

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
2007 GRADUATE PROGRAM ASSESSMENT REPORT
June 2007

Introduction

The program. The Sociology M.A. program seeks in 32 credit hours to develop students capable of conducting professional-quality sociological research in their chosen quantitative or qualitative genre. The core course in theory seeks to instill the sociological perspective; the core two course sequence in research methods and statistics seeks to provide the necessary research skills. Two required seminars provide opportunities to learn the current research literature and unresolved issues in two areas of specialization, and two elective courses are chosen to deepen understanding in those specializations. Finally the M.A. research paper, under the close supervision of the student's selected advisor, provides the capstone experience that is intended to give the students their first meaningful test of their new array of professional skills.

Each year approximately 20 students enter the program, and about half this cohort will have completed their degree after two years. Thus each year the faculty are working with approximately thirty students in residence, one-third of whom are being individually supervised in the preparation of their M.A. papers.

2007 report. This is the third year of a phased program assessment plan. In 2005 learning outcomes were assessed at the program level by direct examination of recently completed M.A. research papers and indirectly by means of focus group interviews of students at the end of the spring semester. In addition, plans were developed for subsequent annual phased assessment of course-level learning outcomes in theory, methods/statistics, and the substantive seminars. In 2006 the assessment data at the program- and course-level was restricted to indirect evidence, based on responses to a mail survey of recent graduates on both program and course objectives.

The 2006-2007 graduate committee of Professors Chriss, Meiksins (chair), Park, and Sun decided to focus on three assessment tasks—1) a second review of recently completed M.A. papers (using a revised scoring rubric), given that this direct program-level assessment exercise was intended to take place biannually; 2) a third annual indirect assessment of program level goals, this time using open-ended telephone interviews of a sample of students nearing program completion; and 3) the launching of direct course-level assessment with a focused examination of learning outcomes for the required theory seminar (using a newly developed scoring rubric).

Goals, Outcomes, and Methods

The Sociology faculty continues to adhere to its original four program goals for successful graduate student learning. These emerged from departmental discussion during 2004-2005 and remain the defining focus of the assessment plan. They are as follows:

- 1 Students will learn the conceptual frameworks of sociology and develop a critical understanding of the continuing debates concerning these frameworks.
2. Students will learn the fundamental procedures for conducting basic and applied sociological research.
- 3 Students will learn about the fundamental knowledge and the contemporary research issues in at least one major substantive area of sociology.
- 4 Students will learn how to conduct and report professional-quality sociological research.

Course-level outcomes. The outcomes associated with the first three goals are the respective measured success in achieving the learning objectives for the required theory seminar, the required methods/statistics course sequence, and the two required substantive seminars. These learning objectives are defined in the scoring rubrics developed for assessing the quality of student learning in each of these three course areas. Application of these scoring rubrics to student learning products (papers, tests) is done across the three areas in alternate years. Together they constitute the “course-level” assessment component of the plan.

This year the assessment was done evaluating material from the theory seminar, in order to focus on the first goal. To assess student achievement of four learning objectives for goal one (presented below in the findings), three members of the Graduate Committee (Manning, Meiksins and Chriss) who also teach theory on a regular basis reviewed the learning products for the section of Soc 640 – Sociological Theory -- that was taught in Fall 2006. The materials consisted of essay exams and out-of-class explications of original texts by major sociological theorists. A rubric was developed to guide the assessment of these materials (see attachment).

Program-level outcomes. The outcomes associated with the fourth goal are the measured success in achieving the learning objectives of the M.A. research paper, considered the capstone learning experience of the Sociology M.A. program. These objectives were operationalized in the scoring rubrics applied by the two faculty assigned to read each completed paper.

This year a different scoring rubric was used from the initial 2005 assessment of M.A. papers, in order to see if the overall evaluation was contingent on the particular rubric used. The same basic learning objectives were rated, but in the initial 2005 assessment each paper was assigned one of three scores (exemplary, acceptable, or unacceptable). This year the raters assigned points to the different learning objectives, weighted by the importance of each objective, and then summed them for an overall total possible of 100. In terms of inter-rater reliability, both forms were acceptable. From hindsight, this year’s reviewers agreed that the original rating scheme was superior, since it was more flexible across the different paper formats and methodologies and hence provided better information. Nevertheless in these early trial years we believe it is appropriate to test different metrologies before settling on one that can be used uniformly over time and permit trend analyses.

The department also employs indirect assessment of program-level outcomes, evaluating systematic student feedback on their learning experiences. This feedback has taken three forms, and is likely to continue to vary for a couple more years until the department agrees which method and sampling frame is superior. In 2005 the feedback came using a focus group discussion of students completing their first year; in 2006 it was a mail questionnaire to students who had either recently graduated or left the program without completing. This year's committee conducted telephone interviews of students who were completing their M.A. papers.

Findings

A. Theory Course Outcomes (Goal One)

Objective 1. Students will be familiar with the main ideas of Marx, Weber and Durkheim

A set of 18 exams covering Marx, Weber and Durkheim was examined. One was rated exemplary, 12 were acceptable and 5 were somewhere between acceptable and unacceptable.

Comments:

Most of the students had trouble relating the specific passages and concepts to the theorists' general ideas - but that is a difficult thing to do, especially under test conditions. Several of the students wrote poorly and that made it hard for them to write persuasively.

The class was also very large: 18 students. It is not easy to work with such a large group on individual difficulties. It would also be instructive to know how many of the 18 had already taken a theory class.

Objective 2. Students will be familiar with the major schools of contemporary sociological theory, including, but not limited to: functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and feminist theory.

A set of 18 exams covering contemporary theory was reviewed. The exams contained questions on five topics related to the objectives for this aspect of the course. Two short answer topics were manifest and latent functions (functionalism) and civil inattention (Goffman and symbolic interactionism). There were three essay topics: functionalism, feminist theory, and the self (symbolic interactionism). There were 52 items total, and how these were assessed by way of the rubric is indicated below.

	Exemplary	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Manifest and latent functions	7	7	2
Civil inattention	3	6	4
The self	0	10	0
Functionalism	1	4	0
Feminist theory	0	7	1

Comments:

The good news is that only 7 of the 52 items were deemed to be unacceptable. On the other hand, 11 of the 52 items were judge to be exemplary. The great majority, 34, were deemed to be in the middle or acceptable range. The topic on which students did the worst was civil inattention. They seemed confused as to who was the innovator of this concept, and the examples they tried to give were often wrong or confused. Indeed, one of the major reasons that acceptable responses were kept from attaining exemplary status was that students were unable to provide appropriate examples to show deeper understanding of the concepts and apply them to real world phenomena.

This indicates the need to work hard to make sure that students understand how the concepts can or should be used, beyond the simple teaching of the concepts at the analytical or abstract level. But in general, it appears that we are accomplishing the broad goals of the course, as represented by the generally low level of unacceptable responses.

Objective 3. Students will demonstrate the ability to analyze write about and discuss major original works of sociological theory.

A set of 18 short “explication” essays was included in the assessment file for the Fall 2007 section of Soc 640. They were rated as follows:

Exemplary: 4
Adequate: 12
Unacceptable: 2

Comments:

In general, students seemed able to summarize, in their own words, the overall argument of the excerpts in question. With the exception of the four strong ones, however, few got beyond a sense of the main argument. They were not, for the most part, able to work through the details in the excerpts and relate them to the main points. Often, they followed the structure of the original essay, summarizing as they went along, but seemed unsure of how each paragraph connected to a larger whole. Only a few (the strong ones, again), were able to relate the excerpt to the overall theoretical project of the author.

Many of the essays also revealed significant writing limitations. The most common problem was organizational – quite a few of the adequate essays in particular, tended to ramble and to lack a structure (other than that provided by the excerpt being summarized).

Objective 4. Students will demonstrate the ability to identify theoretical components of empirical sociological projects.

No materials that would have allowed assessment of student achievement of this objective were included in the assessment file.

B. M.A. Paper Learning Outcomes (Goal Four)

A total of 15 papers were read by two faculty each, yielding an overall average score of 71.98, distributed as follows:

90-100: 0
80-89: 4
70-79: 7
60-69: 3
<60: 1

Below are the average scores assigned for the four primary sections/ learning outcomes of each paper

Lit Review: 14.2/20

Methods: 15.4/20

Results: 14.9/20

Discussion: 7.4/10

Comments:

1. The vast majority of the papers were of acceptable quality. There were few really good papers, and few weak ones. Only one was judged to be entirely unacceptable.
2. There was no specific area in which the papers were weak. Individual papers were poor in specific ways, but there was no overall pattern to these problems.
3. The reviewers were generally in agreement about the papers they read, so it appears that we are applying a relatively consistent standard in our evaluations.
4. The reviewers found that the evaluation form worked poorly for certain papers, particularly those that were not quantitative. It was hard to rate the papers on certain criteria because those criteria seemed to have been designed with more quantitative papers in mind.

C. Program-level student telephone survey (indirect assessment of goal 4 objectives)

This report is based on 9 interviews of the graduate students between May 10 and 14, 2007, conducted by Yun-Joo Park and Rongjun Sun. Open-ended responses were elicited in five areas:

1. Expectations

Academic expectations were to expand their sociological knowledge (Many of them had some background in sociology or B.A. in sociology when they applied) and professional expectations were either to get a promotion with the degree or to better job prospects.

Both academic and professional expectations were generally met except that some students said they were not well prepared to the heavy course work.

2. Required courses

A common issue regarding the required courses was the schedule. Those who were admitted in the spring semester had a hard time completing their coursework on time because the required courses were only offered in the fall.

Also some students pointed out that the grading policy for the required courses is problematic i.e. you need a B to pass, requiring a C to be “averaged out” by getting an A in the next semester.

Some students mentioned that they did not understand why they had to take the statistics sequence while they were taking them, but later on they found them useful skills and could help them in the job market.

Overall, none of the students questioned the quality of professors who teach the course. It is about the structure of the courses (course schedule and grading system) that makes students have relatively lower satisfaction level in the required courses.

3. Elective courses

In general, students express difficulty in finding courses relevant to their interests. Criminology courses are offered but the number of courses is limited. Sociology of gender, political sociology, sociology of the third world, social psychology, sociology of family are mentioned as a course that students want to see in the program.

4. Relationship with the supervisor

According to the interviews, it is the most significant determinant of how students evaluate the program. Those who have a good relation with their supervisors evaluated the program as excellent but those who do not have a good relation with their supervisor or do not have a chance to select a supervisor expressed their frustration of the program. Most students expressed lack of academic advising regarding their area of interests. Students noted that the director of the graduate programs has been helpful but the director can not closely monitor each student’s academic progress.

Also the difficulty in finding a supervisor or meeting with professors who do not teach a graduate course was mentioned in interviews.

But overall, most students think their advisors are very supportive.

5. Overall Evaluation

Most of the students evaluated the program as excellent.

Review

Each of the three sets of findings has been reviewed by the graduate committee members, with recommendations which follow. The full report will be read by the faculty as background material for discussion of the committee recommendations at departmental meetings next fall, or possibly at a fall retreat.

Actions

A. Recommendations for improving the M.A. paper quality and completion rates based on the 2005 assessment were implemented this past year by Interim Graduate Director, Professor Meiksins. The gist of his email correspondence with faculty M.A. paper advisors has been the importance of active engagement with the student at all phases of their research and writing project. We have seen some improvement this year in the quality of work, but this will not be fully apparent until the next formal review of M.A. papers scheduled for 2009.

Some more specific recommendations emerged in this year's cycle of the M.A. paper assessment, and they will be discussed and acted upon this year:

1) Have the Graduate Committee collect one or two examples of good papers in the most common "genres" students are likely to attempt. These appear to be: a. secondary data analysis; b. small, campus-based survey; c. pilot, interview-based study. These could be kept in the main office and advisors could refer students to them so that they would have a better sense of what a good paper looks like.

2) Have advisors pay as much attention as possible to helping students develop a clear research question. The weak papers we read tended to lack a clear question or failed in various ways to pursue the question they had developed. Seminar leaders should also emphasize this so that students have multiple opportunities to attempt to develop research questions prior to embarking on the MA paper.

3) Have the Graduate Director and the faculty generally continue to encourage students to think about MA paper topics well ahead of actually registering for the MA paper. Many of the better MA papers clearly emerged from seminar papers or independent readings courses students had completed earlier in their careers. Students should be encouraged to view seminars and electives as places to try out potential topics, begin working on aspects of their projects, etc.

4) Have advisors use the rating form (also referred to as the scoring rubric) in working with students. Advisors should discuss with students the components of the MA paper (as described in the form) so that they have a clearer understanding of the way in which a research paper is put together.

5) Convene a group of faculty to develop a clearer set of criteria for qualitative papers. There needs to be a clearer sense, within the department, of what such papers should contain, how much research they should involve, etc.

6) Subsequent to the process discussed in #5 above, have the Graduate Committee rework the rating form to make it more appropriate for use in qualitative papers; alternatively revert to a form more like the one used in the 2005 assessment

B. Improvements of the theory course based on the outcome findings are under current review, and are likely to be implemented in next year's offering. This will include the inclusion in the curriculum of material that will permit assessment of objective four, which was excluded in this year's version of the course (and most prior offerings.) despite its considered importance. See point three below. Issues identified for improvement include the following:

- 1) Although students are achieving a satisfactory grasp of the conceptual framework of sociology and debates regarding it, few students go beyond the adequate level of achievement in this area;
- 2) Students have significant writing problems that interfere with their achievement of this goal;
- 3) Students are frequently unable to link theoretical ideas to real-world materials;
- 4) Class sizes are large, which limits the instructor's ability to work with individual students on either writing or analytical problems.

C. Student proposed improvements in the program. These three recommendations emerged from the telephone interviews and will be discussed for possible implementation at department meetings in the fall:

- 1) The department needs to do more in terms of providing academic advice to students. Assigning a mentor for each student was suggested as a way to address this issue.
- 2) Provide more career counseling, more information regarding job opportunities in the local area.
- 3) Students want a greater sense of belonging. They wish to have more connections between the faculty and students, and among students themselves.

C. Next year outcome assessments will be performed for the methods/statistics sequence (for goal 2) and for one of the substantive seminars (goal 3). At that point we will for the first time have complete initial assessment data (a baseline if you will) on the full program.