

## **SOCIAL SCIENCES AT SANTA CLARA**

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The development of each human being is marked by periods of differentiation and periods of integration. For example, our various senses develop independently and at different rates, but eventually become coordinated, as in the case when we turn our eyes toward the direction of a sound that we hear. Just as human development involves differentiation and integration, the development of the social sciences at Santa Clara University may benefit from a similar process. The division of the social sciences into separate units—sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, political science, liberal studies—is important for the vitality of each area. These separate disciplines employ different methodologies and different lenses through which the social world is perceived and understood. If the distinction between the disciplines becomes dull, some of the richness of our understanding of the world is lost.

Differentiation without integration, however, does not take full advantage of these various perspectives to create a more unified vision. At some point, the perspective of the psychologist should be combined with the perspective of the sociologist to more fully understand the causes and effects of poverty, for example. The economist and the anthropologist together can provide a clearer picture regarding the meaning of property within a particular culture than either discipline can provide alone.

The Strategic Plan for Santa Clara University includes emphases on high quality scholarship, distinctiveness, and integrated education. One way that Santa Clara University can raise its profile while following the principles of the Strategic Plan is by facilitating the collaboration among faculty members across disciplines and at the intersection of disciplines.

Psychobiological research, for example, takes advantage of the natural overlaps between the natural and social sciences. A collaborative research project that considers the sociological causes of differences in access to legal services represents an example interdisciplinary research that spans a somewhat broader disciplinary divide.

Inter-theoretical, cross-disciplinary research and teaching is somewhat rare in the social sciences, but badly needed. The increasing specialization within the social sciences can inhibit the larger perspective that is needed to address real-world issues. As a Jesuit institution dedicated to issues of social justice and equity, a focus on interdisciplinary collaborations to address difficult social problems may be in the interests of all. At Santa Clara, where departments are small and faculty often are the sole representatives of their sub-disciplines, collaboration among faculty members on research can be difficult. By providing incentives for collaboration in teaching and research, the social sciences at SCU can carve out a distinct place in both research and teaching that can increase the quality and impact of the research we produce and help us to better provide an integrated education for students.

### **Taking the “Social” and the “Science” Components Seriously**

Because the mission of Santa Clara includes such a strong emphasis on improving conditions for the marginalized of society, science that is conducted for the purposes of direct application to

this cause is highly valued. In the consideration of the relevance of social science research it is important to remember that nothing serves the “social” part of social science better than a well-articulated theory.

One of the most important functions of many social science disciplines is to explain, and not just to describe, the phenomenon of interest. Indeed, a shared goal of the social science departments at SCU is to create a “culture of evidence” that helps students look beyond their personal experiences and use evidence to explain phenomenon and understand the social world. This emphasis on evidence and critical inquiry is the foundation for the awarding of BS, rather than BA degrees in the social sciences at SCU. In the history of the social sciences (as well as the natural sciences), incorrect or poorly articulated theory has led to a number of problematic applications of the research. The eugenics movement, social Darwinism, and trickle-down economics are but a few examples of this. Before knowledge garnered from social science research can be usefully applied to solving problems in the real world, social scientists must be confident that their research results are accurate and that their explanations for their findings are based on solid theory. In this sense, “basic” research in the social sciences is as important as “applied” research.

When considering the applications of social science research to societal problems, Santa Clara may be well situated to make a contribution through examinations of the interaction between theoretical principles and the multiple contexts in which they can be applied. Universal theories that can be applied to all people or all situations are interesting, but may be difficult to study given the resource constraints of a liberal arts institution. In addition, considerations of the ethical application of social science theories, or the generalizability of social science research to the diversity of cultures in the world is difficult for researchers at other institutions to engage in given the lack of emphasis on ethics at many institutions and the relatively homogeneous cultures of many communities. Instead, Santa Clara may be better positioned to conduct research on, and teach students about, how grand theories are manifested in the varied social contexts that can be found in and around the Bay Area.

Santa Clara is located in a unique geographical area that contains a range of cultural, economic, religious, and geographical conditions. Therefore, social scientists at Santa Clara, in collaboration with each other and with faculty from other disciplines (e.g., law, the natural sciences, education, business) are able to examine how broad, general principles in different disciplines play out in various populations. How is an information age economy experienced differently by immigrant and native populations? How are principles of human motivation expressed differently and similarly in Vietnamese and European American high school students? How might a program to provide premarital counseling need to be structured differently for urban and rural families? These are the types of questions that depend on good theory but can also be explored in their complexity given the nature of our immediate environment. They are also questions of relevance to both the privileged and the marginalized in society, and the types of questions that can best be answered through interdisciplinary collaboration.

### **Benefit to Students**

When the social science faculty engage in research and teaching that is theoretically sound,

applied to a wide variety of contexts, and integrative across social (and natural) science disciplines, students will benefit in several ways. First, they will learn that the nature of science is to explain phenomena of interest, not simply to observe it. Second, they will discover that the application of scientific principles involves a complex interaction between theories and specific socio-cultural contexts. Third, students will begin to see that the various disciplines within the social sciences, and across disciplines, although separate, are related. While becoming proficient in the methodologies and perspectives of a given social science discipline, students will not become myopic in their social and scientific views of the world. Rather, they will understand that viewing social phenomenon through multiple lenses can provide a sharper picture than viewing that phenomenon through a single lens alone. Promoting research and teaching across the disciplines will help the university achieve its mission of providing an integrated education.

Students and faculty in the social sciences at Santa Clara are already accomplished groups. As we aspire to greater prominence, we may do well to consider ways to capitalize on our strengths while acknowledging our limitations and our affordances. We have somewhat small departments and limited budgets compared to some of our R1 comparison schools. But we also can provide incentives for collaboration and integrative research and teaching that take full advantage of our rich social environment. By focusing on differentiation and integration, as well as the social and science components of our fields, we can develop students and research programs and make distinctive contributions to the social sciences. An interdisciplinary focus with an emphasis on sound scientific principles applied to diverse populations should attract external funding and quality faculty, resulting in an enhancement of our teacher-scholar model as well as the national stature of Santa Clara University.

#### Reflectors

Robert Numan, Chuck Powers, Patti Simone, Eleanor Willemsen