Ian Mullins Reappointment Statement January 10, 2022

I began as an Assistant Professor, General Faculty at the University of Virginia Fall 2019. Despite having more than a decade of prior teaching experience in higher education and having been recognized for teaching excellence at my prior institutions, I am a more dynamic instructor today than I was three years ago. Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted me to question the assumptions that undergird my courses and solve problems in ways that have both made my classrooms more equitable and provided students with more opportunities to engage in active learning. My work for the College of Arts and Sciences as a first- and second-year advisor and for the Department of Sociology as a major advisor has also led me to develop greater aptitude in helping students navigate their time in college and plan for their transition to life after college.

My professionalization was also spurred by the more mundane practical challenges of taking on my first full-time appointment, like time-management and the need to balance various responsibilities. Throughout the past three years, I have carried one of the heaviest teaching loads in the department. From Fall 2019 through Spring 2022, I taught twenty-two courses, oversaw two independent study classes, supervised three sociology distinguished major projects, and mentored one student in the Echols Program’s Interdisciplinary Major. In total, I have taught 1,448 students at the University of Virginia. I have advised 25 Arts and Sciences students (11 of which are in the Echols program), and 18 Sociology majors. In addition to my work with undergraduates, I have directly supervised and mentored 17 graduate student instructors, as well as participated in two department-wide training workshops for new graduate student instructors. As part of graduate student instruction, I have conducted classroom observations and provided personalized mentorship in a one-on-one setting.

The remainder of this statement is divided into subsections that detail significant developments that occurred over my current 3-year appointment related to teaching, advising, service, professional development, and research.

# TEACHING

Upon starting at UVa, my prior experience teaching at Yale University, Colby College, the University of California-San Diego, and the University of Minnesota informed much of what I did. I approached each class with the belief that all students are capable of academic excellence and deep thought, and I worked to create classrooms where they could achieve both. Except for Introductory Sociology (SOC 1010), I designed my courses in a similar manner: students read exemplary books, we discussed them in class, and then I challenged them in a highly Socratic fashion. Like courses I taught at other colleges or universities, this course design was successful at UVa; students were highly engaged and achieved their learning goals. However, following my first semester at UVa, I quickly realized that teaching three courses and hundreds of students per semester limited my ability to give each student the individualized attention that I was accustomed to and upon which this approach depends.

Not being able to give each student personal attention throughout the semester, I considered ways to (1) increase peer interaction among students; (2) differentiate my approach in lower and upper division courses; (3) better train teaching assistants to support students (when applicable); and (4) structure my classes in a more equitable way that does not rely on knowing each student’s personal circumstances, nor having to make accommodations on an individual basis. To increase peer interaction, I incorporated more group activities such as small group discussion, workshopping, and class projects into my courses. To better differentiate lower and upper division courses, I broke the content in lower division courses into smaller subunits that provide students with immediate learning goals and incorporated more lectures (with accompanying PowerPoint presentations). This reduced students’ reliance upon me at any given moment and made it easier for students to help each other more often. To better train teaching assistants, I began providing personalized one-one-one instruction to each assistant as well as dedicating time during weekly TA meetings for group discussion on pedagogy. Lastly, I revisited class policies and requirements to structure the class as whole in a more equitable fashion.

For example, aligned with the literature on best practices for equity in higher education, I created more flexibility in class attendance, eliminated my prohibition on electronics in the classroom, and built in opportunities for students to redo or make up coursework. While my intervention in these four areas was initially successful, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic made these changes inadequate for the challenges of teaching in such an unprecedented time.

Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has led me to think outside the box when it comes to course design. It has been difficult to support students during the pandemic because so many of them have experienced hardship, illness, and loss. While this has led me to become much more empathetic and trusting of my students (I believe them when they tell me that they need something and I do my best to help them), I have also developed new ways to structure my courses to cultivate a sense of community and enable peer interaction in an online environment. The types of creative problem solving that I engaged in to do so is best demonstrated through my FA20 Introductory Sociology (SOC 1010) course.

Introductory Sociology (FA20) was a lecture-based course that was supplemented by discussion sections. The class had a 260-student enrollment. Aligned with the literature on equity, I taught the course asynchronously to provide students flexibility as they navigated their personal and academic commitments during this difficult time. While it is relatively simple to make lecture asynchronous, this decision led to several other more challenging problems that needed to be solved: (1) how to support students who benefit from a more structured classroom environment; (2) how to conduct worthwhile asynchronous discussion sections; and (3) how to encourage peer interaction among students. This is how I did it.

First, while some students benefit from the flexibility of being able to watch a recording of lecture on their own schedule, some of my students from SP20 and SU20 told me that they benefitted from the structure that synchronous lectures provided—they depended on that structure for time management. I solved this problem by broadcasting lectures using Microsoft Stream at set times and then posting the recording immediately after on the course’s Microsoft Teams page. Without entering a discussion of learning management software, this setup ensured that students had the same experience whether they attended the live broadcast or watched the video.

Second, sections needed to be asynchronous. I implemented online forums SP20 and was dissatisfied with the results because student contributions were superficial and, at times, counterproductive to the learning goals of the class. Seeking an alternative, I reconceptualized discussion section into a weekly recorded roundtable discussion among teaching assistants that students were required to watch. Each week, students submitted questions about the reading or lecture material and TAs responded to their questions or comments in a 50-minute discussion. This format increased students' engagement in the content and provided them with an alternative to sitting in yet another video conference call each week. In addition to the roundtable format, I repurposed three of the discussion sections into a speaker series for the class. The authors of the books that I assigned for this course joined the class for a 50-minute Q & A session. Students who were able to attend had the opportunity to speak directly to the authors. While all three authors are leading scholars in their subfields, notably, one of them had been awarded the MacArthur Fellowship weeks prior to visiting my class. This component of the class went exceptionally well.

Lastly, students needed opportunities to interact with each other. To accomplish this, I rethought discussion sections once again and devised a class-wide research project that would bring them together through a series of structured activities and unite them through a common pursuit. The project was a class survey. If students were not able to get to know each other in person, they could at least learn about each other in aggregate. To accomplish this project, I distributed section assignments based on enrollment and reorganized students into research groups. Each student told me which topics interested them most, I identified the four most popular topics, and then assigned each student to a research group based upon their stated preferences. Each research group was overseen by a teaching assistant who served as the PI. Through a series of assignments, I had students divide into small groups within their broader research group and incrementally narrow their broad interests into specific areas related to their topic. Each small group then developed, tested, and revised three questions related to their specific focus. Once finalized, each small group’s questions were included on a class-wide survey, and then the class took the survey. This project was a resounding success. It provided students with hands-on experience doing social research, provided them with a structured way to interact with their peers, and in the end, also provided them with a better understanding of who “they” as a class were.

Upon analyzing the results, many of them were surprised by what we learned.

FA20 Introductory Sociology (SOC 1010) illustrates more than my ability to come up with creative solutions to unprecedented challenges, it also marks a significant development in my pedagogy. The class research project became a touchstone of the course that encouraged students to indulge their curiosity and engage in creative problem solving. It also provided an alternative means for me to build a discussion with students over the semester. While I typically do this through a highly curated reading list, this project provided the class with a means to do so through problem-solution framework. As a class, we encountered several unexpected problems related to how to organize and coordinate small groups within both their broader research groups and the class. This project stoked my interest in active learning.

In the next three years, I will continue to work toward developing more equitable classes. I will also work to expand student opportunities for active learning throughout the semester. For example, during SP22, I am teaching an elective course on Ethnography (SOC 3559) through which students will conduct both individual projects and contribute to a class project. I am also teaching a course on Abolition Movements in the United States (SOC 4540) through which I will build an ongoing discussion

through a highly curated list of assigned reading that presents a top-down approach to understanding abolition movements while students are tasked with investigating present day social movement organizations from a bottom-up approach. In both instances, I seek to both mediate student interactions through a shared project and task them with contributing content to the class discussion in a way that teaches them to solve practical problems associated with investigating society.

In addition to experimenting with my courses in the Sociology department, I have been selected to be a College Fellow for Arts and Sciences. Through my participation in the College Fellows program, I seek to further develop my skills in designing and conducting courses around principles of active learning. While I am sure that I have much to learn, the College Fellows Program will provide an ideal community to continue experimenting in student-centered pedagogy.

# ADVISING

In the past three years, I have gained significant experience as an advisor for undergraduate students and graduate student instructors. These experiences have changed how I view myself as a professor. Whereas I once embraced a romantic view of education through which the sole aim was to encourage students to engage in non-instrumental learning for the mere sake of excellence, I now feel a great and pressing responsibility to help students prepare for life after college. As a result, I actively work with my advisees to develop plans for life after college, obtain internships, seek employment, or apply to graduate or professional school. I also frequently write letters of recommendation and continue to support my students once they have graduated.

While I work to help all my students, I am especially skilled at helping first-generation students. In addition to being a first-generation college graduate myself, I have more than a decade of experience in mentoring first-generation students, often from historically underrepresented backgrounds. I have continued to develop my aptitude for this type of work by reading the scholarly literature on inequality in institutions of higher education as it relates to first-generation students and those from historically underrepresented backgrounds. I worked with Josipa Roska (Professor of Sociology and Education) to develop a reading list of 15 books on this subject. I have since read all the books on this list and use their findings to help guide my approach to mentorship in a major with high concentrations of students from these demographics.

# SERVICE

I have fulfilled every service appointment that the department chair has assigned to me. This includes: (1) maintaining the Sociology departments website and Twitter account; (2) serving on the subcommittee for Introductory Sociology (SOC 1010) and the subcommittee for the Sociology Research Workshop (SOC 3120), each of which is tasked with establishing criteria to standardize how each course is taught; (3) serving on the sociology department’s Merit Committee which is tasked with developing criteria that will be deployed to evaluate faculty productivity during the annual review; and (4) helping to conduct two departmental workshops for first-time graduate student instructors.

In addition to departmental service, and serving as an Arts and Sciences advisor, I am becoming increasingly involved in student life at UVa. Upon receiving invitations, I delivered an Echols Fireside Chat, and will soon speak with UVa’s YDSA chapter. I have been interviewed by the Cavalier Daily several

times in the past semester. I enjoy participating in student-led activities at UVa and foresee that I will continue to do so as the pandemic allows.

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

In the past three years I have actively worked to develop as an instructor by participating in eight pedagogical workshops hosted by either The Center for Teaching Excellence or Learning Design and Technology. These workshops focused on constructing more equitable classrooms and ways to incorporate new technologies into instruction. I am also a member of a working group on equity that is organized by Gail Hunger (Learning Design and Technology). This working group meets once per month and is comprised of faculty from across the university. I intend to continue my involvement in on- campus discussions related to excellence in teaching, and plan to become more involved in disciplinary discussions of pedagogy that are organized through American Sociological Association.

In the next three years, I also plan to resume conducting research. I plan to expand upon my current specialization in conservative politics and knowledge, and my emerging consideration of how students experience higher education, to investigate how UVa students encounter and make sense of political claims and information. As someone who is knowledgeable in both the scholarly literature on campus politics and public debates over free speech on college campuses, it is striking how little we know about the ways students understand political information or how the mode through which they encounter it affects them. There is both a gap in scholarly literature and a need to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions in public debate that can be approached from a perspective that also studies and improves pedagogy.

# FINAL WORDS

In the next three years I intend to continue serving as an important member of the department’s teaching and service rotation, and am committed to continuing improvement in pedagogy and mentoring. Joining the College Fellows program and continuing my involvement with both the Center for Teaching Excellence and Learning Design and Technology will further integrate me into the life of the university beyond the Department of Sociology. I will also continue my professional development by becoming involved in conversations around teaching in the broader sociological community through participation in the American Sociological Association Section on Teaching and Learning. I also intend to conduct research that combines my scholarly expertise in political sociology with pedagogical insights, and to submit this research to peer-reviewed journals for publication. In sum, I plan to continue being an active member of the department and to expand my profile in the UVa community and the broader discipline of sociology.