, focus groups, and so-called “course-embedded” measures.

The graduate program has also grown in numbers (now more than 100), quality, and diversity, attracting students from diverse backgrounds, both domestic and international. The Department’s self-study (see below) noted that in 2004-05 about one-fourth of the applicants to the doctoral program were international students, and nearly two-thirds of applicants from the U.S. were from undergraduate programs outside of New York State. Sociology has had a joint Ph.D. with Communication, and has participated in Certificate programs in Demography, Planning and Policy Analysis, Women and Public Policy, Organizational Studies, and Urban
Policy. A number of our doctoral students have completed an MA in Women’s Studies, and a formal joint MA/PhD program with Women’s Studies was recently approved.

Our graduate students are a central part of our success, both in terms of our academic contributions and our collegial culture. Over the years a substantial number of our doctoral students have received university awards for their research and teaching, and our graduates have gone on to productive careers in academia and in policy/research positions in, for example, various NYS agencies. Our students regularly participate in collaborative research projects with faculty and with each other. Each year, the graduate student organization, “Students of Sociology” (SOS), organizes visiting speakers and brownbag discussions on various topics. Our students are also an important part of our teaching mission, offering many undergraduate classes toward the latter part of their degree work and participating in teaching workshops offered by the department and by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

In 2005-06 the Department undertook a self-study, followed by a site visit, as part of the University’s review of the undergraduate and graduate programs. The Department defined its mission and learning objectives, using ASA materials as a guide. The self-study report summarized material that has been presented above. It also highlighted the Department’s interdisciplinary connections, with, for example, Criminal Justice, Women’s Studies (for which Chris Bose and Gwen Moore have served as Chair), Social Welfare, and Organizational Studies; the multiple awards received by faculty for both research and teaching (we have not tried to list here the many individual faculty and student achievements and recognitions; these and other details may be found on the departmental website and in program review documents, newsletters, and the like); and the professional leadership positions held by many of the UAlbany Sociology faculty. Examples of disciplinary leadership have included: Vice President of the American Sociological Association (Alba), President of the Eastern Sociological Society (Alba, Denton, Bose), President of the Association of Black Sociologists (Horton), President of Sociologists for Women in Society (Bose), and President of the American Society of Criminology (Messner). Also, many faculty have chaired sections and committees in ASA, PAA, ASC, and other leading professional associations. A report by external reviewers concluded that the Department “is on a clear trajectory to excellence, enjoys a solid reputation nationally, provides sound undergraduate and graduate training, functions well organizationally, and shares an enviable collegial atmosphere and camaraderie.” Quite a change from the early 1970s!

Beginning in the late 1990s, Nanoscience and what would become the College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering was becoming the “next big thing” at UAlbany, with a futuristic complex across Fuller Road (our offices have also made us witnesses to construction of the new University Hall and Entry Plaza, and the new School of Business building). Nonetheless, Sociology has retained its stature as one of the leading programs on campus. Administrative support has stood us in good stead as the University has faced continuing budget issues, reflected in a series of “BAGs” (Budget Advisory Groups) to review allocations and consider possible discontinuation of some programs, an echo of the 1970s. In this context, Sociology has benefitted from the University’s philosophy of “building on strength.” Most recently this has been reflected in recruitment of new faculty to partly replace losses due to...
retirements and other departures, with Joanne Dreby and Peter Brandon joining the faculty in 2011.

Thus, we as a department have grown in size and stature over the past several decades, transforming ourselves from a small, conflict-ridden department to one that is productive, collegial, nationally-ranked, and viewed by the University administration as one of the premier departments on campus. We have enjoyed administration support since the 1970s, from an early plan to build to several decades of “building on strength.” In addition to this support, we see our democratic culture, our web of productive research collaborations, and our wise (and perhaps lucky) hiring decisions as having contributed to this success. We have tended to hire junior or associate-level faculty with much promise, many of whom became widely-regarded “stars,” rather than bringing in already-established senior faculty. Having built the department together, our faculty have shared strong expectations to serve the department and the campus, in addition to our excellence in research and teaching.

That’s the story so far. This narrative has been gleaned from the recollections of participants in the life of Sociology at Albany and from available records. Many thanks to all of those who have contributed their memories. The authors apologize for errors of omission or commission. We leave it to others to continue this account.