

AY 2012-13

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The Department has identified three learning goals for its graduate program, which offers an MA in sociology and an MA in criminology. The learning goals are:

- i. **Students will demonstrate a sociological knowledge of and analytical skills in the substance of their major and minor fields, including stratification, urban sociology, and criminology.**
- ii. Students will be able to explain the process of sociological research; critically consume research-based information; and collect, code, and analyze sociological data using qualitative and quantitative research methods.
- iii. Students will be able to articulate sociological theories, evaluate the limitations and strengths of a variety of theoretical approaches, and apply theories to the analysis of social life.

In assessing these learning goals the Department has adopted an incremental plan of implementation in which we have begun with Learning Goal #1 and will move more deliberately to the assessment of Learning Goal #2 in the upcoming year.

Regarding Learning Goal #1, and based on our Action Plan from AY 2011-12, the Department has adopted two direct and one indirect assessment measure for this learning goal this year:

DIRECT ASSESSMENT:

- Part A: rubrics for all master's theses and comprehensive exams
- Part B: rubric for one assignment in SOC 6258: Deviance and Control, Fall 2012

INDIRECT ASSESSMENT:

- job and academic program placement upon graduation

Our assessment of a rubric for SOC 6258 is included this year based on the strengths and weaknesses we identified from last year's assessment. We present our analysis of these assessment measures below.

DIRECT ASSESSMENT (PART A): Learning Goal #1

In Summer 2011 the faculty designed a rubric for all MA theses and a separate rubric for all MA comprehensive exams (students in the criminology program have a choice between writing the thesis or the exam). Each student's Thesis Director or Academic Advisor completes the assessment of these products using the appropriate rubric, and the Director of Graduate Studies compiles and analyzes the data we collect through these rubrics each year. The Department has communicated our assessment plan to all current and incoming graduate students in the program through our Graduate Student Handbook, and we implemented the plan with all theses and exams beginning in AY 2011-12.

The rubrics assess graduating students' sociological knowledge and analytical skills as apparent in their theses or exams. Although the rubrics also assess other dimensions of our three learning goals, we concentrate again this year on Learning Goal #1: *Students will demonstrate a sociological knowledge of and analytical skills in the substance of their major and minor fields, including stratification, urban sociology, and criminology.*

The Department graduated 13 MA students in AY 2012-13 (not including Summer 2013): four students took comprehensive exams; nine wrote master's theses. The average scores for each item on the rubrics are detailed below, along with analyses of the Department's success in meeting Learning Goal #1.

ASSESSMENT OF MA THESES (N=9)

Task	Score (Mean Score on a 1 (low) to 5 (high) metric)
• Statement of a problem or articulation of hypotheses (clarity of issue relative to appropriate theory)	4.11
• Literature review (relevance, comprehensiveness, theoretical focus)	4.11
• Data (appropriateness and relevance of data to problem/hypothesis)	4.22
• Analysis (effectiveness of analysis in addressing problem/testing hypothesis)	4.00
• Conclusion/integration (clarity in summarizing how analysis adds value to theoretical understanding of problem/issue)	4.00
• Writing (quality of prose; citation style conforms to discipline conventions)	3.89

These average scores indicate that students are writing theses that demonstrate strong levels of sociological knowledge and analytical skills in their particular subject areas. In particular, students are using appropriate and relevant data in their analyses. However, the assessment does reveal a weak point in writing. The assessment of writing fell from an average of 4.14 in AY

2011-12 to 3.89 in 2012-13. Since writing is a fundamental skill for any MA student, and because ineffective writing can hamper a student’s ability to communicate their sociological knowledge and analytical skills, this is an important weakness to address.

Action Plan: This direct assessment measure indicates that one dimension of Learning Goal #1 (demonstrating sociological knowledge and analytical skill in the substance of students’ major and minor fields) may need to be addressed: writing. Faculty in the Department work intensively with students on their thesis projects, but faculty may be able to guide students more effectively as they learn to become professional and academic writers. To this end, the Department has committed to sending the Director of Graduate Studies, Ivy Ken, to the American Sociological Association’s Conference for Directors of Graduate Studies in August 2013. The topic of this conference is “Teaching Writing in Sociology Graduate Programs: Training the Next Generation.” The conference is aimed to help faculty prepare their students for both journal publication and “writing for public sociology in the digital age.” Prof. Ken will return from the conference prepared to engage our colleagues in a discussion of how to better prepare the Department’s graduate students to be effective writers. In addition, faculty in the Department will encourage students to work closely with the University’s Writing Center to develop their written communication skills.

ASSESSMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS (N=4)

Task	Score (Mean Score on a 1 (low) to 5 (high) metric)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of appropriate theoretical perspectives 	4.5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to critically analyze key theoretical/conceptual perspectives 	4.5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding of, and comprehensiveness of response to, the specific issues raised in exam 	4.3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity to critically address criminological issues using appropriate social science tools 	4.5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality of writing and use of citation style that conforms to discipline conventions 	4.5

These average scores indicate no noticeable difference in AY 2012-13 in the quality of work of the Criminology MA students who took comprehensive exams, and the MA students (in Criminology and Sociology) who wrote theses. Those students who took comprehensive exams demonstrate a strong level skills in all areas, and no clear weaknesses emerge.

Action Plan: Please see Part B below.

DIRECT ASSESSMENT (PART B): Learning Goal #1

The aggregate rubrics for comprehensive exams last year (AY 2011-12) revealed weaknesses in students' ability to critically analyze perspectives, comprehensively respond to specific issues, and critically address criminological issues using social science tools. The Department's Action Plan included the adoption of an additional sociological theory course in the Criminology MA curriculum, and this adoption has now been voted on, approved, and incorporated.

In addition, the Department requested that Prof. Ron Weitzer complete and submit a rubric for one assignment in his SOC 6258 course, Deviance and Control. This course is fundamental for all students who take the comprehensive exam. Prof. Weitzer chose to assess how students evaluated theoretical and empirical work throughout the semester in their class discussions and written comments on each week's assigned readings, in addition to their performance on the final paper. A table summarizing his assessment appears below:

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN SOC 6258 (N=10)

Task	Score (Mean Score on a 1 (low) to 5 (high) metric)
• Student completes assignments	4.9
• Comprehension of theory	4.3
• Writing clarity	4.2
• Critical thinking (oral, in class and office hours)	4.4
• Final paper	4.5
• Overall performance	4.4

Writing clarity and comprehension of theory appear to be the relative weak points in this assessment, although overall averages for all measures are strong. The range for writing clarity is 2-5 while the range for comprehension of theory is 1-5. Since we are particularly concerned about comprehension of theory and critical thinking in this assessment, we note that 80% of students received scores of 5 in both comprehension and critical thinking, which meets reasonable expectations. While the students' scores on these important measures are bifurcated, only two students' scores fall on the low end of the range. This suggests not a failure of the Department to communicate and facilitate learning goals, but rather, weaknesses in the skills of a small proportion of students.

Action Plan: Given the (1) strong scores on this course assessment, (2) strong overall scores on the comprehensive exam assessment in AY 2012-13, and (3) revisions to the Criminology MA curriculum to include a course in sociological theory, the Department is satisfied that Learning Goal #1 for the program is being met for Criminology MA students who take the comprehensive exam, and recommends no specific changes.

INDIRECT ASSESSMENT: Learning Goal #1

In order to indirectly assess whether graduating students in the Sociology and Criminology MA programs exhibit a sociological knowledge of and analytical skills in the substance of their major and minor fields, including inequality, urban sociology, and criminology, the Department tracks the academic, professional, and community positions the students attain upon finishing their degree programs.

We are pleased that a great many students have matriculated in PhD programs and attained professional positions in which their sociological and criminological skills are put to direct use. Among placements this year are:

- PhD Program in Sociology (University of Wisconsin)
- PhD Program in Sociology (University of Illinois-Chicago)
- PhD Program in Sociology (University of Florida)
- PhD Program in Sociology (North Carolina State University)
- PhD Program in Justice, Law, and Society (American University)
- Analyst, U.S. Department of Justice
- Match Specialist, Big Brothers Big Sisters
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- Intelligence Analyst, ManTech
- Energy and Environment Security Intern, Atlantic Council of the U.S.
- USAID
- National Archives

Action Plan: These placements indicate that students are receiving appropriate training in the Department so no changes in professional preparation are recommended.

AY 2013-14 ACTION PLAN

Building on our implementation of these direct and indirect measures for Learning Goal #1 in AY 2012-13, we will adopt the following assessment plan for the Graduate Program in AY 2013-14:

- (1) continue to collect assessments of each comprehensive exam and thesis;
- (2) continue to track professional and academic placement of our graduates;
- (3) implement strategies from the ASA Conference on writing;
- (4) begin the direct assessment of Learning Goal #2.

Learning Goal #2 stipulates that *students should be able to explain the process of sociological research; critically consume research-based information; and collect, code, and analyze sociological data using quantitative and qualitative research methods*. In the MA thesis and MA comprehensive exam rubrics, the Department is already collecting data to be able to assess this learning goal. To augment this approach, the Department will also begin to collect data from a rubric used for one assignment in the students' Sociological Research Methods course (SOC 6230). The indirect measurement of Learning Goal #2 will again come from students' professional and academic placements.