In the spring semester of 2010, the Department of Sociology welcomed a new criminology major to its curriculum with a humble inaugural class of just 11 students. Since then, the major has grown tremendously, now accommodating 225 students in the department. As the program expands with each semester, the Department of Sociology recognizes that it has established a major with a unique course of study that sets its graduates apart from others in the field of criminal justice.

Before an official criminology major was offered, the Department of Sociology had a criminal justice certificate program for students interested in the field. The certificate program was popular among students, but it required more hours than a criminology major would have involved. Taking note of the discrepancy, Greg Dunaway, and current Interim Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, and Peter Wood, began laying the groundwork for transitioning the certificate program into a major. Nicole Rader, joined the faculty in 2005 and was immediately on board with the transition. The three, along with faculty member Stacy Haynes, worked throughout 2009 to complete a proposal and have it sent to various groups for approval, and finally the major was accepted to begin in spring 2010.

One aspect of major importance to Dunaway, Rader and Wood while constructing this major was their insistence on keeping the curriculum sociologically based. This foundation in sociological studies ensured that, in addition to the lessons of a traditional criminal justice program, students would also learn about the reasons why people commit crime and the social dimensions of crime from a sociological standpoint.

“We were interested in providing an avenue for students where they could learn about the causes of crime, which I think is important,”
Rader says. “It is a more holistic approach to criminology than you find in a lot of programs, so that is why I thought it was really special.”

Involvement in a criminology major that provides insight to the intersection between sociology and criminology boasts many benefits for students. While the law enforcement aspect of criminal justice is still a key focus of the program, students within the major also learn to appreciate a much broader approach to criminology. The classes offered help students learn to use different theoretical approaches to deal with power dynamics—a component that is not common to a traditional criminal justice program. Other social dimensions such as gender and race are also heavily studied in relation to crime. The creation of a Race and Crime course echoes the significance that department faculty places on these issues. Rader stresses that such factors are important in both the state of Mississippi and in the field of criminal justice when it comes to understanding the underlying causes of crime.

Another focus of the program that has become increasingly important to both students and faculty is the interest in the victims of crime. Because all police officers must eventually deal with victims at some point, Rader believes that students who have a better sense of the victim role in the criminal justice system will ultimately be more effective in their job. The growing interest in this sociological facet has led to the creation of a Victimology course, the first of its kind at Mississippi State.

“I feel like exposing students to various aspects of criminology is something that we’re doing at Mississippi State better than anyone else right now,” Rader says. “It’s not just about taking Juvenile Delinquency, but about taking a Gender and Crime class and maybe not liking what you hear, but learning something that you didn’t think about before. I think that’s good for our students.”

While a sociology base gives the criminology program the ability to attract a larger range of students with an interest in the field, there are other theories among sociology faculty members that help explain the booming growth of the new major. David May, Major Advisor for the criminology program, pinpoints the intrigue behind the jobs that criminology majors are able to pursue. He also acknowledges that the experiences of individuals or of their relatives and friends with the criminal justice system may drive students to follow a career in the field. Furthermore, there is the idea that positions in criminology provide a career opportunity for those with a passion for helping others.

“The criminology major has appeals to a wide variety of personalities and experiences,” May explains. “When we began offering the major here, these students were naturally drawn to the program.”

Behind every successful major is an involved and hard-working faculty, and the criminology program has proved no different. There are currently five tenure-track criminologists, including May, Haynes, and Rader along with Shelley Matthews, and Raymond Barranco, who are each dedicated to different aspects of criminology. This is incredibly beneficial to students, as it offers a variety of perspectives and interests to be taught and addressed in classes. However, it also allows students the opportunities to work with faculty members on diverse research opportunities tailored to their specific interests. Cameron Thigpen, a senior criminology major graduating in December, believes that working with faculty members who are knowledgeable in the field provides a priceless experience and education to students in the program.

“I feel very confident graduating with my degree in criminology. I feel this way because I have been educated by instructors who are well-versed in the field,” he explains. “Besides teaching experience, all of my instructors have worked in the field so they know the skills, education and training needed to be successful in this career.”

Although the creation of a major has resulted in a larger base of criminology students, there are still a number of perceived benefits these students have gained because of the growth. Rader believes that a sense of “togetherness” has made itself evident among students. Now that they are all criminology majors taking the same classes, the loyalty and sense of community between the students has grown, making them closer with each other than Rader could have imagined with the criminal justice certificate program. May also stresses that as the program grows, the future outlooks of its students will continue to improve.

““As we grow in both quantity and quality, I believe our reputation will be enhanced first at the state level, then at the regional level and finally at the national level,” May says. “This should help our graduates in their pursuit of jobs and additional educational opportunities.”

Future plans continue to look bright for the budding criminology major. A recent step to increase the quality of the program was a vote that students must maintain a cumulative GPA of 2.0 to remain in the criminology program. While this may not directly impact the topics covered in the classes offered in the program, it can be seen as a move to increase its overall academic quality, which is essential, according to May. The department is also discussing the possibility of offering a criminology minor at some point in the future. The prospect of a double major to pair a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology with a Bachelor of Arts in Criminology may also be an option for students down the road.

Overall, Rader maintains a sense of accomplishment regarding the success of the criminology major’s establishment in the Department of Sociology.

“I’m really happy with the way that things turned out,” she says. “Our students seem happier, and our biggest concern is just how to manage that many students sometimes. But for the most part, we’re handling it well.”

Lynne Cossman, and sociology Department Head, echoes Rader’s delight in the final product of the criminology major and emits a smile of satisfaction when asked about the success of the program.

“The Criminology major has been phenomenally successful,” Cossman says with pride. “We’re bursting at the seams with criminology majors, and it’s very exciting how quickly it has grown.”