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## Patrolling the New Sociology: Neil Gross brings the timely and topical to a venerable Department

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# FACULTY



## Patrolling the New Sociology

**NEIL GROSS BRINGS THE  
TIMELY AND TOPICAL TO A  
VENERABLE DEPARTMENT**

By Gerry Boyle '78

### **Newly arrived Charles A. Dana Professor of Sociology Neil Gross used to be a cop.**

That Gross was a patrolman with the Berkeley (Calif.) Police Department for a year before going to graduate school may be only tangentially related to his decision to teach a course next semester called Policing the American City. But his time on the beat certainly gives him classroom cred.

The new course will explore militarization, mass incarceration, race, and other police-related issues. Gross also will teach Red and Blue America, a course about political polarization. Both, he said, are part of “an effort in sociology [at Colby] to reorient the curriculum toward classes that are pretty topical issues today.”

Coming to Mayflower Hill from Princeton University, Gross noted that he is joining an institution that was one of the first to offer sociology. President Albion Small (1889-1892) graduated from Colby in 1876 and returned to pioneer the discipline of sociology at Colby before establishing the department at the University of Chicago. “I hope to continue that legacy,” Gross said, not only for majors, but for any students interested in what a sociological perspective can teach them. “More than anything else, I want sociology at Colby to be the vibrant department that it can be.”

“There is an increasing recognition among students that there are lots of topics that require seeing things from a variety of perspectives. And that means being fluent in more than one discipline.”

—Charles A. Dana Professor of Sociology  
Neil Gross

In his first weeks as department chair, Gross had already begun. Speakers this fall included sociologist Van Tran of Columbia University, who studies ethnic and racial equality including the consequences of gentrification on cities, and Eric Klinenberg of New York University, an urban studies scholar whose books about the new popularity of people living alone and forces that control the media, among others, have drawn wide popular interest.

Gross’s own interests are wide ranging. He’s written a sociological biography of American philosopher Richard Rorty and a book that set out to answer the question of whether college and university faculty members lean left—and try to indoctrinate students with liberal notions.

He concluded that faculty do lean slightly to the left on the political spectrum but don’t discriminate against conservative students. One research technique, which Gross called “a mild bit of deception,” involved sending fictitious queries to humanities graduate schools. There was no evidence of systematic bias against the prospective applicants who revealed a conservative bent, Gross concluded.

If this doesn’t sound like your grandmother’s sociology, or Albion Small’s, it isn’t. It may reflect Gross’s own interdisciplinary interests, which meld sociology, philosophy, intellectual history, higher education, and political science. “But always with a sociological root,” he said.

The subject will continue to captivate students, including some he’d already met at Colby—those who love sociology and embrace the way it sees the world. “At the same time, there is an increasing recognition among the students that there are lots of topics that require seeing things from a whole variety of perspectives,” Gross said. “And that means being fluent in more than one discipline.”

No surprise that he is aware of trends in higher education. In fact, this semester Gross is teaching *College in Crisis?*—the course title ending with a question mark. It explores, from a sociological perspective, the challenges facing higher education: rising tuition

costs, questions about the value of such an education, even the relationship between the college party scene and equality. Gross planned to have the authors of books and articles used in the course answer questions from students, making the experience interactive.

“For a sociologist these are interesting issues to think about and explore,” he said. “What will be the future of American higher education? Will it continue on in roughly its present course? What will the trajectory be of innovators in the area? ... As a sociologist interested in higher education institutions and academia, you can’t help being interested in the present moment.”

The present moment includes much discussion and growing concern about inequality in the United States, from both sides of the political spectrum, he said. And sociologists should be ready to step in. “This,” said Gross, “should be sociology’s time.”



*Today’s students, says Professor Neil Gross, need to be fluent in more than one discipline.*