

**Assessment Project: Final Report**  
**Sociology Undergraduate Major at UC Irvine**  
**September 15, 2011**

## **General Statement**

The faculty of the Department of Sociology at UC Irvine conduct cutting-edge research in a number of areas of sociological inquiry. The hallmark of our department and, by extension, our instructional programs, is a multi-method approach to empirically grounded, theoretically motivated, sociological research. Undergraduate sociology majors at UCI can expect to encounter some of the best sociologists in the field—people who are working on issues at the forefront of sociological knowledge.

Our major is very large, with approximately 650 students for the 2010–2011 academic year. In that respect, we are the seventh largest major across all the university's departments.

## **I. Outline of Learning Objectives for the Undergraduate Sociology Major**

In response to the call for assessment, the department's Undergraduate Committee began by devising a list of learning objectives for the undergraduate sociology major. Committee members were Katherine Faust (chair until Spring 2010), Stan Bailey (chair beginning in Fall 2010), Ann Hironaka, Andrew Penner, Yen-Sheng Chiang, Sam Gilmore, and Ann Tatlock (graduate student representative). During one of its monthly meetings, the department faculty discussed and offered feedback on these objectives, approving them at a later meeting on February 4, 2009. That list follows.

As recipients of a BA degree, sociology majors at UCI should acquire the following skills:

1. Take a sociological perspective on social issues
2. Understand the role of empirical evidence in relation to scientific theories
3. Have knowledge of key substantive areas within the field of sociology
4. Design and apply appropriate research methods to investigate sociological questions, including:
  - a. formulate well-reasoned questions for sociological inquiry
  - b. gather empirical evidence
  - c. summarize empirical evidence
  - d. evaluate what the empirical evidence implies for the research question
  - e. communicate results of empirical inquiry
5. Possess the capacities required to use sociological knowledge in the 21st century, including technological competence for:
  - a. conducting research
  - b. searching for literature and other scholarly resources
  - c. analyzing information
  - d. writing reports
  - e. presenting results

## **II. Development of Assessment Rubric and Site Selection**

In a second stage, the Undergraduate Committee developed a mechanism for direct evaluation of one of these objectives. Toward the end of selecting an objective for study, in March 2010, the committee

designed a rubric to survey faculty members who had taught one of the major's required courses in the recent past (Introductory Sociology, International Sociology, Introduction to Social Problems, Research Methods, Sociological Theory, and the Sociology Majors Seminar). The survey inquired as to whether or not an instructor believed that any, all, or a combination of the major's learning objectives had been taught in the class (see Appendix A).

The results suggested good coverage of our major's objectives in the core required courses. Moreover, results also showed that Soc. 180A, our capstone Sociology Majors Seminar, would be a good site for evaluating major objectives. This is due in part to the breadth of its coverage of learning objectives and to the high number of faculty who teach the course at one time or another. Two or three sections of this course are taught each quarter and it is required of all sociology majors, who generally take it in their senior year.

Students in the Sociology Majors Seminar design and conduct a research project and are usually required to write a research paper. Although the format of the projects varies across instructors and sections of 180A, the written papers from this course are likely to include some evidence of students' skills in all of the learning objectives. Moreover, the course and its papers appear particularly apt for evaluating the five sub-objectives of learning objective 4 (formulate a research question, gather empirical evidence, summarize evidence, evaluate what the evidence implies for the research question, and communicate the results). In addition, this objective builds on the first three outcomes (take a sociological perspective, understand the relationship between evidence and theory, and have knowledge of substantive areas in sociology), and it exemplifies the discipline of sociology's critical approach to the social world.

Hence, we decided on learning objective 4, designing and applying appropriate research methods to investigate sociological questions, as the particular objective to evaluate. The students' final research papers would be the objects of evaluation. To that end, we created a rubric inquiring as to whether or not a student's final paper satisfactorily met each sub-objective of objective 4: formulate a research question, gather empirical evidence, summarize evidence, evaluate what the evidence implies for the research question, and communicate the results.

At a monthly faculty meeting, the departmental faculty discussed and offered feedback on the assessment rubric presented by the Undergraduate Committee, and later approved it, on May 27, 2010 (see Appendix B).

### **III. Application of Assessment Instrument**

We chose the Winter Quarter of 2011, when three 180A sections were offered, to apply the rubric. The instructors for these courses were Professors Jennifer Lee, Joy Pixley, and Andrew Penner. At the end of the quarter, the research papers of all students in these three sections ( $n = 117$ ) were evaluated by the instructors in conjunction with their graduate teaching assistants using the assessment rubric.

### **IV. Results of Assessment**

The raw scores from the application of the rubric to the 117 papers were aggregated across the three sections, maintaining the anonymity of the individual student as well as the course instructor. The Undergraduate Committee analyzed the data. The percentage of "Yes" responses on each item of the rubric, indicating passing competency in the evaluated sub-objective, is presented below:

- Ability to formulate a well-reasoned question for sociological inquiry: 96%
- Ability to gather empirical evidence to assess the question: 91%
- Ability to summarize empirical evidence: 90%
- Ability to discuss the implications of the empirical evidence: 86%
- Ability to communicate a summary of the empirical results: 93%

Overall, these statistics indicate a high level of performance across all the sub-objectives evaluated. Only the fourth sub-objective, the ability to discuss the implications of empirical evidence, dipped below 90%. Of course, our goal is 100% attainment across learning objectives; hence, below we suggest how we plan to move in that direction.

## **V. Discussion of Results**

Our students' ability to design and apply appropriate research methods to investigate sociological questions in their senior capstone class, the 180A Sociology Majors Seminar, suggests both the high commitment of our faculty to and the aptness of our curriculum for meeting the learning objectives of our undergraduate major. Despite the diversity of the various instructors' approaches, the data suggest a confluence in meeting learning objectives.

Our curriculum mirrors the core areas suggested in the American Sociological Association guidelines for an undergraduate degree in sociology. The content of required courses in the major funnel down nicely from the broad Introductory Sociology (Soc. 1), International Sociology (Soc. 2), and Introduction to Social Problems (Soc. 3) courses into the subsequent rigorous and narrower engagement with Probability and Statistics (a three-course sequence: Soc. 10A-B-C), Research Methods (Soc. 110), and Sociological Theory (Soc. 120). Then, the implementation of knowledge and skills acquired in these required courses culminates in the experience of the capstone Sociology Majors Seminar (Soc. 180A). Along the way, students also take five other core substantive courses that reflect the heart of the discipline as well as the research expertise of our faculty. This configuration appears efficient for meeting our major's learning objectives.

In terms of faculty engagement, they were involved at every stage of this assessment process, although the bulk of the specific elaboration of rubrics, analysis of the data, and writing of the report was delegated to the Undergraduate Committee. This all-out team effort also reflects the seriousness of the department's commitment to undergraduate education.

Specifically, as concerns the learning objective that received the lowest passing percentage (at 86%), the ability of our students to "discuss the implications of empirical evidence," this may in fact be the most difficult aspect of the scientific research process for students to manage. We address below a few steps for improving on this skill.

## **VI. Response to Results**

Although we are pleased with the results of this assessment process, we are cognizant of the need for continual improvement toward 100% attainment of learning objectives. Toward that end, the Undergraduate Committee will present the results from this assessment and this full report to the entire faculty at its annual retreat on September 20, 2011. A discussion will follow in which we will solicit feedback and possible strategies to respond adequately as a department.

In addition, the data suggest, for example, that some special focus may be needed on learning objective 4d, the ability to discuss what empirical evidence implies for a stated research question. We envision that instructors of the Research Methods (Soc. 110) course may provide important insights on this issue for the faculty. In addition, we will specifically solicit suggestions from the 180A instructors toward the same end. Finally, as a faculty we will discuss how students might be exposed more often to this aspect of the scientific research process in our substantive and core courses.

We are aware as well of the bluntness of our measurement instrument. In this regard, perhaps the development of a more nuanced coding rubric, for example, might allow us to capture more variation and hence better identify possible weaknesses in meeting certain objectives. In addition, perhaps in the future we could connect rubric outcomes with other information from the students, while maintaining anonymity, and thereby possibly identify, for example, categories of students at greater risk of failing to fully master certain areas. These might include transfer students and students from underrepresented populations. Armed with that information, the department could then contemplate other responses.

We are also mindful of the necessity to maintain our engagement with our majors and offer them a sufficient course selection to meet departmental learning objectives and requirements. To that end, we moved forward with a significant adjustment to our list of core courses during the 2010–2011 academic year, adding six new options.

As mentioned, we are a very large major, the seventh largest across campus in 2010–2011. Being such a large major, and also one that offers many courses that students from other departments draw on to fulfill elective, GE, and other requirements, the risk of a shortage of significant interaction between students and instructors is real. Our commitment to our capstone Sociology Majors Seminar course (Soc. 180A), which holds enrollment at 40, provides some assurance that our students experience significant student-instructor interaction. Along the same lines, the major offers an Honors Program (Soc. H188A-B). That program parallels the Sociology Majors Seminar, but singles out approximately 20 of the highest performing undergraduate sociology majors for an even more intense mentoring and research experience.

It remains to be seen if the high level of performance of our majors will be challenged by the rising enrollment caps in our courses as a result of the ongoing budget crisis in California. Through this assessment process, we have established an additional baseline against which to measure possible erosion in the future.

**APPENDIX A**  
**Learning Outcomes in Required Undergraduate Sociology Courses**  
**Percentage of Instructors Covering each Outcome**

Course						Learning Outcome
1	2	3	110	120	180	
100	100	100	75	100	89	1. Be able to take a sociological perspective on social issues
100	100	100	100	100	89	2. Understand the role of empirical evidence in relation to scientific theories
100	50	50		50	67	3. Have knowledge of key substantive areas within the field of sociology
	50	100	100	50	89	4. Be able to design and apply appropriate research methods to investigate sociological questions, including:
		100	100		100	a. formulate well-reasoned questions for sociological inquiry
	50	100	100	50	100	b. gather empirical evidence
	50	100	100	100	100	c. summarize empirical evidence
		100	100		100	d. evaluate what the empirical evidence implies for the research questions
						e. communicate results of empirical inquiry
						5. Possess the skills required to use sociological knowledge in the 21st century, including technological competence for:
		50	100		78	a. conducting research
33		50	75		89	b. searching for literature and other scholarly resources
33		100	100	50	100	c. analyzing information
		100	75	50	89	d. writing reports
			100		89	e. presenting results
3	2	2	4	2	9	<i>Number of responses (instructors in academic-year courses, response rate = 100%)</i>

1 Introduction to Sociology      110 Research Methods  
2 International Sociology      120 Sociological Theory  
3 Intro. to Social Problems      180A Sociology Majors Seminar

## APPENDIX B

### Instrument for Evaluating Learning Objectives in Sociology 180

Evaluate each paper on whether or not it meets each objective. Circle “Y” if paper meets the objective at a grade of “C” or better. Circle “N” if the paper falls below a “C” on that specific objective. Circle “N/A” if the paper cannot be evaluated according to that particular learning objective.

Objective	Score	Evidence that it does meet the objective	Evidence that it does not meet the objective
a. <b>formulate</b> well-reasoned questions for sociological inquiry	Y N NA	Presents at least one research question or hypothesis that pertains to sociological phenomenon(a). The question or hypothesis should be testable or capable of investigation using empirical evidence.	The paper does not meet this objective if (1) there is no research question or hypothesis or (2) the question or hypothesis is not potentially testable with empirical evidence.
b. <b>gather</b> empirical evidence	Y N NA	Includes empirical evidence that was collected, compiled, or accessed by the student. (This could include secondary data.)	The paper does not meet this objective if there is no empirical evidence.
c. <b>present</b> empirical evidence	Y N NA	There is an appropriate summary of empirical evidence. (This could be a written summary of the evidence or a statistical, graphical, or tabular summary of results.)	The paper cannot meet this objective if it does not include empirical evidence.  The paper does not meet the criteria if it includes empirical evidence but the summary is incorrect or inappropriate for the evidence.
d. <b>discuss</b> what the empirical evidence implies for the research questions	Y N NA	Correctly discusses what the empirical evidence implies for the stated research question or hypothesis.	The paper cannot meet this objective if either (1) there is no research question/hypothesis, or (2) it does not include empirical evidence.  The paper does not meet the objective if it does not connect the empirical evidence to the research question.
e. <b>summarize</b> empirical inquiry	Y N NA	Includes an appropriate written summary of empirical inquiry.	The paper cannot meet this objective if it does not include empirical evidence.  The paper does not meet the objective if it does not include an appropriate written summary of the empirical evidence.