The ISU Sociology department’s signature theme, Social and Economic Disparities, focuses on theory, empirical research and the professional practices that have been the core of Sociology from the beginning of the discipline. The study of social and economic disparities involves innovative research methods combined with the most advanced theories of social and economic inequality, demography, labor and employment, migration and immigration, and group/organizational processes in society. The social problems addressed by experts in this area range broadly from the effects of equal employment and immigration reforms on workers and families to affordable housing and public education, environmental justice, family health and welfare, and aging.

The Social and Economic Disparities signature theme is critical in achieving the missions of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) and the College of Liberal Arts and Science (LAS) at Iowa State University. The signature theme addresses the mission of CALS by attracting, supporting and graduating outstanding and diverse students who are well-prepared as leaders in addressing complex societal challenges; by providing high-quality distance education programs; by recruiting and retaining faculty who are committed to excellence in a collaborative satisfying work environment; and by producing and disseminating basic and applied research that addresses issues of human health. The Social and Economic Disparities signature theme plays an even more vital role in addressing the LAS mission by preparing students to become knowledgeable leaders in a world of social and economic disparities and diverse cultures. Faculty in the Social and Economic Disparities area use a wide array of teaching venues and technologies in their extensive efforts to address the social and economic challenges facing Iowa, the nation, and the world.

Teaching Programs

The Social and Economic Disparities signature theme rigorously trains students in the profession of sociology for careers in academia, government, and non-governmental organizations in the United States and internationally. Our academic degree programs enable students to meet the following learning objectives: (1) examine linkages among individuals of diverse cultural, racial, class and family backgrounds and educational, governmental, community, and economic institutions; (2) analyze the relationships between local, regional, national, and global demographic and economic changes and family structures, educational opportunities, and employment outcomes; (3) understand the social, demographic and economic dynamics of rural and urban communities; (4) apply quantitative and qualitative methods of social research; and (5) engage in problem-focused research and professional practice.
Undergraduate Education

The Economic and Social Disparities academic track at the undergraduate level has transformed the Sociology major to reflect ongoing changes in the study of U.S. demography and social and economic structures in the modern age. Administered by LAS, ongoing revisions to the curriculum will further streamline the major to focus centrally on preparing students for non-academic as well as the traditional academic careers in Sociological practice. The major, which currently offers students the opportunity to pursue internships, will move toward the requirement of an internship that connects students with future careers in non-profit and for-profit organizations, governmental and non-governmental organizations, community organizing, and academia. Currently the program has approximately 150 majors, but is expected to attract more majors in the future due to name and curriculum revisions. The major requires a core of sociology courses, as well as courses in economics, political science, mathematical and physical sciences, life sciences, and agricultural sciences.

Graduate Education

The graduate program is focused on producing sociologists with strong research skills who help society understand and solve complex problems related to social and economic disparities. Master’s and Ph.D. degrees are offered in either sociology or rural sociology, where students complete a program of study including core and elective courses. Core courses include sociological theory, quantitative and qualitative methods, social inequality, and social psychology. Elective courses currently include race/class/gender inequality, social change and development, environmental sociology, and community and development. After completing their coursework, students must then successfully pass preliminary and oral examinations; and successfully write and defend a high quality thesis or dissertation on a topic appropriate to the Social and Economic Disparities area. Currently there are about 30 graduate students in this signature theme, the most of whom are supported by graduate teaching or research assistantships in the department and across campus. Faculty in the theme mentor graduate students through participating in research projects, presenting at regional and national professional meetings, and co-authoring academic papers.

Integrated Teaching, Research and Professional Programs

Consistent with the signature theme’s disciplinary grounding in sociology, faculty research is problem-focused and highly integrated with teaching programs and professional practice. The Social and Economic Disparities theme has demonstrated national and international prominence in professional associations, journals, and funding agencies. These journals and associations include the areas of mainstream sociology, demography, Latino/a and Latin American Studies, gender Studies, migration and immigration studies, social psychology, and political sociology. Recent grants for research have come from external agencies including the U.S. National Science Foundation and internally from the ISU Provost Office, while recent grants for teaching have come from sources including ISU’s college of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

In aggregate of the past five years, faculty in the Social and Economic Disparities signature theme have produced or generated:
Social and Economic Disparities

- 2.5 peer-reviewed publications (journal articles/book chapters/books) per year per faculty FTE
- 1.4 professional practice publications per year per faculty FTE
- multiple grants (and grant proposals) for research and teaching
- multiple multi-disciplinary research, on-campus teaching, and distance education collaborations

Faculty center their research, teaching and professional practice scholarship in two the distinct areas within this signature theme: (1) sociology of social and economic disparities among families and in employment, education, and communities, and (2) sociological research methods for professional practice. Faculty members within the Social and Economic Disparities area work in close collaboration with each other, with other sociologists nationwide, and with other ISU social scientists, humanities scholars, and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) faculty.

Faculty in the Social and Economic Disparities area are especially intent on ensuring close mentoring relationships between faculty advisors and graduate and undergraduate students. Our strong mentoring practices have contributed greatly to the success of our graduate and undergraduate students in developing as scholars and community leaders. Social and Economic Disparities faculty hold multiple joint and affiliate appointments with related academic programs, including Latino/a Studies, African American Studies, and Women’s and Gender Studies. Social and Economic Disparities graduate students, like the faculty, are extremely active in regional and national professional associations, including the Midwest Sociological Society, American Sociological Association, Latino/a Studies Association, Rural Sociological Society, Sociologists for Women in Society, and the Society for the Study of Social Problems. Faculty in this area also hold multiple elected positions in regional, national and international professional societies and editorial boards, and positions as editors and deputy editors of sociological journals. Graduate students as well as highly active undergraduate students in Social and Economic Disparities, like the faculty, actively produce research articles and book chapters for publication and gain the research skills necessary for employment in academia, non-governmental and governmental organizations, and private industry upon graduation.

Primary Faculty

Sharon R. Bird (LAS), Ph.D. Washington State University
- Economic and social disparities in education, employment and small business.

Betty D. Dobratz (LAS), Ph.D. University of Wisconsin
- Political graffiti as response to social, economic, and political disparities; white power movement

Gloria Jones Johnson (LAS), Ph.D. University of Michigan
- Economic and social disparities in health, education and employment by race and gender, and the social psychological consequences of social and economic disparities for individuals and families.

Abdi Kuso (LAS), Ph.D.
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Marta M. Maldonado (LAS), Ph.D. Washington State University
- Social and economic disparities in communities, education, and work/economy contexts, and disparities related to immigration and citizenship status.

Anastasia Prokos (LAS), Ph.D. Florida State University
- Gendered social and disparities in employment, aging, and the life course.
Susan Stewart (LAS), Ph.D.

Betty Wells (CALS), Ph.D. Iowa State University
  • Sustainable agriculture, food systems, extension.

Associated Faculty

J Arbuckle (CALS)
Carmen Bain (CALS)
Monic Behnken (LAS)
Matt Delisi (LAS)
Shawn Dorius (CALS)
Andrew Hochstetler (LAS)
Dan Krier (LAS)
Rob Mazur (LAS)
Paul Lasley (CALS)
David Peters (CALS)
David Schweingruber (LAS)

For more information

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