

Unit Plan for Assessing and Improving Student Learning in Degree Programs

Unit: Department of Sociology

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Date: September 29, 2008

SECTION 1: PAST ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Since 2000, the Sociology department has experienced tremendous growth in the number of students it serves, essentially doubling its majors from 235 in 2000 to 537 in Spring 2008. In addition, Sociology courses promote the UIUC campus's overall educational outcomes by introducing students outside the department to quantitative reasoning and by supporting several teaching initiatives, such as the International Studies program and various ethnic studies programs.

The growth and expansion of our teaching mission has placed serious demands on our tenure-system faculty, whose numbers have declined from 21.6 FTE in 2000 to 12.7 as the Fall 2008 semester begins. In spite of this sharp decline in FTE, we have nevertheless maintained our commitment to undergraduate and graduate education by offering a wide spectrum of challenging courses that train students in sociological theory and empirical research methods and that encourage students to engage in community service.

We have made a number of changes to both our graduate and undergraduate programs based on our previous efforts to assess student outcomes. These changes are described below:

1) Expanded research methods training. Both graduate and undergraduate students in the Sociology department receive comprehensive training in research methods. Since 2000, we have introduced a series of qualitative methods courses in both the graduate and undergraduate programs to augment our already substantial quantitative methods training. In addition, we have emphasized computer-based skills training in our methods courses.

2) Expanded the availability of internship opportunities to undergraduates. The discipline of Sociology emphasizes community engagement, and undergraduates majoring in Sociology are more likely than most to seek out opportunities to apply their "sociological imaginations" to real-world problems, thus making Sociology a natural location for advancing UIUC's goals of promoting public engagement. The faculty and staff in the department have sought out contacts with local law enforcement and social service agencies so that students can actively engage in important projects of public engagement, in keeping with the University's goals.

3) Provided research opportunities to undergraduate students. Through close co-operation with the Sociology Club, faculty have involved undergraduates in their research

projects, from having students help to create reading lists for new projects to coding data. By participating in faculty research, undergraduates learn about the possibilities of pursuing research-based careers.

4) Enhanced the undergraduate advising office. In light of the rapid expansion of the number of undergraduate majors, we added a .50 FTE advisor to keep up with the dramatic increase in demand for advising services. In addition, our growing undergraduate majors have much more varied expectations about career possibilities, so we have expanded the career advising that we offer.

5) Developed an alumni newsletter. We have introduced an alumni newsletter designed to keep our alumni informed about the teaching and research activities in the department, as well as alumni news.

6) Created student awards. We have introduced awards for student achievement. We now offer an undergraduate and graduate student award for best paper, and we offer a prize to the best journal article published by a graduate student. These awards encourage and reward students for excellent research and scholarship.

SECTION 2: REVISED ASSESSMENT PLAN

PROCESS

The Head of the Sociology department delegated the development of the revised assessment plan to the Curriculum Committee. The Chair of the Curriculum Committee consulted with the Director of Undergraduate Studies, the Director of Graduate Studies, and the staff member in charge of our undergraduate and graduate students. In addition, the Chair of the Curriculum Committee sought input from faculty members in the revision of the assessment plan.

UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM

STUDENT OUTCOMES

The Sociology department has several different goals for its students who major in Sociology. We seek to engage our students in the wide spectrum of sociological theories and research methods. We train our students in the analytical skills and critical thinking required to identify and interpret significant social problems, processes, and institutions. Finally, we encourage our students to apply their theoretical and empirical training through active community engagement, focusing on developing the capacity to identify and assess strategic solutions to pressing community problems. To these ends, we have identified several critical outcomes for Sociology majors.

OUTCOME 1 – *Develop a thorough knowledge of sociological theories, concepts, and research methods.* Specifically, students who have completed the Sociology major should:

- Demonstrate a knowledge of the general history and recent trends in the discipline and its major sub-fields;
- Be familiar with important sociological concepts and theoretical traditions;
- Master a range of basic empirical and statistical social research methods; and
- Apply their theoretical and empirical knowledge to complex social problems.

OUTCOME 2 – *Develop the intellectual skill of critical thinking.* Specifically, Sociology majors should be able to:

- Frame social issues as empirical questions resolvable by observation;
- Assess the validity and reliability of evidence for competing claims regarding social issues;
- Demonstrate cognitive complexity in understanding complex social phenomena; and
- Write and speak clearly about social issues.

OUTCOME 3 – *Foster attitudes that sustain community engagement and a sociological imagination.* Specifically, Sociology majors should:

- Link personal problems and troubles of everyday life to broader social processes and social problems;
- Adhere to the ethical standards of confidentiality and maintain the integrity of the discipline; and
- Seek out opportunities for community engagement in pursuit of social justice.

MEASURES AND METHODS USED TO MEASURE OUTCOMES

In keeping with our department’s mission of covering the breadth of research methods, we will use both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data about student outcomes. Because of our critical shortage of FTE faculty, we will rely heavily on existing sources of data available at UIUC at the beginning of our outcome assessment. But because we understand that outcome assessment should be an ongoing process, our plan embraces strategies for data collection that allow for greater faculty participation and evaluation in the future.

To evaluate our students' knowledge of sociology, we will rely on measures reflecting students' performance in our program. Specifically, we will be examining the following indicators:

- Students' GPA in Sociology and in the rest of their coursework at UIUC;
- Students' performance in the program's required courses and in particular courses in specific sub-fields of Sociology.
- The graduation rate of declared majors in Sociology;
- Student accomplishment through UIUC and external awards and honors;
- Graduate school placement;
- Employment placement; and
- Student self-assessments of their progress through the program, gleaned from surveys and interviews.

To evaluate our students' critical thinking skills, we will evaluate their ability to use sociological concepts and theories to analyze social problems and processes. We plan to evaluate these skills through:

- Students' self-assessment of their coursework;
- Soliciting evaluations from fieldwork supervisors who monitor our students' internships;
- Panel studies of students at different stages in their education, relying on student's written work and interviews with students about their progress through the program;
- Focus groups with students involving discussions of social issues (a project that can hopefully involve the Sociology Club);
- Alumni's self-assessments about the value of a degree in Sociology to pursuing their chosen careers.

The methods that we will use to collect data on these measures will include:

- Data from the Campus Profile;
- Data from the Senior Survey;

- Survey of our graduating seniors about their experience in the program and about graduate school and / or employment plans;
- ICES scores;
- Exit interviews with our graduating seniors;
- Panel studies of students that will include survey and interviews;
- External evaluations from internship supervisors; and
- Focus groups.

Again, because of severe shortages in FTE and the unprecedented demands on our undergraduate support staff, we will not be able to implement all of these methods immediately. But planning has begun for most of them, and we aim to have the first wave of data collection implemented by Spring 2009.

GRADUATE PROGRAM

STUDENT OUTCOMES

The Sociology department's graduate program continues in a tradition established prior to the last outcome assessment of offering graduate students an intellectually focused and closely-mentored experience. The department continues to control the number of students that it admits, particularly given the serious shortage of FTE available to supervise graduate students. Students can specialize in one of the following areas: Race, Class, Gender; Social Dynamics and Structure: Networks, Population and Life Course; and Transnational Studies.

OUTCOME 1 – *Develop a thorough knowledge of sociological theories and intensive knowledge of and research ability in a specific area of sociological inquiry.*

OUTCOME 2 – *Develop the analytical skills required to identify significant research problems in a chosen area of sociological inquiry.*

OUTCOME 3 – *Develop a thorough knowledge of a wide array of research methods to make it possible to conduct their own research and to evaluate the research of others.*

MEASURES AND METHODS USED TO MEASURE OUTCOMES

The department will rely on the following measures to assess the outcomes of our graduate students:

- Successful completion of program requirements;

- Review of graduate student publications and awards;
- Annual interviews with faculty about the progress of graduate students through the program;
- Survey of graduate students about their experiences in the program;
- Exit interviews with graduate students who are leaving the program, both with and without degrees; and
- Survey of alumni about their employment status.

SECTION 3: PLANS FOR USING RESULTS

a) **PLANS:** The department's curriculum committee will be responsible for supervising the data collection and for presenting the results to the department.

The department will rely on the student outcome assessment to develop a better student profile to evaluate the needs of our students in light of the constraints of our faculty. We will rely on the results to evaluate, for example, whether the courses we offer provide a sufficient overview of the discipline and what gaps there are in the curriculum.

The department will also rely on the results to clarify our undergraduates' career options to determine whether new or additional courses might support their goals – for example, widening the scope of our internship program or increasing the number of pre-law courses that we offer.

Finally, we hope to institutionalize our efforts to assess student outcomes so that the data collection and the periodic review of the data becomes part of the department's institutional practice.

b) TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In Fall 2008, we will work with LAS Alumni Relations to develop a database of our recent graduates for our survey of alumni; design survey questions and interview schedules for existing students and recent graduates; select students to participate in panel studies and ask them to submit samples of their work; and solicit the assistance of the Sociology Club in data collection.

In Spring 2009, the advising staff will collect the most recent institutional data regarding the performance of our students; administer the surveys to existing majors and recent graduates; and conduct the interviews with students. The advising staff and curriculum

committee will also re-evaluate the methods of data collection based on these experiences.

In Fall 2009, the curriculum committee will present the results of the outcome assessment to the department's faculty for evaluation and discussion about possible changes to the undergraduate and graduate programs.