Part I: Follow-Up on Last Year’s Assessment Report Recommendations

In 2012-13, the department examined the quality of writing in graduate student papers. While students were relatively competent at sentence level and organization, we found that they could be doing a better job at conceptual development and at making and supporting an argument. We decided to redouble our efforts to convince MA students to use the writing center to the fullest. While many MA students think that the writing center will not help them, graduate students who have used this resource have routinely seen their writing improve by leaps and bounds. We discussed these findings at department meetings, and implemented curricular changes to the graduate program, with all students now required to take a writing course to support their MA writing project.

Part II: Report on This Year’s Assessment Project

While your annual assessment project may have assessed multiple learning outcomes, this report should focus on just one program learning outcome.
Department of Sociology  
Assessment Project, 2013-14

Abstract  
Provide a short abstract (no more than 250 words) describing the assessment project, procedures and results.

Our assessment project focused on one of our learning outcomes for the major: “Use theories and concepts to identify research questions and analyze empirical situations.” We examined coursework from our SOC380/381 research methods sequence. Faculty were asked to submit a random selection of 5 final assignments. A total of 4 sections from Winter Quarter 2013-14 were sampled, yielding a total of 20 papers. Our content analysis of these papers focused on 4 dimensions: engagement with theory, use of concepts, development of research questions and analysis of empirical situations. Findings: engagement with theory (60% acceptable or better; 30% excellent); use of concepts (90% acceptable or better; 30% excellent); development of research questions (95% acceptable or better; 30% excellent), and analysis of empirical situations (100% acceptable or better, 25% excellent). Qualitative coding of the papers brought out important weaknesses that were not picked up in the quantitative coding: (1) when papers engaged with theory, this was often limited to passing references in the introduction, with far less use of theory in the rest of the paper; (2) concepts were often introduced in the front of the paper with little critical reflection or discussion of how to operationalize the concept as an indicator (with little discussion of validity and reliability); (3) research questions often did not match up with the data collected; and (4) there was very little integration of theory and empirical data, with many papers presenting thin discussions sections.

Learning Outcome Assessed  
Which one of your program learning outcomes did you assess?

We examined the 5th undergraduate program learning outcome: “Use theories and concepts to identify research questions and analyze empirical situations.”

Data Collection and Methodology  
How did you collect evidence to determine whether or not this learning outcome is being achieved? Please explain:

- The way in which student work was collected or observed.
- The student groups studied.
- Please include any instruments in an appendix.

Based on our curriculum map (created as part of our ongoing Academic Program Review), we identified SOC380/381 as the courses where learning objective 5 (“Use theories and concepts to identify research questions and analyze empirical situations”) would be most productively
explored. We asked instructors from Winter Quarter 2013-14 to randomly select 5 papers from their classes for inclusion in the assessment (emphasizing that the papers should be random, we were not looking for their best papers but a true cross-section of the spectrum of the student work they had from their course). All faculty complied with the request.

The undergraduate program committee then met to develop a coding rubric (see appendix A). The rubric defined key terms (theory, concept, operationalization, and empirical situation) and described a coding procedure to assess student work in quantitative and qualitative dimensions.

We assessed four dimensions quantitatively: engagement with theory, use of concepts, development of research questions and analysis of empirical situations. For each dimension, the paper was scored 0 “minimal”, 1 “some”, or 2 “extensive”. As well, each paper was explored using four qualitative prompts.

How was the evidence you collected analyzed? Please explain:
- The methods you used to analyze and interpret the results.
- The person or group who analyzed the data.
- How “acceptable performance” was determined for this assessment project.
- Please include any scoring guides or rubrics in an appendix.

A total of 20 papers were analyzed. We explored inter-rater reliability by having two faculty members (De Maio and Martinez) independently double-code a subset of 10 papers. A comparison of those papers suggested high inter-rater reliability (with agreement on 30 out of 40 items for 10 papers). When differences did exist, they were typically small (a 1 versus a 2, rather than a 0 versus a 2). Qualitative coding was broadly in agreement between the two coders (see appendix B for our raw data).

“Acceptable performance” was measured by a score of 1 or 2, rather than 0 in the four quantitative dimensions. These scores reflect ‘some’ or ‘extensive’ engagement with theory / use of concepts / development of research questions / analysis of empirical situations.

For the final quantitative summary, we chose a conservative strategy and report ‘acceptable performance’ on the dimension with the lowest score (rather than average the four dimensions).

Results

Revised 2014 by the Assessment Advisory Board
What are the results of this assessment project?

The four quantitative dimensions scored quite high: engagement with theory (60% acceptable or better; 30% excellent); use of concepts (90% acceptable or better; 30% excellent); development of research questions (95% acceptable or better; 30% excellent), and analysis of empirical situations (100% acceptable or better, 25% excellent). Qualitative coding of the papers brought out important weaknesses that were not picked up in the quantitative coding: (1) when papers engaged with theory, this was often limited to passing references in the introduction, with far less use of theory in the rest of the paper; (2) concepts were often introduced in the front of the paper with little critical reflection or discussion of how to operationalize the concept as an indicator (with little discussion of validity and reliability); (3) research questions often did not match up with the data collected; and (4) there was very little integration of theory and empirical data, with many papers presenting thin discussions sections.

- Please include any tables, charts, or graphs in an appendix.
- Please complete the following table. Report each number as a single whole number (not a decimal, range of numbers, or percentage).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcome</th>
<th># Students Assessed</th>
<th># Students with Acceptable or Better Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use theories and concepts to identify research questions</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and analyze empirical situations.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Interpretation of Results

Based on your analysis of the data, what evidence did you find for whether or not your unit’s specific learning outcomes are being met?

This is one of our most ambitious learning outcomes. The challenge of integrating theory and empirical data within a 10 week course is daunting – particularly as some students may take the methods sequence before taking theory classes. For many students, these courses also offer their very first attempt to collect and analyze empirical data. There is a steep learning curve involved in this process. Future assessment projects may look for evidence of this learning outcome being met in other places in our curriculum, perhaps the capstone course.

Describe your program’s satisfaction with the results.
Overall, we are satisfied that this learning outcome is being met, at least for a majority of the students sampled. Being a true cross-section of student work, we expected to find considerable variance in quality, and that is reflected in the data. Some of the papers are superb – with nuanced research questions, extensive fieldwork or sophisticated statistical analysis, and thoughtful discussion of concepts and theories underpinning the analysis. Other papers are substantially weaker – some with minimal or no engagement with theoretical ideas, poorly framed research questions, or superficial analysis (with some papers over-emphasizing p values and statistical significance at the neglect of substantive findings or confidence intervals).

**Recommendations and Plans for Action**

*Based on the results of your assessment project, what recommendations do you have to improve students’ achievement of this learning outcome in the future?*

Our department holds an annual undergraduate research conference. We may take that opportunity to open up discussion with our students about the value of integrating theory and empirical data – perhaps by inviting the keynote speaker to address that specific issue in relation to their work. Given that we are in the second year of our Academic Program Review, we would recommend discussing these findings as part of our general review of the state of the program (taking advantage of insights from our external reviewers, for example).

**Based on your recommendations for improvement, please describe your plans for implementing your recommendations. Please explain:**

- **Your expected timeline for each of these actions.**
- **Any potential barriers you see to implementing these actions.**

Our undergraduate conference will be held in May. We will explore the possibility of inviting a keynote speaker to specifically address the value of integrating theory and empirical data in their talk. We don’t expect significant barriers in implementing this idea.

Our APR discussions will continue throughout 2014-15, and we expect the department will be interested in engaging with this learning outcome as part of our review. In particular, we will look to nurture exchange between faculty teaching our theory courses and our methods courses – with the aim of helping students to see that concepts and ideas from sociological theory can be used to develop empirical research and that contemporary research still pursues some of the avenues opened by earlier theoretical work.
Appendix A: Coding Rubric

Department of Sociology Annual Assessment Proficiency Rubric 2014

Assessment Project
Evaluation of Student Learning Outcome #5: “Use theories and concepts to identify research questions and analyze empirical situations.”

Coding Instructions:

Working with the excel tracking sheet (Assessment 2014 coding.xls; available in W:\las\SOC\Committees\Undergraduate\2013-2014\Assessment), enter scores of 0, 1, and 2 for the Part A. The excel sheet contains space for open-ended responses to the prompts in Part B.

Definition of Terms:

**Theory:** A system of ideas intended to explain something. This may involve generalization, classification, and/or explanation. In sociology, the term theory is often used to described basic theories of society – structural functionalism, conflict theory, etc.

**Concept:** A building block for theories. Concepts can be used to classify and impart meaning on the social world. Examples include: anomie, class consciousness, or gender.

**Operationalization:** The development of concrete, observable indicators for complex concepts (e.g., examining perceived racial discrimination (a concept) though a self-reported Likert scale).

**Empirical Situation:** Can take many forms – from a traditional (positivist) stance based on observation and measurement to more interpretative forms of research (where data may be collected through interviews or photography). The term usually implies testability with data.
Part A: Quantitative assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimal = 0</th>
<th>Some = 1</th>
<th>Extensive = 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement with theory</td>
<td>No connection to theory.</td>
<td>Connection to theory is weak. Perhaps it is mentioned in the introduction of the paper but it does not inform the paper as a whole.</td>
<td>A strong connection to theory – demonstrated through language in the paper suggesting the theory is being use to explain something, or the paper is testing / critiquing theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of concepts</td>
<td>No use of concepts</td>
<td>Use of concepts is weak – perhaps concepts are undefined, or concepts are used only superficially.</td>
<td>A strong use of concepts – demonstrated by language that explores (critically) questions of operationalization, measurement, validity / reliability, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of research questions</td>
<td>The paper does not feature a research question.</td>
<td>The paper includes a research question, but it is poorly phrased (perhaps unanswerable).</td>
<td>Clear, thoughtful research question underpins the paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of empirical situations</td>
<td>The paper does not feature analysis of empirical situation(s).</td>
<td>The role of empirical data in the paper is limited (e.g., very basic analysis or very thin description).</td>
<td>Extensive role – with empirical data being used to test / explore theoretical assertion.</td>
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Part B: Open-ended

1) Describe specific ways that the paper engages with theory. For example, evidence that the student’s work is informed by specific authors or theoretical frameworks.

2) Describe specific ways that the student uses concepts in their work. Are concepts described / used only in very abstract ways, or are they also ‘operationalized’, and discussed in concrete / observable ways?

3) Does the student work feature an appropriate research question? Is the research question specific, and framed in such a way that it could be answered? Does it open up complex answers?

4) Describe the ways the paper integrates theory and empirical data.