

Social Sciences Task Force (SSTF)
Executive Summary
October 1, 2009

Guiding Observations

1. Social Science Excellence Is Critical to Cornell University's Excellence

It is highly unlikely that Cornell will move up in the rankings unless it has strong social sciences. This insight led previous administrations to focus resources and attention on the social sciences over the past decade. The connection between the social sciences and university excellence has also been observed by a number of external observers, including the Social Science External Advisory Council (SSEAC).

2. Breadth, Excellence, and Budget Constraints

Cornell has a large number of social science units. This tradition of breadth, consistent with “any person, any study”, has been a hallmark of Cornell social sciences for decades. Despite recent efforts to promote excellence in the social sciences, the current situation is that Cornell is good, but not great, in most social science areas, and many of our units are smaller than their competitors. We strongly encourage the administration to choose excellence over breadth in the social sciences. Cornell must continue to focus on theoretical and applied work, but the number of focal areas must be reduced.

3. Increased Efficiencies Must Be Combined with Aggressive Hiring if Cornell Is to Excel

Cornell is not alone in facing significant economic challenges, yet many top universities are hiring in the social sciences. By comparison, Cornell has been slow to launch tenure-track searches in the core social science departments in Arts and Sciences, and the applied social science departments in CALS. There are several active searches in CHE and ILR. It is likely that our social science rankings will fall unless our efforts to gain efficiencies through reorganization are accompanied by aggressive external hiring. All of the savings generated by increased efficiencies cannot be used to help solve the university's budget challenges.

4. Current Concerns, Future Excellence

Throughout, our focus is on actions that will position Cornell to excel in the social sciences over the coming decades. This long-run perspective differs from a focus on what we can do to enhance social science excellence over the next few years. It is clear that one must think about the short run in pursuing long-run excellence, but we believe that an exclusive focus on the short run is inconsistent with the transformational change that is necessary in the social sciences.

Recommendations

1. Pursue long-run excellence in the social sciences.
2. Reduce the breadth of Cornell social sciences so that resources can be focused on areas of excellence. This will require strategic mergers of existing units and a reconceptualization of some department and college missions.
3. The Provost's Office and colleges must work together to identify weaker programs and to then decide what actions will best position Cornell for long-run excellence.
4. Merge social science infrastructure units organizationally, programmatically, and physically to increase efficiencies and effectiveness.
5. Continue to explore options for transforming an existing college or colleges into a School of Public Policy.
6. Over the past few years, the Social Science External Advisory Council (SSEAC) has provided a critical, informed, external perspective on the social sciences across Cornell. It will be important to seek their input before and after any significant changes are made.

The task force did not engage broadly with faculty, students, staff, or alumni as part of its deliberations. We opted to be discrete about our emerging proposals, especially those that would be seen as controversial and transformative. It will be critical to discuss our ideas more broadly before any decisions are made.