

ASSESSMENT OF THE UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR

**Department of Sociology
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Assessment of the Undergraduate Major Spring 2003

Summary

Based on surveys of graduating seniors in 1998 and 2003, the undergraduate program in the Department of Sociology is judged to be stable and of high quality. Student ratings on the two surveys are nearly identical. Although students are generally very positive about their experiences, access to course and advising continue to be areas of challenge. Students also recognize contributions to their human capital growth, particularly in areas such as understanding how society works, understanding connections between individuals and society, knowledge of social research, critical thinking, and working independently. A new (2003) survey of faculty revealed a need to offer more sections of required courses in methods, statistics, and theory, so that Sociology majors can enroll in these courses earlier in their careers.

Introduction

This report is a follow up and extension of a study that was conducted in Spring 1998 to assess the quality of the undergraduate major in Sociology. It is the second of a planned five-year cycle of assessments. These studies focus on four areas: student learning in sociology courses, the sociology program overall, academic advising in sociology, and undergraduate student research. Both assessments were carried out through a survey of graduating seniors in the major that was administered in select classes during the month of April. The 2003 survey used identically worded questions except for minor modifications to questions on student backgrounds and the addition of an open-ended question and more detailed questions about advising. The 2003 study also included a faculty survey to assess faculty perceptions of student preparation for advanced courses and research.

Assessment of Program Dimensions

In this section we compare the 2003 ratings of the Department of Sociology by graduating seniors in the major to similar ratings obtained by the survey conducted in 1998. The results are shown in Table 1. The t-ratios displayed in column four provide statistical tests for differences between the responses in 1998 and 2003. As in 1998, students who responded to the survey were graduating seniors enrolled in Sociology courses in the spring semester. A total of 76 students responded in 2003 (compared to 65 in 1998), which is about half of all graduating seniors in Sociology. If there is a bias associated with surveying only students who are enrolled in Sociology courses in their final semester, the same bias would hold for both survey years.

The main finding of the 2003 survey is that the views of graduating seniors majoring in sociology on their experiences in the program are virtually identical to those of students who graduated in 1998. In general, these views are very positive. In both years, more than 80% of respondents rated their "overall experience as a major in the Sociology Department" as either "excellent" or "very good." In addition, more than 70% of respondents in both years rated the "quality of faculty teaching," the "overall quality of curriculum and courses," and the "availability of faculty for course-related discussions outside of class" as either "excellent" or "very good." Based on

students' perceptions, we conclude that the overall quality of the major has remained high over the past five years.

Students' open-ended comments ranged from enthusiastically positive to more critical. The main issues that came up for criticism were lack of diversity among faculty and TAs and insufficient access to courses and to academic advising. Indeed, a new question in 2003, "course availability in sociology," revealed that nearly half of respondents thought that access to courses was only "good" or even worse.

Responses to questions on advising indicate that students were generally satisfied with advising about the sociology major, which is central to the Undergraduate Advisor's mission; about half rated it as either "excellent" or "very good." Nearly 40% of respondents never sought career advising from the Undergraduate Advisor, but among those who did, less than half found it to be "good" or "excellent." Answers to a question on the estimated number of times that students consulted the Undergraduate Advisor, summarized in Table 3, suggest that the quality of advising is adversely affected by the large numbers of students that the Advisor must assist. Graduating seniors estimated that they met with the Advisor, on average, about 2.8 times during the course of the current academic year. In other words, for seniors alone, the Advisor probably had over 400 meetings. If these numbers are projected to the total pool of Sociology majors (about 450), that would imply about 225 phone conversations, nearly 800 e-mail exchanges, and about 1300 in-person meetings. Concerns about the advisor's heavy load of students are also reflected in students' open-ended responses. As one student explained,

Great experience in the sociology department! Teachers & TAs are excellent!—only comment—it would be useful to have an additional sociology advisor b/c Ellen Jacobson is always busy!

Contribution of Sociology Courses to Human Capital Growth

In this section we examine student ratings of Sociology with respect to a series of core academic objectives of the undergraduate program. One principal objective of the undergraduate program is to teach students how societies function and how societies shape the lives and views of individuals. A second important set of objectives is to teach students about the nature of social research and to equip them with the skills needed to conduct research.

The results in Table 2 speak to our achievement of these and other objectives as judged by our graduating seniors. These results reflect responses to the question, "How much did the Sociology courses you took as a major contribute to your growth in the following areas?" Along the left-hand side of the table are listed the dimensions of "growth," i.e., program objectives, that students were asked to evaluate. We used paired t-tests to determine which mean ratings were statistically indistinguishable—such objectives receive the same rank score—and which were significantly different. For example, the first two objectives ranked "1" are indistinguishable from each other, but received significantly higher mean ratings than all other objectives. Once again we find perceptions of the Sociology program highly stable across the five years. Students continue to recognize substantial contributions to understanding how society works and

understanding connections between individuals and society; nearly as much is gained in key skills such as critical thinking and independence; and lesser contributions occur to computing and speaking skills and developing career plans.

Description of Results from the Faculty Survey

The faculty survey asked all faculty who teach upper level courses (400-600) or independent study courses a series of fixed-response questions, with a space to write comments in the end. The questions were related to students' preparedness for their classes, for independent research and for their future careers. In the fixed-response questionnaire, most faculty members considered students to be poorly prepared in both statistical skills and methods, and moderately prepared in theory and writing skills. As to overall preparation, most faculty members considered students moderately prepared.

Some members of the faculty, in the open-ended questions, attributed this lack of preparation not to the lack of intelligence or motivation of the students, nor to the quality of courses taught in the department that deal with methods and statistics, but rather to the fact that many students have not taken these courses before they took the respondent's class. They suggested that students should take methods, statistics, and theory before enrolling in advanced classes.

Many of the faculty also noted that there is a high variability among students. As one professor put it, "Indeed, the primary difficulty that I face is not a low *average* level of preparation but a high variance -- which implies that I must either teach to the least common denominator or risk losing a large portion of the class." One professor reported a high variability in writing skills among students, and two others remarked that there are a few exceptionally good students. Some professors marked two or three answers in the questionnaire, and one answered "depends on the student" instead choosing one of the options. Many professors stated that they were answering about the average student, thus implying that the variance is large.

Faculty members were also asked about students' preparedness for research in class, as an undergraduate assistant and in independent study. Faculty members tend to view students as moderately prepared for doing research in the course and for undergraduate theses. In general, students are seen as better prepared for course work research than for independent study and undergraduate thesis. Note that some faculty have claimed to mark these answers for the specific group of students who actually do this kind of research, which in many cases is different from the average student.

Professors were also asked their opinions about prospects for students' careers in sociology, either as graduate students or in non-academic jobs where knowledge of sociology is useful. Most agreed in the closed questionnaire that students are moderately prepared for graduate school in sociology. In light of the high variability among students this response may indicate that a majority of students are moderately prepared, or that some are poorly prepared and others very well prepared. One faculty claimed that "Most of them were not ready to go to graduate school, although some are clearly exceptional students."

Most faculty members think students are moderately to well prepared to pursue a non-academic career in which knowledge of Sociology is useful. One professor thought that students seem a bit disoriented regarding their career options: “they don't have much clue what that would be and they assume faculty don't either; if smart and well prepared, they also don't think anything but grad school is valued.”

Implications

We draw four main conclusions from this assessment. First, overall, the quality of the undergraduate major in Sociology is high, and stable. Second, the large majority of students are satisfied with the teaching, curriculum, and courses they encounter in Sociology. Third, students recognize important contributions to their human capital growth. Fourth, some concerns are evident. When students complain about course access, and faculty bemoan the fact that students take upper division Sociology courses before taking the introductory theory and methods courses, they are really complaining about the same thing: insufficient access to gateway courses such as Soc 357 (methods), Soc 475 (theory) and Soc 210/211 (Introduction to Sociology). Both concerns could be addressed by increasing the number of sections of these courses, so that students can enroll in them earlier in their careers. This will not entirely solve the problem because some students come late to the major, and even if we expand our offerings, we will never be able to seat every student the first time s/he desires a required course. Still, expanding offerings in these required courses will go a long way towards addressing the problem, and we are making every effort to do so.

Another concern is lack of sufficient diversity among our faculty and teaching assistants. This is a very real problem, especially for Sociology where diverse experiences and viewpoints are beneficial to discussion and debate, and thus enhance the quality of students' learning. We are making every effort in our recruitment of faculty and graduate students to combat this problem.

A final concern has to do with career advising, as reflected in students' questionnaire responses and comments and in faculty responses. Clearly, we simply do not have the resources to provide career counseling to our majors; we are stretched thin just in responding to their advising needs in making progress towards completing the major. Fortunately, new advising resources are available outside the department, including the Cross-College Career Exploration Center for freshmen and sophomores, and the L&S/Human Ecology Career Center for juniors and seniors, which may help address this problem.

We recommend that the Department of Sociology continue monitoring the quality of the undergraduate major by repeating the survey of students and faculty on a five-year cycle. The faculty survey could be improved by adding questions that encourage responses about variability among students, instead of focusing solely on the averages.

Table 1
Mean Ratings of Quality along Selected Dimensions,
Graduating Seniors in Sociology, 1998 vs. 2003

Dimensions	Sociology 1998	Sociology 2003	t-ratio	p-value (two-tailed)
Overall experiences	4.07 (65)	4.03 (75)	-0.36	0.72
Overall quality of curriculum and courses in major	4.02 (65)	4.00 (75)	-0.10	0.92
Course availability	N/A	3.55 (75)	---	---
Overall availability of faculty	4.08 (65)	3.96 (75)	-0.77	0.44
Overall quality of faculty teaching	3.93 (65)	4.05 (75)	0.79	0.43
Overall quality of TA teaching	3.59 (64)	3.74 (73)	0.88	0.38
Academic advising: on sociology ⁴	3.22 (64)	3.49 (75)	1.49	0.14
Academic advising: on courses outside sociology	N/A	2.95 (75)	---	---
Career advising	2.48 (46)	2.46 (46)	-0.19	0.85

Notes:

¹ Positive values of t-ratio indicates comparison favors 2003; negative values favor 1998.

² All ratings are on a scale ranging from 5 = excellent to 1 = poor.

³ N/A = Not asked

⁴ The questions on academic advising on the sociology program were slightly different in 1998 and 2003. 1998: "How would you rate the academic advising you received as a Sociology major?"
 2003: "How would you rate the academic advising you received about the Sociology program?"

Table 2
Mean Ratings of the Contribution of Sociology Courses to Growth in Selected Areas,
Graduating Seniors in Sociology, 1998 vs. 2003

1998 Rank	2003 Rank	Area	Sociology 1998	Sociology 2003	t-ratio	p-value (two-tailed)
1	1	Understanding how society works	3.52 (65)	3.59 (74)	0.58	0.56
1	1	Understanding connections between individuals and society	3.61 (65)	3.57 (74)	-0.36	0.72
2	2	Knowledge of how social research is conducted	3.45 (65)	3.34 (74)	-0.75	0.45
2	2	Critical thinking skills	3.34 (65)	3.27 (74)	-0.49	0.63
2	2	Working effectively on own	3.34 (65)	3.36 (74)	0.19	0.85
3	3	Working effectively in groups	3.18 (65)	3.01 (74)	-1.15	0.25
3	3	Understanding statistical data and analysis	3.15 (65)	3.11 (74)	-0.31	0.75
3	3	Writing skills	3.14 (65)	3.03 (74)	-0.71	0.48
4	4	Computing skills	2.55 (65)	2.26 (74)	-1.82	0.07
4	4	Speaking effectively	2.43 (65)	2.30 (73)	-0.82	0.41
5	4	Developing career plans	2.21 (65)	2.18 (74)	-0.23	0.82

Notes:

¹ All ratings are on a scale ranging from 4 = "a lot" to 1 = "not at all."

² Areas with the same rank show no statistically significant difference in mean rating. Areas with different ranks are, by a paired t-test, significantly different at a p-value < .05.

Table 3
Communications with the Undergraduate Advisor during Current Academic Year,
Graduating Seniors in Sociology, 2003

Kind of Communication	Mean Number of Times Used Per Student	SD
Telephone	0.50	1.49
E-mail	1.74	3.38
In Person	2.84	2.86

N = 76 students