

Sociology in Community: Revitalizing a Sociology Program through Community Development Studies

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Abstract: Sociology programs across the country have adopted various strategies for addressing a range of complex pressures and challenges over the last decade. This paper examines a curricular innovation strategy – the creation of a Community Development Studies Concentration within the Sociology major – adopted to address declining program enrollment and relevance. Drawing on institutional reports, student evaluations, and engagement activity data, the article offers qualitative reflections on the creation and implementation of the new Community Development Studies program and its initial impact on the sociology program and the community. The clearest benefits so far, we argue, are the increased level of engagement with community partners for both students and faculty, despite little available evidence for the new program's impact on major enrollment.

Keywords: Community, community development, sociology program, curriculum, innovation, concentration.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, sociology programs in the United States have confronted myriad pressures and challenges that have tested their viability (Young and Bates 2024). Enrollment in undergraduate sociology programs has declined steadily since 2013 (ASA 2025). Other trends affecting higher education institutions more broadly, such as the overall demographic decline in the pool of high school graduates, covid pandemic complications and accompanying financial constraints, added to the declines in sociology enrollments and, in some cases, elimination of sociology programs in recent years (Downs 2023; Friedman 2024). More recent political attacks on 'woke' topics, accelerated in the second Trump administration, have made sociology programs vulnerable on multiple fronts (Everett 2024; Misra *et al.* 2024; ASA 2025).

While these challenges are often beyond a program's ability to address on its own, sociology programs have responded in different ways to address the adverse pressures (Young and Bates 2024). Some have merged with other more popular majors such as Criminal Justice or Anthropology to bolster small programs in consolidated units. Some have enhanced career-development components and improved messaging to students and the community about the benefits of a sociology degree (ASA 2025). Others have updated their curricula to incorporate new trends, such as the sociology of gaming, and more experiential learning opportunities for students (Downey *et al.* 2019).

This article examines another strategy – the establishment of a community development focus within the sociology major – for addressing sociology's declining enrollments and diminished profile at a regional university in the southeast. Drawing on institutional reports, student evaluations, and engagement activity data, the article offers qualitative reflections on the creation and implementation of the new Community Development Studies (CDS) program and its initial impact on the sociology program and the community. The clearest benefits so far, we argue, are the increased level of engagement with community partners for both students and faculty, despite little evidence for the new program's impact on major enrollment.

As a way of capturing the program change process and its preliminary impact, the article draws on a small, diverse sample of sources. The description of the circumstances giving rise to the creation of the program relies on sociology faculty notes, university administrator directives, and program review reports to help identify the impetus for curricular reform. Our assessment of the initial impact of the program draws on a combination of student evaluations and reflection papers, informal discussions with community partners, and a compilation of community engagement activity data. The authors reflect on emergent themes that cut across the sample of sources. More research is needed to provide a more systematic analysis of the new program and its various impacts.

BACKGROUND FOR CURRICULAR CHANGE

The path to curricular change in our Sociology program was shaped by a combination of broader contextual trends and factors as well as specific institutional directives and pressures.

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The Sociology program forms part of the Department of Sociology, Criminal Justice and Women's and Gender Studies within the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Sociology has about 30 majors, making it smaller in comparison to larger more popular programs such as Criminal Justice, which has about 200 majors. The institution is a regional comprehensive university in the southeast with student enrollments just over 5000. Like other regional comprehensive universities, the student population has a large portion of nontraditional students, students of color, and first-generation students (Zack 2020). The university had experienced enrollment declines – from a peak of 6307 students in 2019 to just over 4478 in 2024 -- but has since stabilized and is now seeing the largest student body since 2019. While the university has been impacted by larger adverse trends affecting higher education (pandemic, disinvestment, demographic decline), the local and regional economic and demographic growth is likely to offset those risk factors.

The Sociology program has shown consistent strengths over time. The primary mission of Sociology is to *equip students with the ability to understand human behavior in the context of social, historical, and cultural influences*. It is remarkably productive in terms of students served and faculty engagement in research, the profession, and the community (Waity 2022; Zack 2023). The curriculum remains flexible with new service-learning, active-learning, online and applied experiences added. A common theme cuts across our teaching and research: inequity and disparity, broadly defined, and the human response to it through policy, civic engagement, and public protest. We frame our work within the global international character of the region, and its population growth and diversity. Our program attracts many students of color and first generation and nontraditional students. Alumni pursue careers in the region in social services, counseling, community advocacy, consulting, research, and human relations, as well as post-graduate degrees in Social Work, Law, and Public Health. The program, thus, aligns well with the university's strategic objectives in providing a rigorous, career-relevant, and accessible education, enhancing the quality of life in the Upstate, and being the university-of-choice for students, faculty, and staff.

Other indicators point to recent weakening of the program. The number of majors has declined consistently from a peak of 57 majors in 2019 to 48 in 2022 to the current 29, a 50% decline overall. The

program has also seen a comparable decrease in faculty capacity -- from 5.5 full-time faculty in 2015 to 3 currently – due to retirement, departure, and career advancement. These declines have shifted the stature of Sociology within the university, from a medium-sized program on par with other social sciences and larger than humanities majors to one of the smaller programs in the college. Some of the decline in the number of majors can be attributed to decreased recruitment potential in the Intro class as fewer sections were offered, less often by full-time faculty, and more offered online. Due to its reliance on specific feeders such as the Intro class, the impact of regionals being squeezed by free tuition at nearby two-year colleges and increased enrollments at the flagship may be exacerbated for Sociology program (Gardner 2023).

Even before the pandemic, the three current sociology faculty had often discussed ways of growing the program by drawing on and institutionalizing our regular use of high-impact practices in our teaching (McDaniel and Van Jura 2022). For example, we all incorporated active-learning and community engagement opportunities into our classes. Sociology of Aging was converted into a Service-learning course. In fall 2018, students in a Political Sociology class trained as poll workers and worked at polling stations on election day. Urban Sociology featured field trips, community leaders as guest speakers, and even a local photo project in collaboration with a Graphic Design course. We have also sponsored several applied research projects in Senior Seminar classes and independent studies and supported direct field experience in internships. The common denominator was having students use their sociological skills and understanding to investigate firsthand various community and social problems.

In January 2022, the Chancellor announced that the university would be undertaking a new Institutional Program Review Process, a common mandate for academic programs (Senter 2021). The purpose, according to email communication from the Chancellor's office, was to "create financial efficiencies that contribute to a balanced budget and the necessary resources to invest in programs and innovations that align with our mission and the community's needs." In short, the university needed to reduce expenditures by \$1.1 million and find new ways to increase tuition revenue. The initiative was informed by Robert Dickeson's book *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance* and an outside higher education consultant,

Dr. Ken Dobbins. The review process was applied to all university divisions, both administrative and academic. Among academic programs, the decision was made to select 'low enrolled majors' (i.e. average number of majors below 50), which included Sociology. The process involved answering a dozen questions about productivity, costs and revenue, internal and external demand, quality of program, and 'ways for improving the future productivity' of the program. A review committee assessed the program report and any proposed innovations. We had already achieved maximum efficiency and flexibility in the Sociology program, so innovations had to come from creating something new.

In the report, we proposed creation of a Certificate that equipped students with skills needed to work in the community and met their desire to work with underserved populations, marginalized groups, solving social problems, etc. We planned to explore certificates in community development, community engagement, and applied social science. This proposal was supported by research on the benefits of high-impact practices and active-learning pedagogies, practices already adopted by faculty and recommended by the American Sociological Association (Pike *et al.* 2017).

This review process turned out to be the first step on the path to creating the CDS Concentration.

WHY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STUDIES?

Though we had initially proposed a certificate, we opted for the model of a concentration. A separate certificate, we figured, would not generate enough benefit for the sociology program and existing certificates on campus had not drawn student attention. We also ruled out creating a minor and even replacing the Sociology major with a different more applied community focus. Our broad goal was to grow the sociology program both in terms of enrollment but also in its profile within the university and across the community. We decided on a Concentration, which is like a track within the major. We could retain the traditional core of the Sociology major and offer two upper-level tracks, one "general sociology studies" where students selected any 7 courses and the other as the new applied/community-focused concentration. We had some successful examples on our campus as a model. The Criminal Justice program had created a Crime Analysis concentration within the major using the two-track format. Political Science was also considering adding a Concentration in "Justice and Law Studies"

geared toward students interested in pre-law, law school, and other legal careers.

We chose "Community Development Studies" as the Concentration theme for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, it fit well with student interests. When asked why they choose sociology, students often talk about wanting to help people and make a difference in their community. Like other regional comprehensive universities, our student population tends to come from the local region and within the state and usually returns to these regions after they graduate. Of course, students in other majors, such as criminal justice and psychology, nursing and education, also have a similar motivation for choosing their major. We wanted to be able to reach them as well. The community development focus could also appeal to students wanting to pursue social and community service careers but not necessarily social work. We also hoped that a focus on community development would allow us to prepare students to contribute, through their careers and lives, to the building and maintenance of social infrastructure in their communities (Klinenberg, 2018; Schloffel-Armstrong, 2023).

We also found community development programs at other universities to be compelling and feasible models for creating a track within a sociology major. Examples include at University of California Davis, Portland State University, Temple University, and others. These community development programs were generally interdisciplinary in that their programs drew from sociology, political science, and public policy/administration programs, including relying on those faculty and classes. This was attractive to us because we had to find a way to create something new with existing resources. We also liked that these programs offered a combination of theory, applied social science, and a community engagement focus.

Another reason for choosing 'community development' was to signal better to various audiences what it is we do in sociology and how it might connect students to various career aspirations. Generally, students don't know what sociology is before being exposed to it in college. It's not a standard course offered in high schools and sociology, as a social science discipline, does not have the same cultural resonance as political science, anthropology, psychology, and economics. If anything, sociology is often conflated with social work. And, as a broad degree offering a set of transferable skills and honed perspectives, it doesn't point clearly to jobs or careers.

We figured that associating sociology with ‘community development’ would conjure up something more concrete even if people were not familiar with the field of community development.

Table 1: Program Development Timeline

CDS Program Formation Process	Timeline
University Review Process	January 2022
Conceptualizing CDS program	Summer and Fall 2022
University and External Approval Processes	Spring and Summer 2023
CDS Program Launch and Promotion	Fall 2023
Offer existing core CDS courses	Spring 2024
Create new CD course	Summer 2024
Teach new CD course	Fall 2024

Another important audience to address was “our community”, variously defined as the small city, county, and multi-county region relevant to our institution. Spartanburg is a dynamic city, within one of the fastest growing counties in the country, and with a fair amount of financial support for arts, culture, and civic initiatives, through local foundations and several active and impactful non-profits. The President and CEO of one of these local organizations, the United Way of the Piedmont, graciously supported our sociology program by serving as a member of the committee conducting the program’s external review. With their input, that review affirmed the reciprocal benefits of increasing community engagement through our program, suggesting that it “could lead to faculty-led research

opportunities, capstone projects for students, service-learning opportunities, and increased community impact. Spartanburg and the surrounding communities value data-driven decision-making, and the Sociology program could provide expertise in research, data analysis, and issue framing/context (Waity *et al.* 2022).”

Finally, we saw potential for collaboration and support by aligning with emerging initiatives on campus to do more community engagement. The Office of Service Learning and Community Engagement was tasked to encourage the development of more community engaged learning opportunities and to capture and document disparate engagement work we were already doing on campus. University leadership had set as a goal to qualify for the elective Carnegie classification for community engagement.

With all these factors in mind, we embarked on creating the curriculum for the Concentration in Community Development Studies. Beyond the Sociology core (Intro, Stats, Theory, Methods, and Senior Seminar), we created a community development core to include a Community Development class, Urban Sociology, and Social Problems, all three required courses for the CDS Concentration. The latter two we already offered on a regular basis. The Community Development course had to be created. After the core, we wanted students to take 3 sociology courses, 1 from each thematic area of institutions, inequality, and civic engagement. In the interest of relying on existing resources, we organized the sociology courses we already taught into the 3

Table 2: CDS Program Curriculum

Curriculum for Sociology Major with a Concentration in Community Development Studies
<p>Required (15 hrs): All Sociology majors take 5 courses: Introduction to Sociology, Statistics for the Social Sciences, Sociological Theory, Sociological Research Methods, Senior Seminar</p>
<p>Upper-Level (21 hrs): Students choose Option A – General Studies (any 7 upper-level Sociology courses) or B - Concentration in Community Development Studies</p> <p>B: Concentration in Community Development Studies</p> <p><i>Three required courses:</i></p> <p>SOCY U322: Community Development</p> <p>SOCY U323: Urban Sociology</p> <p>SOCY U311: Social Problems</p> <p><i>At least one course from each of the three areas:</i> Students can choose a related upper-level course from another program, subject to approval of adviser.</p> <p>Institutions: SOCY U341 Sociology of Families; SOCY U345 Sociology of Religion; SOCY U347 Sociology of Organizations and Work; SOCY U361 Medical Sociology</p> <p>Inequality: SOCY U330 Social Inequality; SOCY U333 Race and Ethnic Relations; SOCY U337 Gender and Society</p> <p>Civic Engagement: SOCY U325 Social Movements; SOCY U343 Political Sociology</p> <p><i>1 course in Applied Community Experience:</i> SOCY U395 Internship; SOCY U399 Independent Study, SOCY 321 Sociology of Aging, or any other course designated as service-learning or community engagement, subject to approval of advisor</p>

thematic areas and sorted them accordingly. This way, students could choose among options. In the future, we could add course options from other areas such as Political Science, Community Health, and Nonprofit. We also wanted an applied/experiential learning component, called Applied Community Experience that could be met with an internship, service-learning class, independent study, or undergraduate research. These 7 classes, the equivalent of 21 credit hours, constituted a track parallel to the "General Sociology Studies" track.

After moving through the approval process in spring of 2023, on our campus and with the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, the new Concentration in Community Development Studies was set to launch in Fall 2023.

IMPLEMENTATION

The initial phase of implementation involved marketing and promoting the new program. We did this by distributing new flyers, doing outreach on campus and to area two-year colleges, highlighting it at recruitment events, announcing it to our community partners, and talking about it during our fall advising so that our Sociology students would be aware. We had 4 Sociology majors opt right away for the CDS Concentration in this initial phase. We encouraged interested students to pursue the core courses - take the Urban Sociology and Social Problems courses in the Spring and the new Community Development course the following fall. We opted to cross-list the new CD course with an honors section to help fill the class and to steer students from other majors into it.

The next task was to create and launch the new Community Development course. The purpose of the course was to introduce students to the field of community development, core concepts and approaches, and expose them to the many dimensions of community development (DeFilippis and Saegert 2012; Green and Haines 2016; Phillips and Pittman 2015). The curriculum was organized around broad themes. The first section provided an overview of the field, highlighting core questions, the historical development of various approaches, and the ethos and impetus informing it. A single appropriate undergraduate level introduction to CD text was not identified so a mix of materials (e.g. readings, videos, podcasts, etc.) were compiled for the syllabus. Another principal goal was to integrate as much experiential learning as possible, preferably for each week/theme.

Many weekly lessons included guest speakers from local community organizations who covered a range of topics from urban planning, regional cooperation, economic expansion, HIV-AIDS education and awareness, trail development and healthy living, youth mentoring, and neighborhood revitalization. We also took students into the community for field trips, which included a visit to the SC Inland Port terminal and to a gallery photo exhibit on youth mental health. Students were required to conduct preparatory research on the organizations' issues and prepare discussion questions. The signature engagement activity was the Poll Worker Project, where students trained as election poll workers and served at county polling stations on election day, 2024.

We also encouraged students to attend relevant co-curricular events, often focused on career readiness. For example, we organized our annual Non-Profit Career Panel in the spring semester where a diverse group of nonprofit professionals from the community share information about their work, motivations, career paths, and challenges. This event helps students envision what it might be like to build a career doing community development. The speakers help students see how to translate a passion for making a difference into a career.

We also strategized on how best to formalize our Community Partners network. Sociology faculty have worked in some capacity with many nonprofit and community leaders and activists, but we do not have a system for documenting those relationships and interactions, information that would be potentially useful for student internships, campus speakers, fundraising, and program assessment. At some point, we envision creating a Community Development Advisory Board that would provide guidance on opportunities for current students and skills and experiences graduates need to work in the field.

INITIAL IMPACTS

We are still in the early phases of implementation, so we cannot yet measure long term impact from the new CDS concentration. Still, we can delineate some meaningful positive effects on the Sociology program, on our students, and in our community.

Impacts on the Sociology Program

In terms of enrollment, we have had a total of 7 students select the CDS Concentration since Fall 2023. Two have since graduated and 3 newly enrolled

Sociology students intend to declare it. All of these students were already declared Sociology majors, so we do not yet have evidence that the community development focus has affected overall sociology enrollments. We do know, however, that exposure to the community development focus extends beyond Sociology students. By cross-listing the Community Development class (Fall 2024 and Fall 2025) with an honors section, most of the students in the class have come from other liberal arts majors (English, Political Science), the natural sciences, and professional programs in Education, Business, and Community Health. Thus, though instituting the community development focus has not yet led to sociology enrollment growth, offering the Community Development course has resulted in increased awareness of the program among students across the campus.

Beyond student enrollment, developing the concentration has led to shifts in the way we schedule and rotate course offerings. We have committed to offering Community Development every fall and Urban Sociology every spring so that students can count on taking at least one core course each semester. This has coincided with a more regular rotation of core courses for the Sociology major – Theory and Senior Seminar in the fall and Research Methods in the spring. We then offer a regular rotation of a few upper-level Sociology electives that can accommodate sociology students on either track. This shuffling has led to a more predictable rotation of Sociology courses which makes it easier overall for all sociology students to develop 4-year course plans, an academic program feature that helps with retention (insert source).

In the interest of further aligning our curriculum with the new community development focus, we have also revised existing courses to incorporate more experiential learning and community engagement activities. As described earlier, the new Community Development course has now been taught twice with a diverse mix of field trips, community leaders as guest speakers, and election poll worker training and service. Other courses, such as the Senior Seminar, have been reimagined to include deeper engagement in community projects. During the Fall 2024 semester, for example, faculty partnered with LifeWorks SC and the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce to conduct research into Spartanburg's missing class, those between the poverty line and twice the poverty line who live in precarity. Students examined labor market data while also focusing on

specific issues of interest to them, including the costs of childcare, the challenges that justice-involved people encounter in returning to work, and the difficulties of low-wage employment. The class shared findings with an audience of faculty and staff from outside the department and several community members.

Other courses underwent similar innovations. In Spring 2024, faculty redesigned the Urban Sociology course as Service-Learning and Community Engagement designated and collaborated with a Digital Photography instructor to create a group project for students in both classes. The focus was to capture the built environment of Spartanburg from both a visual artistic perspective and social science research lens. The semester included a variety of class visits with community leaders and community excursions, including historical and neighborhood walking tours. The spring 2025 Urban Sociology did not include a cross-class collaborative project, but it did continue to expose students to the diverse array of community leaders from public, private and nonprofit sectors as well as regional and state organizations impacting local community development. Faculty also made Social Inequality a Service-learning and Community Engagement course. This time, students engaged in a semester-long research project examining the community's progress in achieving the goals laid out in the City of Spartanburg's 2020 Resolution for "Healing, Reconciling, and Unity: A Pathway to a more Equitable Spartanburg."

Impact on Community Partners and Partnerships

Through the creation and implementation of the CDS program, with its many community-engaged activities, we diversified and strengthened connections between our program and community organizations. During the creation phase, which coincided with the Sociology program review process, we worked closely with the Executive Director of United Way of the Piedmont, one of the largest local nonprofit organizations, which allowed us to articulate our vision for the program and receive feedback on how to maximize the impact in the community which skills we needed to foster in students wanting to work in the community development field. This exchange of vision and feedback, we agreed, was valuable for both partners and should be a regular part of the program development process. We have applied a similar model to working with other local organizations, such as LifeWorks and the county Elections office, and see mutually beneficial outcomes.

In this early phase of implementing the CDS program, we can already observe some of the ways our community partners have benefitted from working with us. Through the Community Development course, we have provided student labor for important community functions, such as staffing polling sites on election day. Through research projects, such as the one on the “missing class,” we have generated insightful data that organizations, such as LifeWorks, are using to further educate community leaders and apply for grants. LifeWorks SC has published the report that came from the collaboration with our Fall 2024 Senior Seminar course. We understand that they have also referred to that report in grant applications and discussions with their funders and partner organizations. Additionally, one spring 2025 graduate of our program went on to work with LifeWorks SC in the summer following her graduation. By inviting community groups to our classes, they gain new platforms for reaching young people. Community organizations have also been recognized with awards for the work they do with the university. For their work with students in this course, LifeWorks SC and SC DEW were nominated as the outstanding community engaged activity from the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences for USC Upstate’s 5th Annual Celebration of Community Engagement in April of 2025.

Through the implementation of our community development program, the university has deepened its connections with local stakeholders. These strengthened partnerships have become a cornerstone of our outreach strategy, supporting both academic goals and community well-being. By fostering collaborative relationships, the program has positioned the university as a trusted partner and catalyst for local development.

Impact on Student Career Readiness and Understanding of Community Infrastructure

The CDS program has elevated the quantity and quality of career-readiness opportunities for students. In the last four semesters, students have been connected with an incredibly rich and diverse array of community leaders, issues, and organizations, giving them deeper knowledge of the nonprofit and public sectors in the area, ideas about potential careers, and the opportunity to expand their network of professional contacts.

Students have also had unique opportunities to demonstrate their skills and the value of their sociology

degree to community leaders. After conducting the Senior Seminar research project on the “missing class,” the students’ on campus presentation was so well received by the community members in the audience that they were invited to give multiple presentations of their results outside of the university, including to the Spartanburg County Democratic Party, a Wofford College Winter Term class on “Stories of Spartanburg,” and the North Spartanburg Rotary Club. In the Urban Sociology course, CDS students gained valuable experience in working together with art students, organizing the downtown gallery exhibition, and speaking to community members about their work. In the Social Inequality class, students honed their teamwork, communication, and critical-thinking skills as they assessed Spartanburg’s Racial Healing Resolution and its impact on public policy and city culture and then shared results with city officials and community members. In each of our Community Engaged or Service-Learning courses, students also complete assignments through which they document their progress on the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Career Competencies (NACE, 2025). Students in these courses have created resume entries highlighting the skills they acquired through course activities and reflected on the development of their skills in key competency areas including professionalism, critical thinking, and teamwork.

Beyond the career readiness benefits, students developed greater appreciation for the work of community development, how that work builds community infrastructure, and how it shapes people’s everyday realities. For example, by touring their local public library, students gain first-person experience that reveals how social infrastructure is built (King, 2023). Through their poll worker experience with the county government, students learn the practical reality of their community’s civic infrastructure.

We see these themes, of career readiness and greater understanding of social infrastructure, highlighted in student writing in course assignments and in their qualitative feedback on course evaluations. For example, many students admit they were naïve to the academic concept of community development, but that through their courses they were able to articulate the importance of the concept. As one student acknowledged, “I honestly did not really know what community development was coming into this class and did not realize how crucial it is and how it has an impact on everyone in the community.” Another student noted that “... this class is vital for our understanding of

urban life." In a student evaluation question about advice, one student said: "Take it! It is a unique class and I left it learning some valuable things about the community I live within which has made me appreciate where I live even more."

Some students showed a keen understanding of the centrality of resources and power in the field of community development. As one student wrote:

"I came to realize that community development in all forms is political work, even if the organization is not expressly political. ... Politics are often polarizing, and community development requires coming together for a common purpose. However, I think that if more people began to realize that many of the things that benefit communities are only political because *they are made to be political* in our cultural and political context, they may be able to overcome such polarization to improve their communities. " (emphasis from the student)

Still, after their course experiences, many students were readily able to identify community development efforts in their lives and in their communities. Many of the students expressed appreciation for how these courses demonstrated ways by which they themselves could impact their communities. As one student wrote, "I had the opportunity to learn about the work of community development, and thus about the multitude of ways that we as humans can better society."

Students also expressed an understanding that communities are complex and dynamic, and that social infrastructure is built through the contributions of community members. As one student reflected, "I have learned the importance of civic engagement. There is a lot that goes into keeping our communities together and functioning." As another student wrote, through this course, they "...had the opportunity to not only see community development in action and meet with community development workers, but I was also able to actually work in a community development role."

Many students completed the course with a profound interest in engaging more deeply with their communities through their work and over the course of their lives. One student explained that the course had shifted their perspective, explaining:

"As a marketing major, I did not realize that there were jobs that I could do that

involved community development, and I will be looking more into doing something in community development before I graduate this spring. This class has made me really think about changing my plans from wanting to work for a big corporate company to me now wanting to work more in our community. I now look at life differently, and I really want to be more involved in our community from here on out."

Another student expressed a meaningful personal commitment to their community. In reflecting on one of the readings from the course, the student highlighted a quote: "This suggests that community building solutions must understand how these systems, rules, and structures affect poor neighborhoods, and then make them work better by tapping into the resources of outside institutions and influencing their actions" (DeFilippis and Saegert 370). The student went on to explain their view that, "Without community development, these poor communities, including the ones that I care about, would never be able to thrive again, and this inspired me to attempt to take on that role and try to help the community that I love, even if I don't live in it."

LOOKING FORWARD

These initial indicators suggest that the new Community Development Studies concentration makes positive contributions and should be maintained. Given that the program was instituted with existing financial and human resources, the infrastructure and personnel are already in place to ensure continuity and stability over the next few years. In other words, as long as the Sociology program remains viable, it should be feasible to continue to offer the community development focus as an option for students.

Looking ahead, the primary challenge lies not in sustaining the program but in fostering its growth. Key strategies for growing and enhancing the program, such as sustained outreach and recruitment, creating new engagement and career-readiness opportunities for students (e.g. grant writing, fundraising), and supervising applied community-based projects, are difficult to carry out without additional staffing and funding. Growing the new program will require careful strategic planning and creative collaboration.

One key strategy for strengthening the Sociology/CDS program is to deepen its integration

within the university's academic and civic ecosystem. The CDS program aligns naturally with the university's service learning and civic engagement initiatives and has already created opportunities for joint projects, internships, and community partnerships that benefit the students and local organizations. There is also clear potential for collaboration with related programs such as community health, where students explore the social dimensions of well-being, and political science, particularly among those interested in policy analysis, advocacy, and public administration. By forging these interdisciplinary connections, the sociology program with the community development focus can become a hub for applied social inquiry—one that supports the university's mission of preparing students to address real-world challenges through research, service, and leadership.

Another strategy we plan to pursue is to create a Community Development Studies minor or certificate, creating more degree opportunities through courses we have developed or revised and are already offering. Doing so would increase student engagement with Community Development Studies without necessarily recruiting them to Sociology and give students in other majors more opportunities to stack credentials.

Externally, we have plans to increase outreach to two-year colleges offering sociology, human services, and other related programs. Like many regional comprehensive universities, USC Upstate enrolls many transfer students, and so it is important for any new program to appeal to these students (Grites and Farina, 2012). We hope to highlight the appeal of our new program and the positive impact it's had already on students and the community. We also plan to work with our University's Development office to make them aware of the new program and to establish a fund to support program initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

We reorganized our sociology program to offer students a concentration in Community Development Studies and to re-engage with our university's community because, like so many of the community members, institutions, and organizations which community development efforts work to support, our sociology program found itself short on resources and declining in enrollments. Building the new concentration led to the creation of a new course and the reworking of several courses in our sociology major to be more deeply engaged in our community. We were

fortunate to be doing this work in a diverse and dynamic community that is full of proactive organizations and generous local leaders who were willing to accept our invitations to class and willing to connect our students more closely with their community. As our students learned about the work of community development, they developed an appreciation for all that it takes to make a community whole, for how social infrastructure is built and maintained, and many students committed to contributing to their communities throughout their lives. It is evident at this early stage that the new CDS program, and the deeper engagement with the community that has accompanied it, has indeed helped revitalize the Sociology program in important ways. The next step is to convert this renewed enthusiasm into measurable growth in the Sociology program which in turn would provide more opportunities for students, faculty and community partners to collaborate in the service of greater community well-being.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare no conflicts of interest. This work received no financial funding from any state or private organization.

APPENDIX A: STUDENT DATA

Note: Student names and identifying information have been removed.

- Student Learning Survey, Community Development (SOCY U322), Fall 2024
- Student Final Reflection Essays, Community Development (SOCY U322), Fall 2024
- Student Learning Survey, Senior Seminar (SOCY U499), Fall 2024

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