

ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT PLAN

AND

2016/2017 GRADUATE STUDENT ASSESSMENT REPORT

Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice

Prepared by

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ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT PLAN
DEGREE PROGRAM: SOCIOLOGY, MA
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE
(July 14, 2017)

Statement of Mission: Graduate Program in Sociology

The mission of the graduate program in sociology is to provide the learning environment to meet the program goals and develop the skills listed below. Faculty members have been encouraged to tie the syllabi for every course into the program goals.

Program Goals (3-4)

(Program goals are broad general statements of what the program intends to accomplish and describes what a student will be able to do after completing the program. The program goals are linked to the mission of the university and college.)

The discipline of sociology is characterized by its breadth and the diversity of its subfields and specializations. Hence, of particular importance to the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice are the following general goals included in our mission statement:

1. to provide knowledge and understanding of the historical, social, intellectual bases of human culture and environment;
2. to provide habits of thought and investigation useful in later life;
3. to encourage exploration and development of ethical values; and
4. to offer the necessary foundation for professional competence or further training in professional or graduate schools.

Student Learning Outcomes (6-8)

(Student Learning Outcomes are defined in terms of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students will know and be able to do as a result of completing a program. These student learning outcomes are directly linked to the accomplishment of the program goals.)

By graduation, MA students in sociology should be able to:

1. effectively use communication skills in writing, editing, speaking and listening
2. effectively use analytical and computer skills to include the tools to analyze qualitative and quantitative data
3. effectively conceptualize and solve problems, and engage in critical thinking, effective reasoning, and decision-making
4. effectively use social skills to include cooperative learning and group problem-solving
5. be able to translate the sociological perspective into everyday life and problems.

The masters' program in sociology seeks to develop and enhance the same skills that undergraduates in sociology have, but at a more sophisticated level than that expected for the undergraduate student. Graduate work is expected to be more independent and self-directed than undergraduate work, and to be more analytical and theoretical.

Process for Assessing each Student Learning Outcome

(A process must be defined and documented to regularly assess student learning and achievement of student learning outcomes. The results of the assessment must be utilized as input for the improvement of the program.)

In the Department of Sociology and CMJS, the graduate director and the graduate committee have the responsibility for reviewing and evaluating our assessment procedures, and for offering suggestions to the faculty. The graduate director is also responsible for administering and reviewing the alumni survey, and for informing the faculty of the results of that survey.

1. Timeline for assessment and analysis

(Must include specific timeline for collection and analysis of assessment data.)

- Data collection takes place on an annual basis during spring and fall semesters.
- In 2015, data collection will take place between March 15 and May 1 and November 15 and December 15.
- The analysis of assessment data will take place between May 1 and May 20.

2. Means of assessment and desired level of student achievement

(Must include at least one direct and one indirect method of assessment for each learning outcome.)

- The graduate director contacts faculty members who are supervising master's theses in December and May to determine how well our students are doing. In addition, the graduate director conducts annual graduate student evaluations in December and May. This is a formal process, using evaluation forms developed by the graduate committee. These forms are designed to determine if the student is making satisfactory progress.
- The same forms are also used to evaluate assistantship performance of the students who have been awarded graduate assistantships. The graduate director shares the results of the semi-annual evaluations with the graduate committee, and asks the graduate committee for guidance in difficult cases. Subsequently, the graduate director uses the semi-annual evaluations to submit the formal annual evaluation of a student's performance to the graduate school.
- In 2012, graduate faculty approved the addition of a new committee responsible for developing, administering, and evaluating the quality of comprehensive examinations. The comprehensive examination committee consists of four tenure-track or tenured faculty members representing our two areas of concentration: general sociology (two faculty) and criminology (two faculty). After the student has completed the process, the examination committee reports to the graduate director regarding whether the student passed the exam. The graduate director shares the results with the student and departmental faculty.
- a thesis (with an oral comprehensive examination component) or a comprehensive written examination to be taken in the student's last semester of the M.A.;
- a paper reporting original empirical research (this requirement may be met by the thesis);

3. Reporting of results

(Must at least report annually to the Dean of college/school.)

- Results will be reported annually by July 14

**2016/2017 Academic Assessment Report
(Master of Arts Degree in Sociology)
(07/08/2017)**

Evaluation of Student Performance and Learning Outcomes

During the 2016/2017 academic year, the graduate program and the evaluation of student performance was conducted by current department chair and graduate program director. Between May and July 2017, the graduate director reviewed program completion data (MA Thesis defenses and comprehensive exams) and post-graduation (PhD program admission and employment) data for graduating cohort as well as course grades and cumulative GPA for each MA student in our graduate program. This information is shared with the Graduate Committee to determine if students are not making satisfactory progress toward degree. The graduate director also contacted faculty members supervising the graduate assistants and/or serving as faculty advisors/thesis committee chairs. The faculty were asked to evaluate graduate assistant performance and graduate student progress toward completing the degree. This is a formal process using evaluation forms developed by the graduate committee. Subsequently, the graduate director meets with graduate students to discuss the review. The graduate director uses the evaluations to submit the formal annual evaluation of a student's performance to the graduate school (due June 30). In addition, the graduate director initiated exit surveys via online survey software (SurveyMonkey). All graduating MA students were sent links to the survey via email. Participation in the survey was voluntary; no identifying information was gathered.

Student Performance Outcomes: New 2016/2017 Cohort

The new 2016/2017 cohort consisted of eleven graduate students, 10 funded through research and teaching assistantships and one self-supporting. The graduate director conducted annual evaluations of eleven graduate students. Ten graduate students received positive marks on their assistantship performance; eleven graduate students received positive evaluations of their progress toward the degree; no graduate student received negative evaluation of their progress (**GPA significantly below the 3.0 GPA**). The department was able to support several first and second year graduate students to present their papers at the national Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) and the American Criminological Society meetings. In addition, three of our students traveled on research assignments and two presented at regional conferences.

Student Performance Outcomes: 2017 Graduating Cohort

A. Satisfaction with MA in Sociology Program

The 2017 graduating cohort included eight graduate students. Six graduate students (75%) completed the latest MA program assessment survey conducted April – July 2017. The majority of respondents indicated that they would recommend our graduate program to others (80%). With a couple of exceptions, students expressed satisfaction with the quality of the degree program (The average response score ranged from 3.2 to 4.6, on a scale from 1 through 5). The survey indicated that students are satisfied with

- (1) content of required courses (Q2 – 4.2)
- (2) number of courses offered (Q3 – 4.2)
- (3) their ability to find faculty members with whom they could talk about professional matters (Q12 - 4.5) and,
- (4) quality of assistantship experiences (4.5)

The level of satisfaction with other aspects of the program was slightly lower:

- (1) content of elective courses (Q5 - 3.5)
- (2) level of difficulty of elective courses (Q7 - 3.8)
- (3) quality of graduate teaching (Q13 - 4.0)
- (4) quality of graduate advising (Q 14 - 3.8)

Again, the major issue raised by the students is variety of elective courses offered (Q6 - 3.2). Overall, on all items, the results of the survey show a slight decline from the 2015/2016 results when the range of satisfaction as measured by the average response scores was from 3.8 to 5.0. In this context, two caveats must be noted. First, only six students responded to our survey, which is the smallest number since we started deploying the survey in 2010 and also brings down mean scores significantly with just one response as either “strongly disagree” or “disagree.” Second, the 2016/2017 results are similar to the 2014/2015 results, when the range of satisfaction as measured by the average response scores was from 2.77 to 4.68. Given these two caveats, we have a reason to believe that these fluctuations have more to do with the nature of individual student experiences in the program rather than the overall quality of the program.

B. Evidence that Intended General Educational Goals and Learning Outcomes Are Being Achieved Program Completion and Post-Graduation Outcomes

The MA Program in Sociology offers two graduation options, including the non-thesis option. In the 2017 graduating cohort, six students pursued the thesis option; two students pursued the non-thesis option (one of these students, Adam Rose, has passed the exams). Among the six thesis students, all six had successfully defended their thesis by the end of the spring semester. Almost all thesis students presented their papers at national and regional professional conferences, including the national American Society of Criminology conference in New Orleans, the meetings of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) conference in Kansas and the Southern Sociological Society in Atlanta, GA.

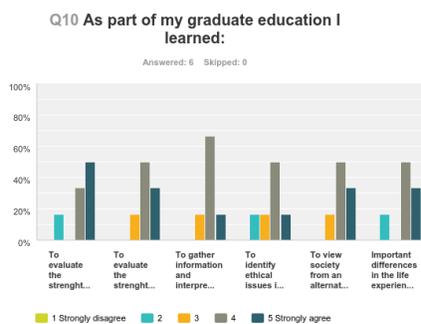
With regard to post-graduation paths, three graduates (Ian Brecht, Cody Tuttle, and Adam Rose) are in the process of seeking employment in closely related fields. One graduate (Katie Ratcliff) has joined the Terrorism Research Center as an Associate Director. Two of our thesis students will be pursuing doctoral work elsewhere and one (Leanna Gavin) will be pursuing a Juris Doctor degree at the University of Arizona. The two Ph.D. bound students were admitted with funding to the following Ph.D. programs: Joshua Cafferty - Ph.D. Program in Sociology at UC Irvine; Drew Medaris - Ph.D. Program in Sociology at the University of New Mexico. Their success in these programs is a good indicator of the quality of our program. We have also learned that two of 2015/2017 graduates were recently admitted to two Ph.D. Programs: DeAndre Beadle to the University of Minnesota and Chao Liu to the North Carolina State University. We have also learned that one of our former graduates, Eric Vest, was appointed as the Director of Career Services at the Northwest Arkansas Community College (2008). These placements attest to the quality of our program and raise the issue of opportunities lost because our best students cannot continue their doctoral education in our department.

In sum, these outcomes provide evidence that our MA program offers the necessary foundation for professional competence or further training in professional or graduate schools (**Program Goal # 4**).

General Learning Outcomes

According to the survey results, the department is meeting its general educational program goals (Program Goals 1, 2, 3 and 4) and student learning outcomes (Learning Outcomes 2 and 3). Specifically, as Figure 1 (Q-10) demonstrates, our graduates indicated high level of agreement with the statements included under the prompt “As part of my graduate education I learned...” The majority of students *agreed or strongly agreed* with the statement that they learned (1) “to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different theoretical perspectives” (83%); (2) “to gather information and interpret the meaning of this information” (83%); (3) “to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different research methods” (83%); and (4) “to identify ethical issues in sociological research” (67%). Moreover, the majority of students *agreed or strongly agreed* with the statements that they learned (1) “important differences in the life experiences of people” (83%); and (2) “to view society from an alternative or critical perspective (83%). The area in which student satisfaction scores had the lowest mean was again learning how “identify ethical issues in sociological research” (3.7). Overall, in 2016/2017 the ranges of the mean scores on these questions were lower than in 2014/2015 (4.0 – 4.9) and 2015/2016, (4.3 - 4.8).

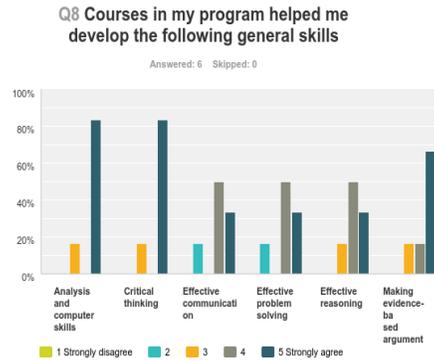
Figure 1: Question 10



Specific Student Learning Outcomes

According to the data, our graduating students indicate a satisfactory degree of consistency between our stated learning objectives and student learning outcomes in terms of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students know and be able to use as a result of completing our graduate program (Figure 2, Q - 8). Specifically, the majority of students strongly agreed or agreed with a set of statements under the prompt, “Courses in my program helped me develop the following general skills...” (Student Learning Outcomes 2 and 3): critical thinking skills (83%); effective communication skills (83%); effective problem solving (83%); effective reasoning (83%) and making evidence-based arguments (83%), and analysis and computer skills (83%). In terms of average scores, effective communication skills and effective problem solving received the lowest average scores (4.0).

Figure 2: Question 8



Finally, responses indicate that courses offered in our program help students develop other skills and intellectual abilities identified as the key components of what the program intends to accomplish. These outcomes were measured by student responses to a set of statements asking them to indicate the level of agreement with a set of statements under the prompt: “Courses in my program helped me to develop an understanding of...” (Program Goal 4 and Learning Outcome 5). In this regard, students expressed high level of agreement with statements related to understanding of “the sociological/criminological perspective” (4.5); “the application of sociological/criminological concepts to the analysis of society” (4.7); “the overall theoretical foundation of the discipline” (4.3); “the overall methodological foundations of the discipline (4.0).” Understanding of qualitative research design and analyses was only area that received considerably lower average score (3.3). The consistency with which these areas receive lower scores is very likely a reflection of the more quantitative orientation in the content of our graduate research methods courses than the quality of teaching our qualitative methods course (see below).

I think research design and statistics could have more integration. As it is, both courses seem segmented from each other and neither attempts to synthesize the other. Also, integrating these two courses might allow students to take both qualitative methods and advanced methodological courses. I enjoyed crim methods but I would have liked to also take qualitative methods.

Table 1: Question 9 - Courses in my program helped me to develop an understanding of....

	1 Strongly disagree	2	3	4	5 Strongly agree	Not Applicable	Total
The sociological/criminological perspective	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	16.67% 1	66.67% 4	0.00% 0	6
The application of sociological/criminological concepts to the analysis of society	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	33.33% 2	66.67% 4	0.00% 0	6
The overall theoretical foundation of the discipline	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	66.67% 4	33.33% 2	0.00% 0	6
The classical theoretical perspectives	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	66.67% 4	0.00% 0	6
The contemporary sociological perspectives	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	33.33% 2	16.67% 1	16.67% 1	16.67% 1	6
Criminological Theories	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	16.67% 1	50.00% 3	16.67% 1	6
The overall methodological foundations of the discipline	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	66.67% 4	16.67% 1	0.00% 0	6
Qualitative research design	0.00% 0	50.00% 3	0.00% 0	33.33% 2	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	6
Quantitative research design	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	66.67% 4	0.00% 0	6
Qualitative data analysis	0.00% 0	33.33% 2	50.00% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	6
Quantitative data analysis	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	16.67% 1	16.67% 1	66.67% 4	0.00% 0	6

Summary and changes to degree/certificate planned or made on the basis of the assessment and analysis

All of our first-year graduate students (fall 2017 cohort) are making satisfactory progress. Program completion and post-graduation outcomes as well as survey responses from our 2017 graduating cohort indicate that they will apply the knowledge and skills developed in our program. With regard to satisfaction with the program, the majority of respondents had positive experiences with the professors and graduate assistantships, were satisfied with advising and mentoring, and benefitted from graduate courses. Our primary areas for improvement continue to include:

- expanding the number of elective courses offered in the program
- expanding the coverage of qualitative research design and analysis in our required courses
- expanding the coverage and discussion of ethical issues in sociological research

One institutional change outside departmental control that might have affected the experiences of this graduating cohort was the transition from graduate student offices located on the first floor of Old Main to Harmon/Fairview apartments. In addition to the new graduate offices being located at a remote site, the students now occupy separate offices. All student cubicles in Old Main were located in the same space and all graduate students had access to a common computer lab. Since the 2017 graduating cohort experienced the transition in the middle of their graduate term in the MA Program, they have experienced more of a disruption than what we expect to see in the future.

One troubling comment we have received pertains to our students being potentially affected by what the respondent referred to as “intradepartmental politics/communication issues” (see below). This is the area in which the department may need to improve as well.

#	Responses
1	Most of the faculty seem interested in helping students, but only if there is an advantage to them as well (which is understandable). There also seems to be a bit of intra-department politics/communication issues or tensions that aren't necessarily in the best interest of the department as a whole. Faculty aren't always the best at keeping these things from affecting students.

Summary of planned changes to the assessment method and process

In general, the assessment methods the department uses to evaluate the extent to which the goals of our program and student learning outcomes are satisfactory. Our primary areas for improvement include:

- developing an alumni survey assessing the extent to which our graduates actually utilize the knowledge, skills, and abilities developed in our graduate program
- developing survey questions evaluating program goal # 4 (to offer the necessary foundation for professional competence or further training in professional or graduate schools) and student learning outcome #4 (effectively use social skills to include cooperative learning and group problem-solving)

Appendix
Student Comments¹

Question 22: Please provide any additional comments or suggestions regarding the program curriculum

#	Responses
1	Great required curriculum, but limited elective choices.
2	It would be nice if stats wasn't paired with both an elective and a core class hours-wise, but I don't see many other ways to structure it to balance skills needed with the natural progression of grad school. I would've also liked to know more about independent study.
3	I think research design and statistics could have more integration. As it is, both courses seem segmented from each other and neither attempts to synthesize the other. Also, integrating these two courses might allow students to take both qualitative methods and advanced methodological courses. I enjoyed crim methods but I would have liked to also take qualitative methods.
4	I would have preferred more options in quantitative analysis/research design. Additionally, I would have preferred to learn a more applicable statistical software in courses, such as Stata or R.

Question 23: Please provide any additional comments or suggestions regarding advising and/or mentoring

#	Responses
1	Most of the faculty seem interested in helping students, but only if there is an advantage to them as well (which is understandable). There also seems to be a bit of intra-department politics/communication issues or tensions that aren't necessarily in the best interest of the department as a whole. Faculty aren't always the best at keeping these things from affecting students.

Question 24: Please provide any additional comments regarding your overall experience in this MA program

#	Responses
1	I'm thankful to have had the opportunity to obtain a Masters degree at the University of Arkansas. My experience in the program and the skills I learned have set me up for future success and have helped shape me as a person and an academic. Thank you!
2	Overall, I had a good experience and would recommend the program as a stepping stone from undergrad as a time to decide what direction you want to head in life.
3	The transition from offices (Old Main to Harmon/Fairview), and the ensuing laptop computer situation was pretty clunky. I realize that wasn't a decision of the department, but the second year in the program felt significantly more disjointed than the first, because of all of those issues.

¹ Comments referencing individual faculty members are not included in program reports.