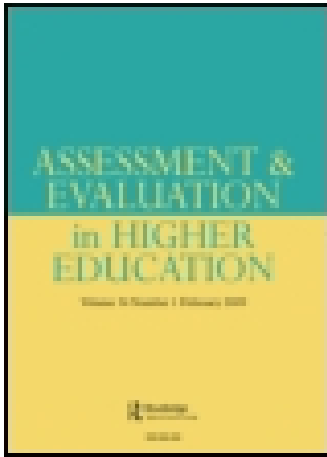


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Assessing learning in a sociology department: what do students say that they learn?

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Assessment plays a central role in evaluating and strengthening student learning in higher education, and sociology departments, in particular, have increasingly become interested in engaging in assessment activities to better understand students' learning. This qualitative study builds on previous research on assessment by asking what students in one American university department see themselves learning in the sociology major. Rather than asking students to reflect on what we think they are learning, we asked open-ended questions about skills, topics and modes of education they considered most significant to their learning. The 25 sociology majors in our study included second-year students, graduating fourth-year students and alumni who had graduated five years prior, enabling us to compare what students have learned or are learning across cohorts. Our findings demonstrate that students emphasise a common collection of skills, topics and – especially – modes of learning in the major, despite their various course selections and interests within the discipline, and also that majors' orientations to sociology vary as they move through, and beyond, the undergraduate curriculum.

Keywords: learning outcomes; skills; sociology; student learning

Introduction

Assessment plays a critical role in evaluating and strengthening student learning in the undergraduate learning experience (Brown and Knight 1994; Rust, O'Donovan, and Price 2005). There has been an increasing focus on assessment and credibility of higher education on a global level since the 1980s (Walsh and Metcalf 2003). In particular, a growing body of literature in sociology departments in the USA focuses on the importance of assessment of student learning to both the student and the teacher, as the discipline of sociology relies on its own methodological strengths to explore learning outcomes (Chin, Senter, and Spalter-Roth 2011; Clark and Filinson 2011; McKinney and Naseri 2011; Pedersen and White 2011). National accrediting bodies increasingly emphasise empirical measures of what students are (or are not) learning, and some parents and students themselves seek deeper information about the skills and knowledge they can expect to come with a college degree (Chin, Senter, and Spalter-Roth 2011; Spalter-Roth et al. 2010).

Sociologists who assess the learning of sociology majors typically take one of two approaches. Colleagues focusing on their own departments most often produce individual case studies showcasing what and how their majors learn (McKinney and Naseri 2011; Pedersen and White 2011). Broader reports from the American

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Sociological Association look across departments to determine what sociology majors nationally are learning and how, if at all, that has changed over time (Spalter-Roth et al. 2010). While the conclusions from these two kinds of studies sometimes overlap, they are different in focus and scope, with case studies focused narrowly on the details of particular departments and national studies quite general in their approach and conclusions. That said, it is relatively uncommon for studies from sociology departments to ask students to articulate, in their own terms, what they see themselves learning and the value of this over time.

The approach we use in this study focuses more on students' perceptions of their understanding of sociology across three different cohorts of students. We build on the insights in these studies of assessment in sociology departments to ask how students describe and experience what they learn in the major. We use the term 'assessment' in this article as a way of understanding students' perspectives of their learning. Rather than presenting students with information about what we think they are learning, we asked them open-ended questions about the skills they brought away from the major, the topics or substantive things they learned, and the modes of education – including research projects and experiential learning options – through which they think they learned the most. We argue that better understanding what and how students see themselves learning, in their own words, can strengthen broader assessment efforts in sociology departments by tying them as closely as possible to the experience of students, and opening up questions about how student and faculty assessment of student learning compare. Similarly, the qualitative approach and the cohort model of this study enables us to explore student learning more in-depth at three different stages in the major, and may be useful for assessing what students think they are learning in other academic disciplines.

We focus on our own sociology department at Brandeis University, seeking analytic leverage from its fit with national norms. Unlike many departments with highly specified requirements, the major at Brandeis is very flexible. We require majors to complete nine courses, one of which must be an Introductory Sociology course. Students can take this introductory course at any point in their completion of the major. The other courses in the department fall into five broad groups (gender and family; politics and social change; health, illness and the life course; theory and methods; and institutions, community and culture), and students rarely have difficulty completing the course requirements in these different areas for the major. We argue that this flexibility is a benefit for a project like this because it allows students to take a range of courses with a range of faculty members (even the introductory course is taught by several faculty members in different ways), crafting for themselves an experience of the major most in line with their interests and goals. Unlike a highly structured department or major in which student learning becomes an artefact of tightly defined major requirements, we argue that our substantive findings speak to learning in a sociology major where student interests, values and priorities – which are potentially quite variable – shape learning in the major.

Our findings are based on interviews with 25 current second-year undergraduates, fourth-year undergraduates and alumni who graduated five years before this research was conducted. We aimed to compare both within and across years to understand how students came to the major and, most importantly, what they see themselves learning. We argue that despite varying entry points, their learning centres around a consistent set of skills, topics and modes of learning. Skills include those of research, writing, oral communication, and analytical and critical thinking,

while the topics focus on an awareness of social structure and social institutions. When asked about modes of learning, students spoke most consistently about research projects both in class and independently, and various kinds of experiential learning that took them outside of the classroom. As these findings to some degree are unique to faculty in sociology and to Brandeis University as an institution, we intend them to be more generative for others studying assessment in higher education and, in particular, sociology.

Literature review

Assessment within the discipline of sociology differs from other disciplines in approach and outlook. While other disciplines may use assessment to evaluate core theories or concepts, employment outcomes, or student engagement by field of study, assessment in sociology emphasises these aspects of assessment but also focuses on students' experiences as sociology majors, and the ways in which key concepts of the discipline relate to the social world in which they live. Assessment is increasingly a priority in many American sociology departments. A study of sociology department chairs in the USA found that 77% of research universities and 92% of master's comprehensive universities were engaged in some kind of assessment of student learning in the 2006–2007 reporting year, including assessment practices such as capstone courses, surveys from graduating students, advanced-level student theses and oftentimes department-wide examinations (Spalter-Roth and Scelza 2009, 5). This figure represents a 10% increase over the preceding five years, indicating the increasing emphasis placed on such activities.

Assessment is often perceived by faculty as a time and labour intensive imperative imposed by outside institutions and/or actors. Indeed, one of its major 'drivers' is the emphasis on assessment by regional accreditation agencies. It is therefore unsurprising that department chairs and faculty report resenting having to undertake assessment, especially insofar as the time demands involved in conducting high-quality assessment may be seen as in conflict with faculty teaching and research commitments (Chin, Senter, and Spalter-Roth 2011). Further, some sociologists have argued that assessment is a part of the 'deprofessionalization' of higher education, suggesting, in contrast, the importance of faculty ownership of these efforts (Clark and Filinson 2011).

Against the 'assessment complaint', some have argued that the push for assessing learning is an opportunity for sociology. These authors point out that sociologists have the requisite methodological skills to conduct high-quality assessment and that assessment might provide a meaningful opportunity to engage students in research, not only as 'subjects', but as research assistants. In this framing, assessment is a kind of 'applied sociology' in which we turn the focus on our own teaching, with many possible advantages. Given many sociologists' strong commitment to teaching, assessment may represent an important opportunity to evaluate and refine a central aspect of our practices (Chin, Senter, and Spalter-Roth 2011).

The empirical literature on assessment in sociology generally falls into two categories. First, a small set of case studies in the peer-reviewed literature report on strategies for assessment of student learning in specific departmental contexts. Second, a series of reports from the American Sociological Association (ASA) examine learning in sociology departments more broadly. We briefly describe both approaches, as each informed the research on which this article is based.

The extant literature suggests that sociology department assessment studies rely on a diverse array of research methods, including student surveys at the time of graduation, evaluations of advanced-level undergraduate papers, cross-sectional evaluations of students as they move through the major, comparisons of majors and non-majors (regarding specific skill and content areas) and longitudinal study of students that extends past their graduation (Clark and Filinson 2011; McKinney and Naseri 2011; Pedersen and White 2011). Some departments have found benefit in a ‘multipronged’ approach, combining different forms of data over time to answer evolving questions about their impact on students (Clark and Filinson 2011). The design of assessment studies is often driven by specific departmental learning goals and objectives, which similarly vary across institutions.

In contrast to these targeted approaches, much of what we know about the experience of sociology majors comes from ongoing research conducted by the ASA on learning in sociology departments across the country. The ASA’s *Bachelor’s and Beyond* study data come from a survey of students from approximately 100 sociology departments in the USA (Spalter-Roth et al. 2010). Twenty PhD-granting departments, 20 master’s degree-granting departments and 40 bachelor’s degree-granting departments were randomly selected to represent the share of graduating seniors from each type of institution of higher education. Three waves of data collection were conducted. In the first wave in 2005, referred to as the ‘What Can I Do with a Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology?’ study, 1077 fourth-year undergraduates completed an online survey (a 35% response rate). Two years later, they were invited to complete a second follow-up survey (44% participated). A third wave of data was collected in 2009, approximately four years after their graduation; at that time, qualitative interviews were conducted with a small subset of respondents. The ASA has produced a series of useful reports, which are publicly available on the ASA website (American Sociological Association 2014). The data most relevant to our study concern student pathways into the major, mastery of skills and content, and satisfaction with their learning.

The *Bachelor’s and Beyond* study finds that students major in sociology because they are excited by sociological concepts, want to understand the relationships between individuals and social forces, seek insight into their own lives and want to change society (Senter, Van Vooren, and Spalter-Roth 2013, 6). Latino and African-American students in particular are more likely to cite a desire to change society as a primary motivation (Spalter-Roth et al. 2006, 2). Findings also highlight the pronounced impact of students’ first sociology courses, which serve as the site for their initial introduction to these possibilities. More than 50% of students cite ‘job preparation’ as a consideration in their selection of the major, though this professionalisation rationale represents only the sixth most common reason given (Senter, Van Vooren, and Spalter-Roth 2013, 6).

When asked about the variety of content and skills acquired through sociology coursework, 90% of fourth-year students reported mastery of sociological concepts (Spalter-Roth et al. 2006, 2). Approximately, 70% strongly agree they learned about the differences between theoretical paradigms, the effects of status differences on daily life experiences, critical or alternative views of society, sociological views of social issues and the relation between individuals and social institutions.

Similar proportions of students, responding to questions about skills, strongly agree that they have mastered aspects of the research process such as developing evidence-based arguments, evaluating research methods, identifying ethical

considerations, writing reports and forming hypotheses. In contrast, less than half of seniors express a high comfort level with statistical software and statistics. In a possible ‘skills mismatch’, among the skills that sociology majors list on their resumes, however, the use of statistical packages is at the top of the list, with nearly all who expressed confidence that they had learned this skill listing it on their resumes. However, in later surveys, respondents also pointed to the importance of a set of ‘soft skills’ to their current employment. Most significant among these was the ability to work with people from other racial or ethnic groups and working in teams, with almost two-thirds of respondents (63.2%) reporting that understanding race, class and gender differences was very useful on the job. As noted by the authors of the 2010 report, this finding in part likely reflects the proportion of graduates employed as social workers at the time of the interview (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2010, 6).

The *Bachelors & Beyond* study indicates further that perceived learning of both concepts and skills is associated with greater satisfaction with the sociology major (Senter et al. 2012, 5). Students who pursue a more rigorous path through the major, and who take courses in sociological theory and research methods, are among those most likely to be satisfied with their degree. Students are most satisfied with their experience in the sociology major when they are ‘given the opportunity to interact with faculty in a variety of ways beyond the classroom, to interact with their fellow students in the context of substantive projects, and to take part in activities that provide for transitions to the next stage of their lives, whether graduate school or employment’ (8). Participants’ reports of their satisfaction with the sociology major has varied over time (75% in 2005; 60% in 2007), possibly as a consequence of graduates encountering increasing difficulty in finding employment that allows them to use the concepts and skills that they learned as undergraduates. According to the *Bachelor’s and Beyond* study, the majority of sociology majors will go into the labour market directly after graduation. While these reports also consider the role of social capital and social networks in the career trajectories of sociology majors, such foci extend beyond our present study.

Similar to the ASA research, our assessment project sought to understand learning from the perspective of students and alumni, applying this approach to an in-depth examination of a single department. We asked participants about broad categories of learning, including concepts and skills. We inquired also as to the effects of the major on their life experiences following graduation. While previous studies have focused on assessment based on departmental learning goals, our study centres on an open-ended approach in which students provided feedback on what was most significant from their learning.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study of 25 sociology major students from Brandeis University, a medium-sized private liberal arts university in the north-east of the USA. We conducted qualitative interviews with sociology majors from three cohorts in order to compare student learning outcomes across these three groups: second-year students (class of 2015), fourth-year students (class of 2013) and alumni (class of 2008) who had graduated five years prior to the beginning of the study.

Sociology majors in the department are required to take nine courses in an order which they choose. The only required course for the major is the introductory course to sociology, which is taught by various faculty. Because many sociology majors come to sociology through a variety of routes, many of which connect to elective courses that they take to fulfil requirements related to other majors and minors, they may take this introductory course at any point in the major, although they are encouraged to do so early on. The sociology programme's interdisciplinary nature allows sociology majors to take courses from a variety of different academic programmes, including those focused on women's and gender studies, health, global issues, social justice, and peace and conflict studies. The Sociology Department includes 12 faculty members and typically offers between 14 and 16 sociology courses per semester. Class sizes range from under 10 students to up to 140 students, with most classes enrolling around 30 students.

To gather a representative sample of sociology major students, we ranked the population of majors in each cohort by grade point average (GPA) and divided it into quintiles. We then used a random number generator to stratify our sample, randomly selecting an even number of students from each quintile. We contacted 40 students/alumni for interviews, and 26 individuals agreed to participate (response rate ~ 65%). The sample included 10 fourth-year students (of 14 contacted), 9 second-year students (of 14 contacted) and 7 alumni (of 12 contacted). The audio recording of one fourth-year student's interview did not work, leaving us with a sample size of 25. Twenty-two of the 25 respondents (88%) were female, in comparison with 75% of all majors in these years. Their mean GPA was 3.58/4.0. Fifteen of the 25 students had an additional major, and one student had two additional majors. Ten students had one additional minor, and another 10 students had two additional minors.

After receiving institutional review board approval for the study, the Chair of the Sociology Department sent an introductory email to each of the students or alumni selected to participate informing them of the study, and one of the two graduate research assistants followed up with each student or alumnus/alumna to determine whether he or she were interested in participating in the interview. We obtained informed consent from the students who agreed to participate prior to the interview via email or in person before the beginning of the interview.

The interviews were conducted by one of the two graduate students in person, over the telephone or via Skype, between May and September 2013. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged from 18 to 75 min long, with an average interview length of 40 min. The interview guide included semi-structured questions on how students decided to major in sociology, how they understand sociology, the skills they acquired and how sociology may have influenced their personal and professional lives. Overall, respondents seemed to enjoy the opportunity to talk about their experiences of studying sociology. The interviews were transcribed, and the data gathered were analysed using the qualitative software programme Atlas.ti. The data were analysed according to the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), in which themes were developed and sub-themes were accordingly identified. We could then compare themes and sub-themes using the software programme. In the discussion that follows, we discuss three major themes that emerged from the data including skills, topics and modes of learning, drawing from respondents' comments from the interviews. We refer pseudonymously to particular respondents.

Findings

Students came to the Sociology major in varied ways and often noted how multiple factors intersected to shape their decision to declare the major. The most commonly cited precipitating factor (mentioned by 12 respondents) involved having a particular Sociology course spark or reinforce a broader interest in the major. In some cases, the initial draw was a specific professor, though more often this resonance centred on the orientation of the subject matter. Ashley, for instance, notes that she ‘liked that [Sociology involved] thinking about people and societal issues’, and Liza similarly reports that ‘it kind of validated what I had already been thinking about’ more broadly, which led her to ‘want to know more’. Nine respondents rooted Sociology’s appeal in the discipline’s resonance with their broader values. In some cases, this normative pull was a primary motivator. More often, however, the draw of a sociological perspective interacted with a sense of dissatisfaction with a previous choice of major or career path. Another common path, cited by six respondents, centred on a discovery that the bulk of major requirements had been fulfilled inadvertently or through parallel efforts to satisfy requirements associated with other majors and minors.

Skills

When asked what kinds of skills they learned in the major, students spoke most often of research skills, writing, oral communication, analytical skills and critical thinking. Interviewees more often offered ‘research skills’ and ‘critical thinking’ in response to open-ended questions about what skills they learned, while mentioning ‘oral communications’ and, to some extent, ‘writing’ in response to specific prompts from the interviewers.

Within the category, ‘research skills’ are several specific techniques. For example, interview skills are mentioned with some frequency. This suggests that students feel that interviewing is a skill available to them, as one fourth-year student noted: ‘So I think that classes where I have had to do interviews myself or where I have had to develop the materials myself have been most helpful’ (Jenny). ‘Fieldwork’ is also mentioned, often with reference to specific class projects that included interviewing components. Some connect ‘interviewing’ with ‘oral communications’, in that they perceive that learning to interview improved their listening skills.

Students report that their coursework involved a lot of writing and that they got extensive feedback from their professors on their papers. Their comments on writing in the major are generally positive, emphasising the development of writing skills and/or the improvement of extant capabilities. One fourth-year student noted in response to writing skills: ‘the amount that I’ve improved since I’ve got here has been tremendous’ (Angie). Sociology classes seem almost definitionally to be ‘paper writing’ classes in these comments, consistent with Brandeis’ departmental emphasis.

Interviewees often pointed to certain styles of critical thinking as ‘skills’. For example, being able to use a ‘lens’ in writing (including ‘a sociological lens’), being able to analyse social life from a ‘social determinants’ or ‘equity’ perspective, and ‘dig deeper’, were specifically mentioned as skills gained in sociology classes. As one alumna stated, ‘I learned to apply a sociological lens to situations ... So it totally changed the experience of watching TV or the experience of reading a book. The way I view the media probably changed drastically’ (Anna). Critical thinking was

specifically mentioned as valuable across multiple contexts. Respondents made frequent mention of learning how to make an argument with evidence to support their positions. Gaby, a second-year student stated, 'I learned how to be detail-oriented, how to be analytical, how to approach things objectively'. A few respondents mentioned learning a critical approach to reading material, which involves 'asking questions' rather than just 'regurgitating' what was read.

Interviewees also spoke about the skills that they did not learn. Many of these comments centre on a desire to learn *more* about a specific methodology, such as field work or interviewing. This code also captures respondents' interest in what one called 'hard skills', such as grant writing, and 'technical skills', such as computer programmes (e.g. SPSS). One respondent expressed desire for a class that would feature skills essential to social change work, such as writing policy memos and community organising. A few alumni offer that they wish they had graduated with stronger quantitative methods.

In regard to oral communications, interviewees also observed that sociology classes are often discussion-based and that therefore there are fewer opportunities for formal presentations, even though listening and engaging are valued. Some commented that their 'discussion skills' improved in sociology classes, as did Tina, a second-year student: 'I think my discussion skills got a lot better. I was able to be more articulate in trying to form my responses to difficult questions that wouldn't necessarily have a right answer'. On the whole, respondents expressed an interest in more opportunities for oral communications skill-building.

Topics

The kinds of topics respondents mentioned most frequently were associated with learning about people with different backgrounds, privilege, gender, media and macro-level structures. Interviewees mentioned 'understanding different backgrounds' and 'subcultures' in response to multiple questions about the major. Sometimes they asserted that their experience in Sociology would change their behaviour: 'It's really broadened my worldview of everything. And being in situations working with low-income people, not being quick to make judgments whenever I can, just understanding that people are forced to make different decisions based on their circumstances' (Natalie). Likewise, students emphasised that their sociological training enables them to 'look beyond the surface' of situations and critically engage with received ideology: 'assumptions aren't always correct: you have to go beyond assumptions to what's actually going on' (Ashley).

Interviewees believed that understanding macro-level structures would make them more effective agents of social change, whether within existing professions or as social movement activists: 'It taught me not to be afraid, to really stand up, and to make a change. It really allowed me to be more passionate ... to be that one to make that change or starting organisations or starting different movements' (Cecilia). On an affective level, students reported that this greater understanding leads them to have more compassion for others:

Through my sociology courses, I became more understanding of what influences people to act in the way that they do, specifically surrounding oppression. It gave me greater compassion for people who are being oppressed and who are maybe creating the oppression. I think it has given me more compassion for understanding influences surrounding people's actions. (Ariel)

Students reported that their coursework had given them a new vantage point on the ways in which they are privileged:

I feel like I learned a lot about my own privilege ... in a lot of my classes, I'm learning about how many barriers people who are not like me, people of color, people of different ethnicities, who aren't from America, or who are very impoverished, the barriers that they're facing. I should understand my white privilege and understand how it influences the decisions that I'm making and how I can use that to be an advocate for addressing inequities. (Angie)

White privilege was mentioned emphatically by two students who had enrolled in an intensive Brandeis-directed 'Justice Brandeis Semester' programme based in Mississippi, both of whom mentioned 'the invisible knapsack', a reference to a piece by Peggy McIntosh (1989) that describes the invisibility of white privilege, as a way of understanding their own experiences in this programme.

Somewhat differently, interviewees commented also that sociology's broad analytic lens allows them to engage with different disciplines in an open and critical way: 'I can delve into psychology, I can delve into medicine, or into hard sciences with a sociological, sociologically aware lens' (Damien). Respondents' comments also point to different ways that ideas were learned. For example, in regard to 'gender', some students emphasised particular classes and/or activities that were impactful for them. Others appreciated the integration of gender across the curriculum:

I liked how, also even in the Religion class, she brought up gender, and so I thought that was cool how at least later people are adding that to the classes and things ... as opposed to it being its own class or its own study 'cause it's part of everything. (Leah)

Alongside specific concepts and ideas, respondents pointed to sociology's emphasis on intersectionality as valuable to their learning. One respondent commented on the importance of understanding 'inequality, power, privilege and how they all intersect' (Lydia). An alumna noted that her focus on health (as a career after Brandeis) came, in part, from understanding it, sociologically, as a consequence of how society is ordered. Interviewees expressed enthusiasm for the learning they did in the major especially when 'it affects the world around you ... I think that's what's great about it is that everything you're learning you can literally apply it to your life' (Haley).

Modes

When asked more directly about the modes of learning that impacted on them – in contrast to the topics they engaged with or skills they acquired – students consistently referenced research projects they undertook both in class and independently. Second-year students, fourth-year students and alumni each emphasised the department's experiential opportunities – construed broadly as active engagement with communities, constituencies and/or primary data – as among their most powerful experiences in the major. As one alumnus, Damien, noted, reflecting on an independent project he had undertaken as a fourth-year student, 'any theory that's going to connect to actual life is going to stick with me'. Such observations are consistent with prior research on the impacts of experiential and community-based pedagogies (Cunningham and Kingma-Kiekhofers 2004; Mooney and Edwards 2001; Senter, Van Vooren, and Spalter-Roth 2013).

As students described class projects, research projects, practicums, internships and/or theses that were important to them and through which they learned something

significant, they most frequently emphasised *how they engaged with these projects* as the key dimension that shaped, and sometimes wholly defined, their impact. In some cases, such modes involved immersion in off-campus communities. Referencing his experience in the summer Justice Brandeis semester programme, one student noted that ‘doing research in Mississippi was really eye-opening’ (Arthur). Similarly, a collaborative capstone field project focused on Brandeis University’s home community of Waltham, MA was singled out by multiple respondents. One fourth-year student, a Waltham native, emphasised the integrative power of applying abstract ideas to familiar settings:

We went ‘into the field’ and we went up and down a section of Moody Street, and we observed people on the street and businesses and how people interact and how things are constructed again to encourage or discourage social interactions. That was very nice because it was taking some of the ideas that we learned ... in classes ... and applying it to my own city, where I grew up. (Anthony)

Similarly, other respondents noted how undertaking interviews or engaging with other forms of primary data allowed them to build connections to the practice of sociological inquiry that – according to alumni accounts especially – continue to resonate even after the substantive findings associated with the original assignment have faded. Frequently, as with students investigating aspects of their communities of origin, these experiential opportunities were most powerful when they interacted with topics to which students felt connected beyond the confines of their courses or assignments. As one respondent explained while discussing a project focused on gender roles in children’s books that had had an especially powerful impact: ‘I remember really liking that because I remember what we found was *shocking*, and I also just like children. So it touched on my personal interests’ (Samantha).

As alumni discussed the broader impacts of their work in sociology, they tended to emphasise how such modes intersected with the skills discussed above, allowing them opportunities for skill development that they continue to draw on in their lives and developing careers. For instance, a number of alumni described how they learned to listen well in sociology and hear what people are really saying and where they are coming from. Becky described, ‘really just listening and understanding people instead of telling them what they might need’. Damien pointed to similar skills learned saying that ‘in conversation with folks of any different walk of life ... it’s easy for me to be able to empathise with folks who have different walks of life only because I have that value placed on the other so much. So I wouldn’t have had that without sociology’.

In looking across majors’ understanding of sociology across cohorts, alumni who had graduated five years prior to this study tended to articulate their understanding of sociology in terms of their worldview. In contrast, second-year students viewed sociology as a reflection of the courses they had completed in sociology, while the fourth-year students seemed most engaged with the discipline in terms of concrete ideas and concepts.

Discussion and conclusion

Research on assessment of student learning often distinguishes between ‘direct assessment’, ‘indirect assessment’ and ‘applied assessment’ (Pedersen and White 2011). Direct assessment requires a measure of student learning that can be

compared to a set of objective evaluation criteria (Pedersen and White 2011); this is the approach reported in many department-specific case studies of learning in the sociology major. Indirect assessment, on the other hand, relies on student perceptions (Coulter 2012; Lowry et al. 2005) as a proxy for student learning (Pedersen and White 2011). Student self-reports of their strengths, weaknesses and engagement with the discipline are most often elicited via survey, with qualitative interview studies much less well represented in the literature. Applied assessment is most commonly used in follow-up studies, following graduation, to ascertain student learning in a specific context, such as the workplace (Pedersen and White 2011). Our study used in-depth interviews with current students and alumni, combining indirect and applied assessment approaches to understand what students think they are learning in sociology, and what conceptual ideas and skills they find important in their lives after graduation.

Despite the variation in the courses that the sociology majors in our study took, our data reveal that students are learning a shared collection of skills and topics, and benefit from different modes of learning. We found that students' development of sociological skills centred on writing, research and critical thinking skills. The sociology majors in our study engaged with issues central to the discipline: understanding different backgrounds, privilege, gender, media and macro-level structures. Modes of learning that incorporate original research and experiential learning environments outside of conventional classroom settings appear to have had a lasting effect on the sociology majors in our study.

Students' descriptions of what they retained from their sociology courses also aligned well with our department's defined learning goals, which emphasise modes of knowledge, core skills and social justice orientations. The general findings presented here provide a basis for tailoring our department's curriculum to address what students find most helpful for learning basic sociological concepts and ideas, as well as to assist them in developing a variety of skills. While we found few significant differences across cohorts in how respondents spoke about their learning, alumni (for whom, by definition, the most time had elapsed since their sociology coursework) appeared to more clearly recall research projects than specific readings or class topics. Perhaps most important, the lenses through which respondents articulated their respective understandings of sociology differed by cohort. In particular, alumni viewed sociology expansively as a formative influence on their worldviews, fourth-year students were most likely to view the discipline through core frameworks and concepts, and second-year students referenced most frequently discrete courses that had impacted them.

The findings from our small sample in a middle-sized American university cannot be generalised to all sociology departments. Similarly, while the qualitative approach of this study may limit the generalisability of the findings, it does not detract from the value of this study, as it points to what can be learned about assessment in sociology departments when we privilege student perspectives. This broad view of sociology majors' learning and understanding of sociology thus represents one generative approach to assessment for sociology departments. Future research using this qualitative and cohort approach to understand students' own perceptions of what they are learning may be helpful beyond the field of sociology and in other academic disciplines to further explore student learning.

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