Sociology Department Plan for Academic Assessment of Students

The Character of the Discipline

As a field that draws on models of knowledge from the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences, sociology has an important bridging role to play in the liberal arts setting. Arising out of the post-Enlightenment effort of social and moral philosophers to make sense of broad societal changes, it was inspired both by an ameliorative impulse to address social problems and by an enthusiasm for systematic explanation derived from the natural science model. Over the course of the twentieth century, sociology has developed a broad range of subspecialties and research methodologies; its quantitative side focuses on social survey methods and statistical techniques, while its qualitative side supports a strong tradition of ethnographic field research—an interpretive approach that is shared with anthropology. Moreover, the "civic legacy" in sociology remains strong, and students are encouraged to apply their knowledge actively to the society that they study. Despite a range of specializations, according to the American Sociological Association (ASA, 1990:7-8) there is consensus in the field in the following areas:

First, most sociologists agree on the crucial role of different types of social structures—-institutions, organizations, even stable communication patterns—in understanding and influencing human behavior. Second, most sociologists agree on the importance of micro-level processes and interaction that foster the development and growth of the "self." Third, sociologists see the value of empirical evidence using a variety of methods.

Encompassing a scholarly and practical interest in the totality of human social and cultural experience (from face-to-face interactions to the complexities of huge organizations), sociology as a field fits neatly into the liberal arts project of fostering interdisciplinary inquiry, cultivating intellectual breadth and depth in students, promoting critical judgement and humane values, and nurturing personal wholeness and social citizenship.

The Sociology Program at Hendrix College

The character of the field described above is reflected in the goals and course offerings of the Sociology Department at Hendrix College. At present, the Sociology Department offers the following courses: Introduction to Sociology, Cultural Anthropology, Social Organizations, Social Problems, Social Inequality, Gender and Family, The Urban Community, Racial and Cultural Minorities, Social Change, Culture and Personality, Medical Sociology, History of Social Thought, Contemporary Social Theory, Sociological Research Methods, and Advanced Research/Practicum. Selected Topics also include "Sociology of Death" and "Images of the City." Although sociology is characterized by theoretical and methodological pluralism and a range of pedagogical approaches, according to the ASA (1990) there is strong consensus that the core departmental requirements should include an introductory course, one or more methods and statistics courses, and one or more theory courses. Our program reflects this consensus; the required eleven courses for majors include an introductory
course, a theory course, a research methods course, the Advanced Research/Practicum capstone course, and a course in statistics. A typical trajectory for a major would take a student from introductory courses such as Introduction to Sociology or Cultural Anthropology in the first year to courses of intermediate difficulty, such as Social Problems or Social Organizations in the second year, to the theory, statistics, and methods courses in the third or fourth years, and finally, the capstone course in the senior year, which encourages students to integrate the sociological knowledge that they have acquired and to apply it in some depth to an internship experience or an original research project. Sociology minors are asked to take six courses in sociology, which must include a theory course and two additional courses numbered at the junior level (3000) or above. Many nonmajors take our introductory courses, branching out to the higher-level courses, or going directly into the upper-level courses, since most of these do not have a prerequisite. Many nonmajors also take the cross-culturally oriented courses in the department to meet the college’s Other Cultural or Linguistic Traditions (OCOLT) requirement.

The core program outlined above reflects not only ASA guidelines, but initiatives identified in a previous program review undertaken by the Sociology Department between 1977 and 1979, utilizing an outside consultant recommended by the American Sociological Association and culminating in a “Practical Action Plan.” The Program Review concluded (p.24) that the departmental curriculum compared quite favorably with those of quality liberal arts colleges and that Hendrix sociology major graduates seemed to be academically as well prepared (as measured by GRE scores) as majors in other departments at Hendrix. Also, sociology graduates reported a fairly high level of satisfaction with the program and that they were successfully pursuing post-graduate studies or vocations. Interestingly, the most negative evaluations of the department came from those Hendrix students who had no direct experience of sociology courses.

Departmental Goals and their Connections to Aims of the College

In order to better evaluate the relationship between its goals and the learning process experienced by students, the Sociology Department at Hendrix College in 1996 identified the following goals for its program:

1. To foster in students a “sociological imagination,” the ability to creatively and meaningfully link individual biographical events to the larger social patterns of society; to see the connection between “private troubles” and “public issues” (C. Wright Mills, 1959).

2. To encourage general “sociological literacy,” the ability to perceive and systematically analyze social structures (stable, persistent patterns of interaction) in society, from small-scale micro-level symbolic interactions to large-scale global social arrangements. The student will thus know “how to appropriately generalize or resist generalizations across groups” (ASA, 1990:29)
3. To impart an intellectually rigorous theoretical and methodological core that constitutes the substance of the field of sociology by:
   a. teaching students how to use the wide variety of classical and contemporary sociological theories to interpret social reality
   b. fostering methodological sophistication through an acquaintance with the research methods of sociology and their appropriate uses, including qualitative and quantitative approaches

4. To teach students about the ethical implications of their knowledge

5. To cultivate a sensitivity to issues of social stratification and social justice

6. To encourage students to synthesize their knowledge as they progress through sequential learning experiences and a capstone course

7. To foster the responsible use of acquired sociological knowledge through an active sense of citizenship/community participation locally, nationally, and globally

8. To nurture students' intellectual curiosity, independent research skills and interdisciplinary interests consistent with a "liberating" liberal arts education [1]

9. To link students to the world beyond Hendrix College through information about such things as internships, career choices, fellowships, graduate schools, service opportunities, cross-cultural experiences and other opportunities

10. To reach "unto the whole person" by engaging students and faculty in a lifelong sociologically-informed search for meaning that is intellectually, ethically, and aesthetically rewarding

We see these goals as reflecting the breadth of the discipline of sociology as well as the aims listed by Hendrix College as a liberal arts institution (Hendrix College Catalog 1996-97, p. 8).[2] For example, Aim #3, "participation in depth in a specific field of study, including acquisition of a body of knowledge and development of skills for discovery, recognition, and integration of knowledge in that field" is reflected in all of our goals above, but particularly in 1, 2, 3, 6, and 8. Drawing on an earlier Association of American Colleges report, the ASA (1990:4) states that study in depth hinges upon "comprehension of a complex structure of knowledge; achievement of critical sophistication through sequential learning experiences...; abilities and skills required to undertake independent work; development of and disposition to undertake new learning in order to serve themselves and their society as citizens." The ASA further concludes that in sociology, in depth liberal learning includes "a central core of
method and theory; a range of topics and variety of analytic tools; and a crucial interplay between continuous observation on the one hand and a developing, articulated theoretical base on the other.” The sociology course sequence described earlier incorporates these principles. In Introduction to Sociology classes, for example, students conclude with a term project that brings together theoretical knowledge and the formulation of hypotheses. As they proceed through the major, students are exposed to a range of topics, theories, and methodological approaches. Theory and research methods are strongly emphasized in our program. By the time they reach the senior capstone course, students are expected to have developed a facility for moving from theory to observation and back again, gaining an increasingly sophisticated in-depth understanding of sociology and its connection to the world. Moreover, students are encouraged to present their work in an undergraduate research symposium, where they interact with their peers, receive critiques, and hone their ideas.

Regarding the other aims of the college, we provide the following brief summary, bearing in mind that in fact our goals are highly interrelated and not so neatly separable in practice. Aim #2, “awareness of certain basic content, the principles, the methodologies, and the interrelatedness of the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences” is particularly reflected in goals 6, 8, and 10 above. Aim #7, “knowledge and appreciation for cultures other than one’s own” is consistent with goals 2, 7, 8, 9, and 10. It should be pointed out that the Sociology Department plays a major role in offering courses that meet the Other Cultural Or Linguistic Traditions (OCOLT) requirement for the college. Concerning some of the more general aims relating to liberal learning, Aim #1, “cultivation of intellectual and aesthetic curiosity and activity through the use of critical and creative abilities” relates to goals 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 10 above. Aim #4, “skills and taste in written and oral communications” is implicitly reflected in goals 3, 6, 8, and 10 (for example, our theory courses are “writing intensive,” focusing not only upon the clear development of theoretical thinking, but its written expression). Aim #5, “ability to use the resources of information and reason in analyzing and solving problems” is found in goals 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. Aim #6, “acquaintance with and sensitivity to beauty” is reflected in goal 10. Aim #8, “preparation for effective civic participation in the changing community, nation, and the world” can be seen in goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, and 10. Aim #9, “independence, integrity, and responsibility in academic, personal, and social matters” is particularly reflected in goal 4. Finally, Aim #10, “recreational and social skills of lasting value” is part of the ongoing process of development articulated in goal 10. It should be clear from this brief description that there is a strong linkage between the aims of the college and our own particular departmental learning goals for students.

Proposed Assessment Instruments

Having provided an overview of our goals and their relationship to liberal learning and the aims of the college, we now move to the question of assessment of
the learning process. For example, how do we know that students are acquiring a "sociological imagination"? That they are becoming "sociologically literate"? That they are rigorously trained in theory and methods, and sensitive to the ethical implications of their knowledge? That they are reaching "unto the whole person" in an extended process of learning that takes them beyond the classroom? In formulating an assessment plan, the Sociology Department has identified the following "instruments" as most useful for assessing the learning experience of students:

Projects from the Sociological Research Methods class
Evidence from the Advanced Research/Practicum class
   (this would include final reports from all students and outside evaluations of those students undertaking internships)
Reported scores for the departmental Comprehensive Examination (the national GRE)
Presentation of papers at the Sociology and Anthropology Undergraduate Research Symposium
Data on admission to graduate programs
Social/community service participation
Comments from an outside consultant from the American Sociological Association
A survey of Hendrix sociology student alumni

While it might also be useful to use term papers and projects as assessment instruments, there are several problems with such a measure at the moment. First, sociology majors typically declare their major late, both at Hendrix College and nationally; therefore, it is difficult to construct an ongoing portfolio of their work until quite late. Second, we would have to keep their papers, which at present we do not do comprehensively and consistently.

We believe that the assessment instruments listed above provide a useful balance between quantitative and qualitative measures of our students' learning experiences, as well as a balance between internal and external evaluations. The research methods class asks students to apply a range of methods characteristic of the field, qualitative and quantitative, and to acquire a sensitivity to the responsible and ethical use of knowledge (goals 2, 3, 4, and 8). The Advanced Research/Practicum class is our capstone course, where majors work to integrate the sociological knowledge gained in previous courses and to apply their theoretical analysis either to an internship or to an original research project (goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9). Many of the students also receive outside evaluations from their internship supervisors. Our comprehensive examination for seniors is the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), a quantitative measure that permits national comparison. The presentation of papers at the Undergraduate Sociology and Anthropology Research Symposium allows us to qualitatively judge our students' professional training and research imaginations in a larger group of their peers. Data on admissions to graduate schools provides information about the academic success of students as well as their commitment to further study in sociology or related careers such as social work, law, urban planning, and other fields. An equally important measure for us is social/community service,
which relates particularly to departmental goals 7, 9, and 10. We find that many of our
students, consistent with the applied and socially involving nature of sociology, choose
to engage in experiences such as Peace Corps, Teach for America, and other social
service experiences instead of and/or prior to attending graduate school. We also
believe that we can benefit from the presence of an outside consultant from the
American Sociological Association, an experience that proved beneficial to the
department in 1979. We will identify and invite a consultant in the Winter Term, 1997.
Finally, we are developing a survey instrument that will be sent to alumni of the
sociology program that will allow us to collect quantitative and qualitative data about
the past and ongoing learning experiences of our graduates as they relate to all ten of
our stated departmental goals. This is probably our most holistic measure, as it
permits us to look at our students in the broader context of the lives that they have
chosen after leaving Hendrix College, and the relationship of these lives to the project
of a "liberating" liberal arts education as articulated by sociologist Peter Berger:

We maintain that the teaching of sociology is justified insofar as a liberal education is assumed to
have a more than etymological connection with intellectual liberation...sociology is justified by the
belief that it is better to be conscious than unconscious and that consciousness is a condition of
freedom....We contend that it is part of a civilized mind in our age to have come in touch with the
peculiarly modern, peculiarly timely form of critical thought that we call sociology. Even those who
do not find in this intellectual pursuit their own particular demon, as Weber put it, will by this
contact have become a little less stoic in their prejudices, a little more careful in their
commitments and a little more skeptical about the commitments of others—and perhaps a little
compassionate in their journeys through society (Berger, cited in Program Review, Department of
Sociology, October 3, 1979).

Notes:
[1] As the authors of Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major (1990) recognize, “The sociological
perspective enables students to become aware of social forces affecting their lives, and allows them to
make more reasoned personal decisions...The sociological perspective liberates students from certain
debilitating aspects of guilt, fear, and ideology. Such liberation is certainly part of the general meaning of
liberal education.” In his essay “Sociology and General Education” (1963) Robert Bierstedt likewise
points out that the study of sociology liberates students from the “provincialisms of time, place, and
circumstance.”
[2] We also see our goals as consistent with the definition of liberal learning formulated by the Association
of American Colleges (1985), “A liberal education is characterized by inquiry skills in abstract logical
thinking; literacy; numeracy; historical consciousness; understanding science and scientific inquiry;
values and their relationships to a variety of life situations; appreciation of symbolic expression;
international and multicultural experiences and diversity; experience with study in depth; and involvement
in a community of learning.” In a similar vein, Robert Bierstedt (1963) argues that sociology introduces
students to the role of logic and of scientific method in the acquisition of knowledge; that it contributes to
a sense of order and methodological sophistication; that as a discipline it spans two cultures, the scientific
and the humanistic; and that it initiates and keeps at the front of students’ awareness the ancient problem
of the relationship between society and the individual.
References:

American Sociological Association (in conjunction with the Association of American Colleges. 1990. *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major.* ASA.


Hendrix College Catalog 1996-97.


Program Review, Department of Sociology, October 3, 1979.