

## **A History of the Sociology Department**

### **The origins of the department and the faculty**

Until the early 1960s, the sociology department was part of the larger social studies department, along with history, economics, geography, political science and anthropology. During that time period, Buffalo State College was primarily a teachers' college. In 1961, these disciplines were separated into individual departments. Sociology, however, was combined with anthropology. At that time, there were four sociologists in the department: Irving Foladare, who was the chair, Gerhard Falk, Fred Hollister, and Gene Welborn. By the early 1960s, the department had added two young sociologists, who had primary school teaching experience. They were Conrad C. Vogler and Richard Seibert.

In September 1969, sociology and anthropology officially separated as new standalone departments. Irving Foladare continued as the chair of the department. That year, Thomas S. Weinberg, a doctoral candidate from the University of Connecticut, joined the department as an instructor. At that time, Sociology faculty members also included Kenneth J. Downey, a University of Illinois graduate and a Buffalo State alumnus, who had previously taught at the University at Buffalo, Joseph Bunzel, Frank Cherry, Kathryn Lloyd, and Gale Largey and John Heaps, who had also joined the department at that time. Rod Watson, from Didsbury College in Manchester, England, who was on exchange for Dr. Downey, also was part of our department for the 1969-1970 school year. The next two years continued our growth, adding Henry J. Watts and Herbert Aurbach as colleagues. Both Drs. Watts and Aurbach would eventually become chairs of the department. Soon thereafter, Rosalyn Lindner, who would also become chair, joined us from the University of Minnesota. Leslie Townsend, a doctoral candidate from the University of Buffalo, was added a year later.

In 1975, we again expanded our faculty with the addition of several young sociologists: Virginia Grabiner, from the University of California, Berkeley, George and Jean Dowdall, both from Brown University, Sidney L. Haring, who had a law degree from the University of Wisconsin and was a doctoral candidate in sociology there, and Jeffrey Schevitz, from Berkeley. Although by that time several of our colleagues had left for other positions, we had about seventeen tenure track lines in our department.

Between 1975 and 1977, a number of us who had been hired without a terminal degree received our doctorates. They included Drs. Grabiner, Vogler, Seibert, Haring, Weinberg, and Karen Davidson, who came from Purdue, and Lennox Yearwood, who had also joined us in the mid-1970s.

The 1970s were a time of turmoil for our department. There was, first of all, conflict between the new hires, all of whom considered themselves radicals, and the older, longer established members of the department. Secondly, the unity among the young Turks dissolved shortly thereafter, with Dr. Schevitz and his student followers at odds with the other radicals.

His followers defamed the others in print, sent pork bones to his colleagues and an Oreo cookie to Dr. Watts, who had become the department chair. They pulled fire alarms, protested by running through the hallways and generally caused chaos on campus. Shevitz borrowed from the Credit Union and never paid back his loan. He did not get his contract renewed at the end of that first year, and he took a job at the American University in Berlin. Schevitz's troubles did not end there. He later took a job as a policy analyst at the Nuclear Research Center in Karlsruhe, where he passed on nuclear secrets to the Stasi, the East German secret police. His

actions were discovered, and he was convicted in a German court in 1995, and sentenced to eighteen months in prison. However, the judge suspended the sentence, fined him, and resentenced him to three years on probation.

Despite the unrest in the department, there were some positive things. As mentioned above, a number of faculty members received their doctorates and achieved tenure. Dr. Weinberg received the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching in 1973, the first year it was given, and our younger colleagues began publishing books and articles. The sociology department has long been recognized for its commitment to its students and its excellence in teaching. Over the years, a number of department members have received the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, including Drs. Gerhard Falk, Virginia Grabiner, Amitra Wall, Richard Seibert, and Zhang Jie.

The late 1970s were a time of austerity and consequent reorganization. A number of departments were asked to combine. The sociology department merged with the geography department in 1976. Under the leadership of the new chair, Dr. Raymond Waxmonsky, a geographer, the conflict in the department was substantially reduced. Geography and sociology separated in 1982.

The early 1980s brought increasing attention to the new computer age in our department. Although the Internet had not yet been developed, the personal desk top computer, albeit with 5 1/4" floppy drives, no hard drive, and a monochrome monitor, running on a nonuser friendly DOS based system, and using WordStar word processing, was now becoming increasingly relevant. Additionally, the importance of applied sociology was now becoming recognized, both nationally and in our department. Central to this new way of doing sociology was our chair, Dr. Kenneth J. Downey. Ken brought us into the computer age. He tutored his colleagues in using the various programs available at that time for writing and data analysis. It was his leadership that created a new major in applied sociology, which included as its requirements a computer course centered on the personal computer and an internship. Sadly, while he was still chair, Ken died at the age of fifty-seven of a brain aneurism. He had been predeceased by two former chairs, Drs. Foladare and Watts, both of whom died in their mid-fifties, while still at Buffalo State.

In the early 1980s, Narendra Nath Kalia was a member of the department, and the late '80s brought additional new faculty to our department, including Carl Backman from Cornell, Frank Southard, Marion Swerdlow and Gerald Moore. The last three colleagues stayed briefly and then left for other opportunities.

In 1990, we added Dr. Ron Stewart, from Howard University, to our faculty. Presently the chair of our department, Ron has brought balance and perspective to our sometimes contentious faculty. In 1997, Dr. Zhang Jie, from Brigham Young University and Dr. Eric Krieg from Northeastern University joined us, and that decade also saw the addition of Dr. Cheryl Albers. In 2000, Dr. Amitra Wall, from Texas Women's University, became our colleague. In the last two decades, while the number of our majors has grown, our full time tenure track faculty has decreased. While we added a number of faculty members, notably Dr. Allen Shelton whose doctorate is from the University of Georgia and Dr. Staci Newmahr, from SUNY Stony Brook, we did, however, lose Drs. Grabiner, Albers, Falk and Welborn to retirement, and a recent hire, Dr. Lindsey Freeman, left for Simon Fraser University. Drs. Wall and Krieg took positions in the administration, and there were other faculty whose contracts were not renewed. Most recently, we have been joined by Dr. Joseph Cleary and Dr. Cameron Herman. Dr. Cleary received his degree from Louisiana State University and Dr. Herman is a graduate of

Michigan State University. Together they bring new energy and vitality to our department.

### **Faculty recognition**

Over the years, our faculty has been recognized for their contributions to teaching and scholarship. As noted above, a number of us have received SUNY Chancellor's Awards for teaching. Others have received the President's Medal for teaching and awards for contributions to service to the college and community. Dr. Welborn, for instance, was selected as one of four finalists for the Thomas Ehrlich Civically Engaged Faculty Award sponsored by Campus Compact, which is a national coalition of 1,000+ colleges and universities committed to the public purposes of higher education.

Faculty international contributions to their field have also been recognized. In 2017, Dr. Weinberg was awarded the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Scholarship and Creative Activities. This year, 2020, Dr. Zhang Jie, received the SUNY Distinguished Professor Award for Scholarship. He had previously received the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Scholarship and Creative Activities.

### **Our distinguished graduates**

Over the years, a number of our sociology majors have gone on to receive doctorates in sociology. They include, for example, Drs. Kevin Hylton, Karen Willert, Patricia Neff, Sheldon Applewhite, Amy Stich, Paul Bugyi, Lisa McDonald, and Watoii Rabii. Some of our graduates have entered the law enforcement profession, including Sergeant Joseph Johnson, Jr. (Columbus, OH Police Department Internal Affairs Unit) and Detective Michelle Palamara (Buffalo Police Department's Homicide Division). Other graduates have distinguished themselves in the legal profession and in business and human services.

### **Student honors and awards**

When Dr. Stewart came to Buffalo State, he was very proactive, establishing a chapter of Alpha Kappa Delta, the national sociology honor society on our campus. Every spring at our annual sociology honors banquet, students are inducted into that society. In 2019, eight students became AKD members. We also give departmental awards, the oldest of which is the NeumannClement award, named for two sociologists who also served as administrators during the 1930s.

Our other awards are the Herbert Aurbach Award, the Kenneth J. Downey Award, the Conrad Vogler Award, the David V. Bullough Memorial Award, the Imaginative Sociologists Award, the Gerhard Falk Writing Award, and the Gary Welborn Civic Engagement Award. Our students are typically engaged in learning and our discipline. For spring 2019, twenty-two of them made Dean's list. Three of those students, who graduated last year, are enrolled in the graduate program at the University of Buffalo.

### **The future of our department**

Our faculty continues to develop ways of improving our offerings to our students. Over the last few years we have added new courses, revised our major requirements and found

opportunities to engage our students in our discipline. We have used internships, servicelearning and found opportunities for our students to present papers at professional conferences. Dr. Krieg, for example, developed an international service-learning course for undergraduates. In 2013, he took eleven students to Santiago, Chile, to participate in service learning and a Spanish language immersion experience. Dr. Stewart has taken students to participate in regional conferences. For several years, Dr. Shelton ran professional conferences at Buffalo State during which students presented papers and interacted with sociologists from other institutions. In 2000, Dr. Zhang Jie established the Center for China Studies, which is housed in our department, bringing Chinese scholars to Buffalo State College. It has been the only Center for China Studies.

We continue to bring diverse theoretical perspectives and varied methodological strategies to teaching, presenting our students with a broad view of society and social issues. Scholarship continues to be an important part of our program. Our department members are engaged in a wide variety of research projects and continue to write and publish books and articles in refereed journals. Our substantive areas of research include race and ethnicity, family, sexuality, gender, occupations, medical sociology, the sociology of education, the sociology of addiction, youth, suicide, environmental issues, nomadic sociology, urban sociology and the application of sociological knowledge. We frequently bring our expertise and research in these areas into our classrooms to enhance our students' experience.