The University of Washington has had a distinguished department of sociology since the 1920s. More than 300 PhDs in sociology have been conferred by the department since the first was awarded in 1932. Five departmental faculty members have served as presidents of the American Sociological Association. Departmental faculty have been elected members of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Partly due to its geographical isolation at the northwest corner of the country, Washington sociology has long been characterized by its intellectual innovation. Under the influence of George Lundberg, it became one of the first American sociology departments to develop a vision of sociology as a scientific discipline. Although many of the enthusiasms of that day have faded with time - it's hard to imagine any current faculty writing a book titled Can Science Save Us?, as did Lundberg - this vision of the department as committed to scientific research continues to describe much of the flavor of Washington sociology. As a consequence, the graduate curriculum places particular emphasis on general theory and quantitative methodology. In the 1970s, under the leadership of H. M. Blalock and Herbert Costner, the department became a leading center for causal inference and quantitative sociological methodology in the field. At roughly the same time, Richard Emerson pioneered exchange theory in social psychology, and Travis Hirschi did the same for social control theory in criminology. In the 1980s, Washington became the first department to apply rational choice theory to macrosociological problems, and the influential religious economies approach to the sociology of religion was developed here.

This innovative tradition continues on into the twenty first century. Current faculty members are principally engaged in three basic types of research activities.

Some of this research aims to discover new empirical facts. Its goal is to establish empirical generalizations about regularities concerning family, the state, race and ethnicity, network processes, fertility, migration, gender, religion, crime, politics and social movements -- or to reveal anomalies about such phenomena. This research employs a number of evidentiary methods, including surveys, censuses, ethnographies, historical archives, and experiments.

Other departmental research focuses on the identification of social mechanisms. The aim of this work is to devise theories that seek to account for the empirical regularities mentioned above. Although the content of these theories can be highly variable, they are likely to have at least two features in common. First, these theories propose specific causal mechanisms that are in principle generalizable; hence, they are not limited to particular substantive areas, data sets, villages, or countries. Second, these theories have unique empirical implications; otherwise, they have little value if they cannot be tested. Examples include evolutionary, ecological, symbolic interaction, rational choice, and network theories.

Last, the aim of some research is on the systematic and rigorous testing of general theories. This kind of research activity involves the creation and application of methods (statistical, experimental and historical) that are appropriate to test the theories being advanced to account for empirical generalizations.

Research is carried on both within the department and under the auspices of a number of interdisciplinary centers. Current strengths of the department include demography (CSDE), criminology, punishment, and socio-legal studies (CLASS), analysis of states, markets and societies, (which includes comparative historical sociology, economic sociology, social movements, ethnic conflict and the sociology of religion), social inequality, migration, research design and statistical analysis (CSSS), and data-intensive social science (eScience Institute).