

SOCIOLOGY NEWSLETTER

Union College, NY

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SOCIOLOGY CHAIR'S UPDATE

From Professor Goldner:

I would like to take a moment to reflect on all that we have accomplished this academic year. Our faculty have used their expertise to develop new courses on environmental issues, power and privilege, the sociological imagination, artificial intelligence, and medical social work. Our graduating seniors have just finished their thesis projects on a range of timely issues such as educational, health and athletic disparities, and the Sociology Club is partnering with Street Soldiers to collect books for vulnerable children in our local community. Thank you all for sustaining our department during these challenging times.

WINTER COURSE HIGHLIGHT: SCHOOLS & SOCIETIES (SOC-222)

By: *Karson Saunders*

Schools & Societies (SOC-222-01), taught by Professor David Cotter, was offered remotely this winter and exposed students to a range of topics pertaining to the sociology of education. Each week, the class participated in synchronous lectures, guided discussions, and debates based on the readings, films, and other course content that was completed asynchronously.

Students in Professor Cotter's class worked to gain a deeper understanding of the historical, social, and cultural factors that shape the U.S. educational system and how it is experienced by students of different backgrounds. In addition to lectures and weekly assignments, students completed three data analysis projects on a topic of their choice pertaining to educational reform. Students were given several choices for the topic of their data analysis projects, such as interviewing former teachers, analyzing residential segregation and disparities in resources between school districts, and reporting on the social structures of their high schools.

In addition to his lectures, Professor Cotter used guided debates and simulations of local school board meetings to further students' understanding of the key issues facing schools today. During these exercises, students were given the opportunity to assume the role of different stakeholders in the education system, including parents, teachers, board members, and district superintendents.

At the conclusion of the course, students were left well equipped to not only analyze the U.S education system broadly but also their own educational experiences. Given all that has changed about schools during the pandemic, this course was especially timely and eye-opening, and I hope more students have the chance to take it in the near future!

WINTER 2021 FACULTY UPDATES

By: *Maeve Daby*

Professor Timothy Stablein

This winter, Professor Stablein taught a first-year preceptorial course on homelessness, continued his research on the role of privacy in shaping behavior online, and, in a separate project, continued researching the experience of housing transitions for people receiving end-of-life care. Professor Stablein has recently developed a new course, Conspiracy Theories and Their Defenders (MIN-211), which will be offered as part of the Minervas Online program this spring and can be counted towards the required credit total for sociology majors. Students in MIN-211 will broadly explore why people believe in conspiracy theories and how they are spread, as well as specific conspiracy theories during class time each week. In addition to sociology, the course will consider work from political scientists, economists, and historians who have contributed to contemporary literature on conspiracy theories. Students will also have the opportunity to perform their own research projects on a conspiracy theory of their choosing.

In addition to MIN-211, Professor Stablein will also be teaching Social Constructions of Deviance (SOC-204) and America's War on Drugs: Culture, Conflict, and Social Policy (SOC-314).

Professor Ilene Kaplan

Since developing and teaching Think Globally, Act Locally (EXP-205) this fall, Professor Kaplan has been working tirelessly to arrange opportunities for students to do remote internships for course credit. The internships are centered around the Department of Sociology and the Environmental Studies Program, and Professor Kaplan has continued to arrange remote internships for the spring term. Internships for the spring term will be offered under the course title: Internship: Human Services (SOC-305), and any students who are interested should reach out to Professor Kaplan using the contact information listed below.

Students who have participated in the internship program over the fall and winter terms have had great success in making contributions to the community and earning course credit, all while working from their home, dorms, or apartments! In addition to facilitating internships for her students, Professor Kaplan has continued to participate in remote government fisheries policy meetings and write fisheries policy reviews for the government.

FACULTY UPDATES CONT.

Professor David Cotter

In his role as Union's Director of Faculty Development, Professor Cotter continued to coordinate the training of faculty for remote and distance learning. These efforts have been informed, in part, by his work at the Faculty Development Institute this summer, in which he and other professors from Union and the NY6 (Colgate, Hamilton, Hobart-William Smith, Skidmore, and St. Lawrence) workshopped different technologies and pedagogies for more effective teaching in remote and socially distant settings. In the classroom, Professor Cotter taught Schools & Society (SOC-222) remotely this winter, and he will be teaching Introduction to Sociology in-person, albeit adjusted for social distancing, this spring.

Professor Cotter has been busy outside the classroom as well. Since he and his family adopted a pandemic puppy in June, Professor Cotter rebuilt the foundation to his barn in August, sent his son back off to college in September, and moved his daughter into Boston to start her new job in October (102 applications later!). To ward off cabin fever in his downtime, Professor Cotter and his wife have taken to hiking and snowshoeing in various parks and preserves in the area, and they hope to keep this up even after the pandemic.

Professor Deidre Hill-Butler

In addition to working with four sociology majors and one American studies major on senior thesis projects this winter, Professor Hill-Butler taught a first-year preceptorial on the sociological imagination and participated in and hosted several events for the campus and the local community. For her first-year preceptorial students, Professor Hill-Butler arranged visits from several faculty and staff, including Robyn Reed, head access librarian and Afrofuturist, Bonnie Cramer, director of Hillel, and Julie Lohnes, director and curator of Union's art collections and exhibitions.

Professor Hill-Butler's speaking engagements for the term included moderating a discussion about *PushOut*, a documentary and book by Monique Morris, as part of an initiative with the Working Group on Girls of Schenectady, Inc., participating in the panel "Participatory Democracy in Action: Southern Black Women Educational Activists and Community Institution Builders in the Urban South, the 1890s to 2010s" at the Pathways to Democracy 2021 Organization of American Historians Conference, and facilitating a discussion with Jennifer Smith Turner '74, former trustee and a member of Union's first graduating class to include women, who discussed her novel, *Child Bride*. Professor Deidre Hill-Butler was also profiled in the *Daily Gazette* as part of their local Black History Month recognition. For more on what Professor Hill-Butler has been up to, see "Q&A with Professor Butler" on page 6.

FACULTY UPDATES CONT.

Professor Melinda Goldner

In addition to advising several thesis students last term, Professor Goldner also taught History of Sociological Thought (SOC-305), offered in a hybrid format for the first time. Rather than asynchronous content, students learned about classical and contemporary theorists through synchronous class discussions and opportunities to apply their course work creatively through songs, movie excerpts, student-made TikToks, and presentations on current issues. Her thesis students finished projects on a range of topics, including inpatient psychiatric care, exacerbating racial disparities during pandemics, socioeconomic differences in the prevalence of eating disorders, and differences in fertility rates between the United States and India. Professor Goldner will be on sabbatical this spring and plans to continue her research on activism in healthcare and women's experiences with chronic pain and acupuncture.

Professor Rosemary Patterson

In addition to teaching a section of Introduction to Sociology (SOC-100) and Domestic Violence (SOC-360) this past term, Professor Patterson continued working with the Sociology Club and pursuing her degree at Tulane University's social work doctoral program. Since the fall term, Professor Patterson has supported the Sociology Club in their winter drive, "the Early Learning Book Drive: Combating Educational Inequity for Vulnerable Children in Our Community," and helped the group begin organizing for their spring drive. For the spring drive, the club tentatively plans to partner with a local agency that serves domestic violence victims and create care packages filled with necessities (e.g., toiletries, deodorant, baby shampoo, lotion, face wash, and toothbrushes) to support their cause.

When asked by the newsletter how starting at Union has been without being on campus or teaching in person, Professor Patterson said the experience has been both unique and interesting. While she said many students seem to be experiencing remote-learning fatigue, Professor Patterson cites breakout rooms as a saving grace and remains in awe of the students' resilience and unwavering commitment to their education throughout the pandemic. Moreover, Professor Patterson says she has been inspired by how students in the sociology club have come together in times of high stress and contributed so meaningfully to the community through both of the club's very successful drives. It has been an amazing few months, and she is so excited to see what is coming next!

SENIOR THESIS TIPS & ADVICE

By: *Dhara Shukla*

Spring term is right around the corner, and the upcoming school year is quickly approaching, so it is the perfect time for juniors to begin thinking about their senior thesis project! While it can be difficult to decide on an area of focus for your thesis, it can be helpful to think about topics related to current events, career aspirations, hobbies, or interesting courses you've taken while at Union.

Some of the broad ideas current and former thesis students have considered are:

- Social media
- Pop culture
- Youth culture
- Race and ethnicity
- Inequalities in the education system
- Social movements
- Gender and sexuality
- Medical sociology
- Mental health
- COVID-19

To help the next class of sociology majors, this year's thesis students provided some advice to the newsletter to share:

- Manage your time wisely!
 - It helps to set aside a chunk of your day to focus solely on writing your thesis.
 - Keep all distractions at the door when sitting down to work on your thesis project (i.e., no scrolling through Instagram, Facebook, or any other social media when you are supposed to be writing).

- Practice, practice, practice.
 - Conversing about your senior thesis project with people who are not already familiar with your topic, like friends and family, can help you clarify your ideas and prepare for your oral defense.
 - Doing this regularly will help you gain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of your thesis and what parts could use additional time and thought!

SENIOR THESIS TIPS CONT.

- Remember, any small task you complete is a step forward!
- Your senior thesis will be a large endeavor, but every bit of progress brings you one step closer to completing the largest project you will do at Union!
- Confidence is KEY!
 - Know that the many hours you spend working on your senior thesis will not go to waste; this is the culmination of your undergraduate work in sociology!
 - By the time you are done writing, you will be an expert on your thesis topic, so as long as you do consistent and focused work, there is no need to doubt your knowledge or abilities when it comes time for your oral defense.



Good luck to all of the rising seniors beginning their thesis projects!

Q&A WITH PROFESSOR HILL-BUTLER

Professor Deidre Hill-Butler on her new role as Union's Chief Academic Diversity Officer, engaging students with DEI programming virtually, and the challenges of bringing a campus together while apart.

By: Peter Dranow

Since the creation of Union College's Diversity Leadership Team in September, Professor Hill-Butler's responsibilities have expanded well beyond those of her own classroom to include matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus. Discussing the position, Professor Hill-Butler described her charge as "promoting and maintaining a campus environment for inclusive teaching and pedagogy, and, ultimately, having people from various backgrounds respecting everyone's path and what they're doing in this liberal arts setting."

While the Diversity Leadership Team has decided to continue many of Union's existing initiatives in diversity, equity, and inclusion programming, Professor Hill-Butler says the group has also embarked in new directions, informed in no small part by the Presidential Initiative on Race, Power, and Privilege from this summer. Specifically, Professor Hill-Butler says the initiative's steering committee—of which she was a faculty representative and co-chair of the subcommittee on curricular changes—laid the groundwork for some of her most important projects, including the revision of Union's general education program to include courses on race, power, and privilege, the facilitation of a BIPOC employee alliance group, and the development of peer-support networks for women of color in Union's faculty and staff.

In addition to the Presidential Initiative, Professor Hill-Butler describes both her background in sociology and intellectual curiosity as guiding forces in navigating her new position. Whereas the former gives Professor Hill-Butler a critical lens to examine social inequality at Union, the latter lends itself to inspiring solutions. In her words, "you think about sociology being the study of yourself and society, especially when it comes to inequality and how blatant it is in our institutions. But I also see elements of change—providing both directions for how things can be changed and hope that change will come."

PROFESSOR HILL-BUTLER CONT.

While issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion have, themselves, changed—insofar as the ongoing pandemic has made some issues less visible than they typically would be—in no way has this made them less real or deserving of solutions. That said, Professor Hill-Butler says it has forced the Diversity Leadership Team to adjust how these issues are being addressed, namely, through changing the delivery of DEI programming from in-person to online. Although she cites the transition to remote engagement to have been difficult at first, Professor Hill-Butler says that students, faculty, and staff seem to have adjusted to the virtual space.

When asked what she would say to students who want to become further involved in these efforts on campus and what she would say to those on campus who do not feel the need, her advice to both groups was the same: step out of your comfort zone and take advantage of being on a small liberal arts campus. If nothing else, Professor Hill-Butler says being intentional about engaging with different corners of campus is crucial to avoiding isolation and staying connected to a larger sense of community. In her words: “Step out of your comfort zone. Take a chance to meet somebody new, and when you see activities that come through campus events and think, “yeah, I don’t think I’ll try that,” step into it. That’s the advantage of being at a smaller college; you make connections where you think there aren’t any.”



Have a Great Spring Term!