A Message from the Chair

Welcome back! I hope you had a good break and are ready to get back to work. Advising for the fall semester begins Friday, March 12th and registration begins Thursday, March 18th. Sociology majors should call Mrs. Hostler (9-4742) for an appointment with me. Criminal Justice majors should call Mrs. Spencer (9-4786) for an appointment with Dr. William Waegel. This is the only time we require you to contact the office staff for appointments (rather than contacting us directly) because it is important that we not double-book people during this very busy time. Remember, advisement is more than simply getting your PIN for registration. It is an opportunity to discuss relevant courses, extracurricular activities and future plans.

Congratulations to students who will be graduating in May. You will be receiving Exit Surveys later this semester. We ask that you reflect on your experiences with all of us and answer the questions thoughtfully and honestly (they are anonymous). The faculty take the survey comments very seriously and incorporate your feedback into our teaching and curriculum plans. We wish you the very best. Do not hesitate to contact us in the future if we can ever assist you. Please stay in touch with your favorite professors. All of us are interested in what our former students are doing after graduation.

Congratulations is also in order for Ms. Dana Moss, our Research Associate. This coming fall, she will begin working on a Ph.D. in sociology. She is currently deciding between the University of Michigan, UNC - Chapel Hill, and several others. Dana has been with us for four years helping students with MicroCase, providing valuable assistance to many professors with their research, and doing more things for the Chair than I can list in the this newsletter. While we are sorry to see her leave, we are all very happy for her and wish her the very best.

—Dr. Thomas Arvanites

Special Announcement:
The Sociology Club is Back!

Villanova’s Sociology Club is being reinstated as of spring 2010 and is actively recruiting new members. The club’s purpose is to engage students in a common social and academic setting to explore mutual interests in sociology, criminal justice, and other related subjects. The club will offer opportunities for students to engage with their peers and professors in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice through a variety of activities. It is open to all students, regardless of major.

Upcoming events will include regular lunch meetings, movie and discussion sessions, and attendance at a Phillies game. In addition, are plans to take field trips to Graterford Prison and the Chester Soccer Stadium to learn about social justice issues there.

Students will also have the opportunity to revise and present their research projects to student and faculty colleagues in a relaxed, supportive setting. This will provide excellent opportunities for collaboration and constructive feedback on projects.

If you are interested in being part of the Sociology Club, please email Alissa at alissa.ricci@villanova.edu to be added to the email list. Also feel free to speak to the club’s faculty advisor, Dr. Rick Eckstein, or the Chair, Dr. Thomas Arvanites. Join the Facebook group online: Sociology Club @ Nova.
The Death Penalty and the Family
By Alissa Ricci, Class of 2011

In many sociology and criminal justice classes, the death penalty is often discussed as a controversial issue in American society today. National research consistently shows that defendants who receive the death penalty are disproportionately low-income racial and ethnic minorities. According to Pennsylvanians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (PADP), more than 90 percent of Pennsylvania's death row prisoners are too poor to afford a lawyer for their initial trial, and almost 70 percent of these prisoners are people of color.

This past fall, an event titled "What About the Family?" offered a holistic perspective on how the death penalty affects the entire community, rather than just the legal system and those in the courtroom. The event was hosted by the Sociology and Criminal Justice Department, in addition to Villanovans Against the Death Penalty and Villanovans for Life. Approximately 60 students attended, many of whom were in Dr. Arvanites' Sociology of Deviance class.

Bill Piper, a member of PADP, spoke of his experience as a survivor of his mother's murder in 1999 and his family's decision not to pursue the death penalty. Piper was 34 years old at the time. The defendant was a 26 year old man with borderline mental retardation and a history of small crimes and family problems.

Piper found himself unable to assign a level of guilt to the defendant, whom he described as "lost, hopeless and not really present" in the courtroom. He also felt sympathy towards the defendant's family, as Piper witnessed their tears at the trial. He asserted that families of homicide victims need psychological support beyond the justice the legal system can offer. He appealed for counseling services for families of homicide victims to help them heal and move on with their lives, as opposed to being encouraged by the legal system and society at large to pursue the death penalty as the primary recourse. Piper sees the court process as dehumanizing and drawn-out because of the appeals process. It normally takes between 18 and 20 years for the death penalty to be carried out from sentencing to execution. In addition, defendants may consistently make appeals in an effort to be removed from death row.

During this time, families of homicide victims are often in a state of constant emotional upheaval as they are forced to relive their trauma and return to court repeatedly over many years, if not decades.

Piper convinced his family not to pursue the death penalty so they might deal with their grief in a private manner more conducive to healing.

"My son, who was three years old at the time of the murder, would have become an adult by the time an execution took place. Instead, my family chose to move on and let go of what we couldn't control [the legal outcome]," said Piper. The defendant is currently serving a life sentence without parole in a general population, maximum security prison. Piper regrets that the prison does not offer mental rehabilitation services to its inmates.

"If the amount of money spent on the death penalty was put towards preventive mental health services and improved social services, I believe there would not be a need for the death penalty in the first place. Life without parole is a less costly, more humane alternative to the death penalty," said Piper.
So You Think You Want a Ph.D.?
By Sarah Blanchard, Class of 2008

Enrolling in a Sociology Ph.D. program after completing a B.A. at a small liberal arts university can be a bewildering experience for many students. One must acclimate to a new institution, different coursework expectations, begin conducting original research, and develop a teaching skill set—all while balancing responsibilities as a teaching or research assistant. In many ways, graduate school is an elite trade-school preparing students for future careers as researchers. Along the way, students are socialized to academia (for better or worse) and gain skills to flourish in the classroom. As I am now finishing my second year in a Ph.D. sociology program, these quick tips represent some of my hindsight advice for students interested in someday earning their velvet stripes.

Do your homework.

Your mentors in the sociology department and other fields can be an excellent resource for identifying if grad school aligns with your goals and what factors to consider when choosing a program. Different universities have unique departmental cultures, research focuses, and perspectives on Ph.D. training. Therefore, trusted faculty can provide valuable sources of insight. Furthermore, learn what to expect in graduate school by contacting Ph.D. students that you or your mentors may know, or better yet, future scholar, go to the literature. In particular, a large-scale survey of Ph.D. students at institutions across the country was recently conducted by Pew Charitable Trusts. The full report, as well as advice for prospective students by field, is available online at http://www.phd-survey.org.

Finally, look at the admissions pages of various universities that you may be interested in and find out about their departments. What are their degree requirements? What type of work do they do? Where do their students get jobs? How long does it typically take students to finish the Ph.D.?

Get in the trenches.

Gaining skills as a researcher is likely the most emphasized component of graduate training. Take rigorous statistics and methods courses as opportunities to get your feet wet and bear in mind that a polished term paper makes a great writing sample submission for grad school admissions. Additionally, it is extremely worthwhile to gain research experience with a faculty mentor at Villanova who can ‘show you the ropes’. Ask sociology faculty about their research, how they get ideas, what methodologies they use, and how they typically share their work. Keep an eye out for summer research programs for undergraduates at universities across the country. Some, like the one at my university, pair undergrads with a senior graduate student and faculty mentors who help them develop an original research project for presentation—it even provides a stipend. Beginning your research experience early in your undergraduate career is a great way to establish a scholarly trajectory and gain an edge during admissions.

Branch out.

Before committing to graduate school, evaluate your other options. Graduate students typically graduate in 5-8 years but sometimes longer. Some choose to pursue post-docs and for those lucky enough to land a tenure-track faculty position, a minimal five additional years of tremendous stress and hard work are required to obtain job security – talk about delayed gratification. The good news is that if you can think of nothing better to do with your twenties than live on minimum wage and sociology, then grad school is for you! Grad school is not an ideal place to soul search, and taking time off after finishing your B.A. is a great idea to gain some focus and weigh your options.

Apply for fellowships.

If you’re ready to commit to the Ph.D., consider applying early for fellowships. As one example, the National Science Foundation’s Graduate Research Fellowship is a lucrative three year fellowship aimed at high-potential students with less than two years of M.A./Ph.D. level training. Applications are due in November and require many of the same materials you’ll be preparing for admissions committees anyhow. While you’ll need to be able to articulate a clear picture of yourself as a budding sociologist, you’re not expected to have it all figured out. Rather, the process of completing such an application is a tremendously useful exercise for focusing yourself before arriving at graduate school. Finally, from an admission’s perspective, there’s nothing better than a highly-driven grad student who will potentially bring their own funding with them to the department.

Sarah is a Villanova alumna currently completing the MA/PhD program in Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. She can be reached at sarah.blanchard@mail.utexas.edu.

More events to look for...

The 4th Annual Ida B. Wells Lecture in Africana Studies Presents:
BLACK FEMALE CRIMINALS IN PHILADELPHIA: 1880-1910
with: Kali Nicole Gross, Associate Professor of History & Director of Africana Studies at Drexel University
4:30 p.m.
Wednesday, April 14th
First Floor Lounge Falvey Library

THE 21ST ANNUAL ELIZABETH CADY STANTON STUDENT RESEARCH CONFERENCE
April 8th, 2010
This year’s keynote speaker will feature prominent Elizabeth Cady Stanton scholar Dr. Lori Ginzberg
All Villanova students, staff and faculty are welcome!
See http://www.villanova.edu/artsci/gws/ec_s_conference/ for more information.
Crime in the U.S. —
Don’t Believe the Hype
By Caitrin Coccoma, Class of 2010

The fear of crime in our society is pervasive; subjects of criminal activity and victimization comprise an overwhelming majority of our popular culture and entertainment. Television series such as Law and Order and NCIS would give the impression that the hapless citizen may fall victim to a serious crime at any moment. However, the reality—as reflected in recent data published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics—suggests a dramatically different trend. The BJS’ National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) recently reported that in 2008 violent and property crime rates were at or near the lowest they have been in over three decades. For its surveys, NCVS obtains information on both reported and unreported crimes by conducting a series of interviews every 6 months, and has been conducting such surveys since 1973. Because of this, it is an excellent source for analyzing changes over time.

The rate of violent crimes, such as rape or sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated or simple assault, had hit an all time high in 1994 with 51.8 violent crimes per 1,000 persons aged 12 years or older. However, the 2008 rate for violent crimes shows a 63% drop from 1994 and a 41% drop in the past 10 years. In addition, property crime rates have fallen by 32% in the past decade. These crimes include household burglary and motor vehicle theft.

As criminologists are careful to note, many victims fail to report the crimes that have been committed against them. Because of this, surveys often include an educated guess about how many crimes go unreported. NCVS estimated that victims reported 47% of violent crimes and 40% of all property crimes in 2008. As is consistent with years past, women are more likely to report being the victim of a violent sexual crime. However, the rate of reported sexual assaults decreased by 53% over the past 10 years, which is a significant improvement. It has been documented in academic research that many women believe that sexual and/or violent assault is most likely to happen during an attack by a stranger. However, the research reveals something even scarier: in over two-thirds of violent crimes, women know their offender. Intimate partners were more likely to be the offenders in violent crimes involving females (23%) than males (3%). In other words, crimes against women are most likely to be committed by their boyfriends, husbands, fathers, or some other known relative or acquaintance. Our department’s very own Dr. Donna Shai has documented this finding in her work on homicides of females in Alaska and Philadelphia. In addition, according to NCVS, about half of male victims know their offender. Overall, only 36% of all violent crimes were perpetrated by a stranger.

The characteristics of victims have shown no change from the past years; victims of violent crimes are still more likely to be males, blacks, and persons younger than 24. Blacks have a higher rate of victimization than any other race. However, individuals who self-identified as more than one race experienced violent crimes at a rate 2 to 3 times higher than those of other races (though it must be noted that only 1% of the US population self identifies as more than one race). NCVS also discovered that lower income households and larger households (with 6 or more inhabitants) experienced a higher rate of overall property crime (including burglary and property theft) than those of higher income and smaller households.

If you are interested in learning more about the BJS, the NCVS survey, or about crime in general, contact Dr. William Waegel, Chair of the Criminal Justice Program, to find out more (william.waegel@villanova.edu).