March 2, 2012

TO: Program Prioritization Committee

FROM: Marieke Van Willigen, Interim Chair
Department of Sociology

RE: Program Prioritization White Paper

The faculty in the Department of Sociology met on Wednesday February 22nd to discuss the White Paper put out by the Program Prioritization Committee on potential restructuring. In addition a number of our faculty attended the HCAS Open Forum with Dean Alan White. While we have discussed all of the ideas posed by the committee, we would like in particular to respond to the suggestion that the Department of Criminal Justice merge with the Department of Sociology or the Department of Political Science. The Sociology faculty is opposed to a merger of Sociology and Criminal Justice for a number of reasons.

First, while the PPC notes that the combination of Sociology and Criminal Justice is not uncommon, these types of combined departments exist on campuses in which Criminal Justice has grown out of a Department of Sociology. This is a very different situation than merging two departments which developed independently and with different priorities and cultures. In departments in which Criminal Justice emerges from among a faculty of sociologists, the research and teaching continues to represent the sociological perspective. Thus, Criminal Justice in these types of departments is more representative of the sub-discipline of Criminology within Sociology than a practice-oriented discipline with a base that is not rooted strongly in theory and research. This is an important distinction as we consider the merger of the two departments at ECU. Such a situation is unlikely to create an environment in which both disciplines thrive.

Second, as a discipline, sociology is very diverse, and our department represents that diversity. We have long term faculty teaching and research interests in family; social diversity/inequality; health; social movements; religion; immigration; environmental issues; economy and regional development. Over the last several years, we have deliberately strengthened our focus on issues of social diversity and social inequality, including gender, race, ethnicity, age, and sexuality. This combined focus on inequality with diverse courses available to our students is a strength in that they are able to learn how social inequality cuts across a wide variety of social institutions, organizations, and settings. In addition the department curriculum continues to emphasize the development of research skills through hands-on experiences provided to our students. It is these
skills that have made our students most marketable. These foci are in keeping with the University’s goals of training students to compete in a global and diverse economy.

By contrast, crime and corrections comprise a very small part of the discipline of sociology as a whole at the national level. The proposed merger, if carried through, would make crime and corrections overnight into the largest single focus of our department and would thereby pose significant disruptions to the department’s historic strengths and its current focus.

The PPC has emphasized that they “will not recommend any structural change that provides modest improvement to administrative efficiency while producing significant disruption and little gain to collaborative environments.” Clearly this merger would produce little or no administrative cost savings while nonetheless producing significant administrative difficulties in trying to administer two very different disciplines within a single unit. Departments of this sort typically experience conflicts over resources and priorities, with one program becoming the dominant program and the other taking on a secondary role. These types of conflicts hinder productivity and affect the recruitment and retention of faculty. This is exactly why departments of this sort at ECU split off into separate units in the past. We have no reason to expect that moving back to this model will lead to more productive and effective results now.

cc. Dean Alan White
Provost Marilyn Sheerer
Chancellor Steve Ballard