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Seeking to Understand, Explain, and Improve Human Society, the Social Sciences at Cornell Are a Work in Progress

Cornell has unusual strength in interdisciplinary areas in the social sciences:

Poverty, inequality, and development

Life course studies

Behavioral economics and decision research

Charles Harrington/CU

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Heirs to a distinguished tradition of research, Cornell's social scientists today are presented with exciting opportunities and challenges as they seek to understand, explain, and, where possible, improve human society. These opportunities and challenges arise from a common source.

Located in eight of Cornell's eleven colleges on the Ithaca campus, the faculty in the social sciences number between 400 and 500 at the professorial level alone. Faculty are found in the endowed, the state-assisted, and the professional schools. They engage not only in basic and applied research but also in a broad range of extension activities. Their interests are disciplinary and interdisciplinary, domestic and international. Their approaches are quantitative and qualitative: they overlap at one end with the natural and computational sciences and at the other with the arts and humanities. They are fully engaged with both of Cornell's dual, and occasionally dueling, personalities—elite Ivy League institution and “Land-Grant” university of the State of New York.

This distinctive, perhaps unique, mediating role among the broad intellectual categories of academic life inevitably generates methodological and theoretical tensions within the social science enterprise itself. One could even define the specificity of that enterprise by reference to these constitutive tensions. Thus, Peter J. Katzenstein, Government, has emphasized the necessity of continuing the debate over foundational questions, but only in a way that invigorates rather than paralyzes ongoing work. These are the opportunities and challenges facing the social sciences.

How has the university responded? “In increasingly systematic fashion.”

Intradisciplinary Collaboration

Beginning about a decade ago, economists on campus, also housed in eight colleges, took steps to join forces with each other. The basic undergraduate economics courses are now taught by faculty from various units. The graduate field of Economics, traditionally restricted almost entirely to professors in the Department of Economics in the College of Arts and Sciences, has come to draw a clear majority of its members from other colleges. The number of doctoral students has grown proportionally, aided by increased financial support from the participating units and the central administration. This reorganization has also proven to be a tool in recruiting new faculty.

Similarly, complementing the impressive recent hires in the strong but small Sociology Department (College of Arts and Sciences), a cross-college process is now underway among sociologists. The Departments of Psychology (College of Arts and Sciences) and Human Development (College of Human Ecology) have also worked together on the recruitment of psychologists for some time.

Interdisciplinary Programs

Collaboration has not been confined within disciplines, however. Responding to the report of a task force on the future of the social sciences chaired by Phyllis E. Moen, Human Development, and David A. Easley, Economics, President Hunter R. Rawlings III allocated additional support in 2000 to three interdisciplinary areas in the social sciences where Cornell had unusual strength—life course studies; poverty, inequality, and development; and behavioral economics and decision research.

Life course studies are concerned with both the problems people face and the solutions they try to find in the course of their transitions from one stage of life and work to the next. Such studies find their home above all in the Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center in the College of Human Ecology. Second, the Poverty, Inequality, and

“globalization, the standard term used to designate the fundamental processes of this new era, is really just a placeholder category, awaiting substantive content. one of the central tasks of faculty in international studies is to provide that content.”



Francine Blau,
Labor Economics



David Easley,
Economics



Walter Cohen,
Vice Provost



Victor Nee,
Sociology



Stephen Ceci,
Human Development



David Sahn,
Nutritional Sciences

Members of Cornell's Social Sciences Advisory Council discuss a university-wide initiative to recruit distinguished faculty to Ithaca.



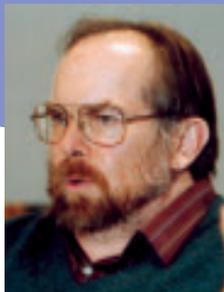
Peter Katzenstein,
Government



Ravi Kanbur,
Applied Economics
and Management;
Economics



Anelise Riles,
Law School



Michael Lynch,
Science and
Technology Studies



Shelley Feldman,
Rural Sociology



Elizabeth Mannix,
Johnson Graduate
School of Management

Photos: Robert Barker/CU

“today, international studies is in the, at once, enviable and disorienting position of having to come to terms with two major shocks to the world system in a relatively brief span—the collapse of European communism in 1989 and the terrorist attack on the U.S. in 2001.”

Development initiative, headed by Ravi Kanbur, Applied Economics and Management; Economics, has staged a series of high-profile conferences designed to create intellectual community and visibility on campus and to project Cornell's accomplishments in this area onto the national and international stage.

Finally, the third interdisciplinary focus was dramatically raised to prominence in recent months with the award of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics for research on behavioral economics. Depending on one's perspective, behavioral economics and decision research may be seen as either a friendly amendment to or a serious critique of the dominant model of rational choice, in which people are understood to be rational actors who seek to maximize their own well-being. Scholars in this area have identified various instances where rational choice breaks down—either because people self-consciously deviate from its principles or because they apparently cannot help but do so.

At Cornell, Robert H. Frank, Johnson Graduate School of Management, and Thomas D. Gilovich, Psychology, are among the faculty who work in the field. The Solomon Interdisciplinary Social Science Program brings distinguished visitors to campus to present their findings on these and related topics. In the fall of 2002, David A. Easley and Lawrence E. Blume, Economics, teamed with Joseph Y. Halpern, Computer Science, to teach a class in decision research.

This course illustrates the intersection of the quantitative end of the social sciences with the natural and computational sciences. So, too, does the highly successful Cognitive Studies Program, which brings together faculty and students in linguistics, economics, psychology, neurobiology, and computer science, among many other disciplines (including, on the humanistic side, philosophy). Much quantitative social science research is supported by the Cornell Institute for Social and Economic Research (CISER), under the leadership of John M. Abowd, Industrial and Labor Relations. CISER has recently received a technical upgrade, and its computing facilities have been fully integrated into the Cornell Theory Center. CISER has also opened a competitive seed-grant program, which aims to encourage submission of proposals for externally funded research.

In international studies, social scientists have tended to interact with their colleagues in the humanities. The Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies has provided the main meeting ground. It comprises a series of area studies programs that focus on the major regions of the world. Many of these programs are federally funded National Resource Centers.

The Einaudi Center also includes various thematic programs, among them Peace Studies, which has been highly effective in obtaining foundation support. Today, international studies is in the, at once, enviable and disorienting position of having to come to terms with two major shocks to the world system in a relatively brief span—the collapse of European Communism in 1989 and the terrorist attack on the U.S. in 2001. Globalization, the standard term used to designate the fundamental processes of this new era, is really just a placeholder category, awaiting substantive content. One of the central tasks of faculty in international studies is to provide that content.

Another task, however, is to help people in poorer countries improve their lives. For more than a decade, the Cornell International Institute for Food, Agriculture, and Development (CIIFAD), under the direction of Norman T. Uphoff, Government, has done just that. Perhaps the most remarkable of its many achievements is its ongoing dissemination of the “System of Rice Intensification” from Madagascar to 17 countries. In the face of opposition from the rice research establishment, this revolution has led to spectacular increases in output that are difficult to parallel in any grain crop.

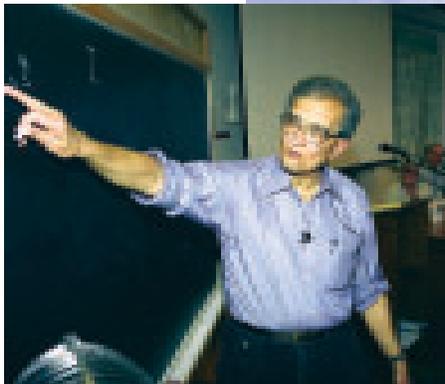
CIIFAD represents the side of international studies where social scientists work with life scientists. Cornell’s activities abroad are in fact so widespread and heterogeneous that there is no systematic account of them. It is with the aim of increasing collaboration in this arena across all the major academic areas that in the fall of 2002, for the first time, a portfolio in international studies was established at the vice provost level.

Faculty Development

There is, of course, no conflict between the pursuit of collaboration across standard academic boundaries and the promotion of faculty intellectual life. In 2000, the university established a two-year interdisciplinary seminar in the social sciences. Combining about a dozen professors, four postdoctoral fellows, and a few senior administrators (including President Hunter Rawlings and Provost Biddy Martin), the seminar met weekly during 2000–01 and again during 2001–02. The first year, under the leadership of Peter Katzenstein, most of the members were drawn from the College of Arts and Sciences. The topic was methodology and theory in the first semester; the future of the social sciences at Cornell in the second semester.

Cognitive studies brings together faculty and students in linguistics, economics, psychology, neurobiology, and computer science, among many other disciplines including, on the humanistic side, philosophy.

Robert Barker/CU



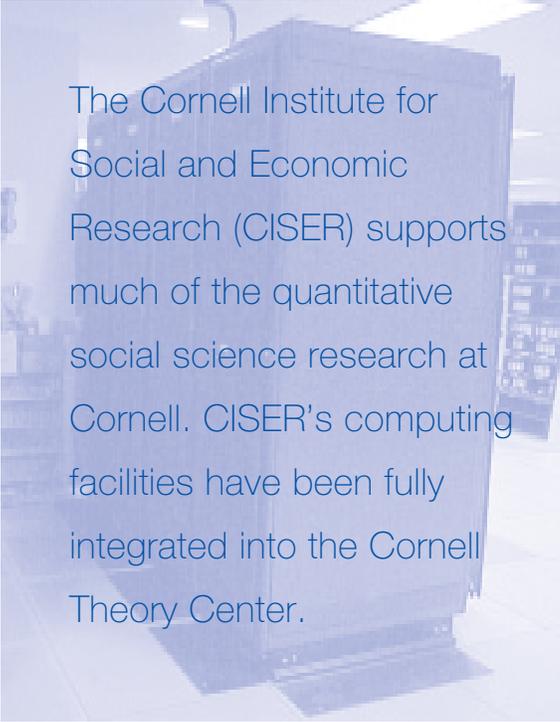
Ravi Kanbur, Applied Economics and Management; Economics, and David Grusky, Sociology; director of the Center for the Study of Inequality organized a symposium, “Conceptual Challenges in Poverty and Inequality,” which featured presentations by several distinguished visitors in April 2002.

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, Cambridge University

Dede Hatch



Robert Frank, Johnson Graduate School of Management, works in the field of behavioral economics and decision research.



The Cornell Institute for Social and Economic Research (CISER) supports much of the quantitative social science research at Cornell. CISER's computing facilities have been fully integrated into the Cornell Theory Center.

Last year, Francine D. Blau, Industrial and Labor Relations, organized the seminar around the topic of inequality, and included faculty from six colleges. The seminar has resulted in publications, new team-taught courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and workshops. Of particular note is the conference on “Conceptual Challenges in Poverty and Inequality” held in April 2002. Jointly organized by Ravi Kanbur and David B. Grusky, Sociology, and director of the Center for the Study of Inequality, it featured presentations by several distinguished visitors, among them Martha Nussbaum (University of Chicago, philosophy), William Julius Wilson (Harvard, sociology), and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (Cambridge University, economics). Of more general importance, however, is the contribution the seminars have made to the development of a sense of intellectual community among Cornell's social scientists.

Seeking New Horizons

The project of building intellectual community has been assumed by the Social Sciences Advisory Council. Formed in response to a recommendation of the social sciences task force, this standing faculty body began meeting in the spring of 2001. The Council's report of May 2002 endorsed the recommendation of the 2000–01 interdisciplinary seminar that Cornell create an Academy for the Social Sciences. The report also recommended the competitive allocation of central funds to attract outstanding faculty to Ithaca, whom individual departments, or even colleges, would otherwise be unable to recruit.

Both strategies are at once disciplinary and interdisciplinary; each is designed to reinforce the other. The president and provost approved this approach in July 2002. Previously led by Peter Katzenstein and then by David Easley, the Social Sciences Advisory Council is currently co-chaired by Ravi Kanbur and Victor Nee (Sociology). Work is already underway on recruitment and will shortly begin on planning for the Social Sciences Academy. As preparation for the Academy's opening in the fall of 2005, the social sciences seminar is slated for revival in each of the next two years.

The social sciences at Cornell are a work in progress. They always will be—and should be. For, as societies change, so too do their opportunities and challenges. In the following pages, you will learn a little more about the ways in which social science research at Cornell is helping to confront those challenges and to seize those opportunities.

Walter I. Cohen

Vice Provost and Professor of Comparative Literature

