



Addendum

Report of the Committee for the Assessment of the Major

Department of Sociology

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Assessment of the Undergraduate Major Spring 1998

As part of the Sociology Department's assessment, the department conducted a modified portfolio assessment, examining work submitted by a randomly-selected sample of ten graduating seniors. Of the ten students contacted, only nine actually submitted work; most of the students who participated complained that they had trouble locating papers or exams. It seems obvious that all the students submitted only selected pieces of work, despite the promise of anonymity; thus, we suspect that we saw only work of which a participating student felt proud, or work from their final semester, rather than a complete portfolio for any single student.

Nevertheless, we are fairly confident that the portfolios are reasonably representative of work produced by our graduating seniors. The students in the sample are generally about average, with a cumulative grade point average of 2.872---slightly lower than the mean gpa of 3.095 of graduating seniors in Sociology. The work they have submitted for the assessment process is probably about as good as they are capable of producing, and we believe that it offers a fairly representative picture of the capabilities of our graduates in their final semester.

In the assessment which follows, instead of reporting on each student's individual work, we reflect on general trends and patterns.

In general, the sample demonstrates that by graduation, our average students are quite competent consumers of sociological research. Every student in the sample submitted work that demonstrated a clear understanding of authors' questions and hypothesis, and every student was able to articulate reasons why the problem addressed was of sociological importance — although, admittedly, students were more likely to frame sociological importance in terms of contemporary policy-relevant concerns than in terms of larger theoretical or analytic debates. In papers where students discussed several works, students regularly displayed a clear ability to distinguish between different analytic starting points, emphasizing the different questions, hypotheses and assumptions with which different authors approached their problem.

With some outstanding exceptions, the work included in the portfolio did not demonstrate any strong interest in or knowledge of the larger theoretical debates in the discipline, but students showed a clear sense of the relationship between research and contemporary policy debates. Several essays, apparently written for a course in sociological theory, displayed a very strong understanding of classic theory, and suggested the student had a clear vision of the relationship between these more abstract debates and empirical research. However, most students did not raise these larger theoretical frameworks in their reviews of contemporary research, nor did they explore the links between author's research questions and broader frameworks or causal assumptions. In general, students seemed more concerned about the policy relevance of research findings, often displaying a strong sense of how the research related to their own experiences.

Students demonstrated a great deal of sensitivity to issues of data collection and to authors' use of sociological methods. Almost every portfolio included papers which discussed data collection issues, critically examining authors' sampling and selection, as well as addressing problems with data collection methods. For example, several papers address the wording of survey questions, and students often suggested alternative wording for surveys. Students were also sensitive to issues of validity, addressing critically authors' claims about the relationship between indicators and underlying social dynamics. Students were frequently able to suggest a reasonable alternative for data or indicators that they did not consider adequate. This sensitivity to data collection issues, however, seems to be more evident in relation to survey and experimental methods than to the data issues that might come up in ethnography or historical-comparative sociological work; none of the submitted papers displayed any real insight into the issues involved in the use of qualitative data.

Students in the sample showed a very clear awareness of the relationship between data, evidence and findings, frequently suggesting that authors' data failed to support their arguments, or offering alternative possible interpretations of the data. Students frequently argued in their papers that authors had failed to consider alternative interpretations of results, or to consider how their data collection methods had perhaps biased their findings. Even work that was below the sample's average standard showed real capacity for critically analyzing authors' claims and conclusion in relation to evidence.

Thus, this limited sample suggests that by graduation, our students are reasonably well-prepared to critically evaluate sociological research.

The portfolio examination suggests that if our goals include producing graduates who are reasonably well-prepared to carry out their own sociological research, we might want to reconsider the kinds of assignments we ask of them in our courses. The limited sample suggests that students have had little experience in pursuing sociological questions on their own. Two of the submitted pieces involved actual research; in both cases, students attempted some kind of field experiment as part of a methods course. These research efforts were clearly laid out, and the hypotheses, methods and findings were reported on very nicely. Beyond these two pieces, however, there were no other pieces of work that could really be called research papers, even drawing on secondary sources. Based on the sample of submitted work, our students are far more likely to be asked to produce book reviews than to try to come up with their own research puzzle. None of the work submitted included any kind of bibliography or even footnotes, and none of the work involved more than four sources.

However, we note that the sample did not include any of the senior research projects or honors theses that many of our seniors produce. Perhaps future department assessment processes should include a more explicit effort to include some of these projects in the portfolio process, to get a clearer vision of the kind of research capacity our students have developed by the time they graduate.

Characteristics of Portfolio Respondents [grade point averages of portfolio respondents per dars 5/6/98]

NAME	ALL [CUM]	INT/ADV	SOC	UPPER-LEV SOC
	2.850	3.222	3.181	3.285
	3.155	3.304	3.625	3.575
	3.018	3.291	3.250	3.166
	2.155	2.574	2.080	2.113
	2.519	2.547	2.777	2.500
	2.979	3.535	3.437	3.520
	2.495	2.682	2.742	3.333
	3.244	3.209	3.183	3.250
	3.437	3.421	3.714	4.000
	25.852			

total = 25.852

mean = 2.872

Cumulative GPA's of All "Degree Expected" Sociology Seniors

N = 127

mean = 3.095