

Degree/Certificate: Sociology
Major/Option: Sociology
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Part I – Program SLO Assessment Report for 2015-2016

1. Student Learning Outcome: The student performance or learning objective as published either in the catalog or elsewhere in your department literature.

EWU's Undergraduate Catalog describes the purpose of the Sociology major as follows: "The educational goal is not to train students; neither is the goal to educate students solely in sociology. Rather, the goal is to use the discipline as a way to critically synthesize what is learned in a liberal arts program." It lists as student learning outcomes:

- 1) Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between critical inquiry and social justice;
- 2) Demonstrate an understanding of core concepts such as social structure, socialization, culture, identity, institutions, power, inequality, and social justice;
- 3) Understand and apply various methodological and theoretical approaches for conducting research.

In other words, our major promotes all of the "essential learning outcomes" identified by the Association of American Colleges & Universities: knowledge of cultures and the world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning. *It is impossible to adequately measure such deep knowledge with "measurable verbs," despite what Bloom's Taxonomy and the UAC co-chairs say (see email dated April 19, 2016).*

Although the intentions of the UAC co-chairs, xx and xx are no doubt good, their approach to assessment is not appropriate for our major in Sociology. As Gert Biesta (2010: 2) points out in *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*, the instrumental approach based on Bloom's Taxonomy displaces the important question of higher education's purpose with "technical and managerial questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of processes." But higher education is about much more than just efficiently and effectively memorizing what is in textbooks or on power point slides, and regurgitating this information on tests to demonstrate "progress." At least in our department of Sociology, it is primarily about gaining the ability to *critically understand* how we shape and are shaped by our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with our social worlds, and about learning how to *use our sociological knowledge to examine and transform our lives*.

From our department's perspective, UAC's comments indicating that our SLO report should not use language like "understand" and "demonstrate an understanding," because these terms are "not measurable" is inappropriate—to put it mildly. The report *Measuring College Learning in Sociology*, published by the Social Science Research Council (May 2016) confirms our position (<http://highered.ssrc.org/projects/measuring-college-learning-project/>). It emphasizes that "Students of sociology should *understand...*" concepts like sociological eye, social structure, socialization, stratification, and social reproduction and social change. And it states that "Students of

sociology should be able to..." do intellectual activities such as applying sociological theories and methods to *understand* social phenomena, and *use* sociological knowledge to engage with the world around them and promote public *understanding*. Again, many aspects of these capacities are too subtle and complex to assess with simple categories and numbers. For a better sense of students' progress, we need to consider more holistically how students grow intellectually; relate to themselves, others, and the world; and use their knowledge in everyday practice (not just during tests).

The Sociology Capstone is the culminating course of our major. As articulated in the catalog: "This course is designed to move from a basic understanding of sociological research and practice to more advanced applications in the field." While students have gained basic knowledge of key sociological ideas and concepts in previous required courses (some of which assessed with the kind of measurements favored by the UAC), Capstone students need to show deeper knowledge of sociology by expressing key ideas and concepts in their own words, and by engaging in course projects on the practical relevance of sociology for examining (and, if necessary, changing) their everyday lives, relationships, and social contexts. In other words, they need to show what education scholar L. Dee Fink calls "significant learning," which involves: Foundational Knowledge (understanding), Application (critical, creative, and practical thinking), Integration (connecting to people and everyday life), Human Dimension (relationships with self and other), Caring (empathy and social responsibility), and Learning How to Learn (self-directed inquiry).

To evaluate to what extent students demonstrate such significant learning, I adopt a *qualitative rather than quantitative methodology*. Instead of letting abstract data and numbers speak for themselves, I make arguments concerning the quality of each student's intellectual engagement, work, and growth. I do not claim to provide "objective truths" about student performance, but take the "subjective responsibility" to describe educational progress as accurately as I can.

In this assessment, I focus on the *Self and Society project essays* of 10 students in the Spring 2016 capstone course: Rebecca Byam, McKenna Culbertson, Rosie Sylvester, Jordyn Doty, Kylie Knutson, Octavio Gonzalez, Mitch Meyers, Sydney Raymond, Victoria Contoise, and Taelor Wilson. For this assignment, they had to use their sociological imagination (their awareness of intersections linking personal experiences to a historical period and wider society) to investigate and critically analyze an intimate relationship with a familiar "self." (At the end of the course, they also led class dialogue on their project.) My qualitative arguments and descriptions will focus primarily on our major's first (relationship critical inquiry-social justice) and second SLO (core sociological concepts). I will support my general claim that while all the students demonstrated adequate learning and progress, some did better at demonstrating their research, critical thinking, and writing capacities than others.

2. Overall evaluation of progress on outcome: Indicate whether or not the SLO has been met, and if met, to what level.

____ SLO is met after changes resulting from ongoing assessments, referencing assessment results from the previous year to highlight revisions;

____ SLO is met, but with changes forthcoming;

 X SLO met without change required

3. Strategies and methods: Description of assessment method and choices, why they were used and how they were implemented.

I will do a qualitative assessment (using discourse analysis) of student papers based on their course projects. I will focus on specific sociological concepts, illustrate how students used them, and evaluate the quality of each student's work. 4 students (xx, xx, xx, xx) used the Bourdieu's concept of habitus, 2 students (xx and xx) used symbolic interactionism, and others used social structure (xx and xx), looking-glass self (xx), and socialization (xx). While each student fulfilled the course's minimum requirements, I will argue and show that 4 students did excellent work (xx, xx, xx, and xx), 4 did very good work (xx, xx, xx, and xx), and 2 did adequate work (xx and xx).

4. Observations gathered from data: Include findings and analyses based on the strategies and methods identified in item #3.

For the qualitative assessment, I focus on key passages in each student's essay that show how she or he applies the key concept. In other words, I not only consider how the student expresses the concept in her/his own words, but also how s/he uses it to develop one of the project's main arguments. I will discuss papers in order of perceived quality, from adequate to exceptional.

a. Findings:

1) xx: Symbolic interactionism and her relationship with friend _____

Xx's project focuses on how her friend's relationships with her father (a famous jazz musician) and her stay-at-home mother has "made xx's personal, intimate, and public life harder to handle," leaving her "to figure a lot out on her own." Xx explains that symbolic interactionism shows how language influences relationships between child and parent: "If the adult cannot show the child how to act properly then they are going to grow up acting a certain way, [making her] language, symbols, and actions inappropriate in encounters with other people in society." Xx suggests that since her mother never taught xx how to find the good in herself, and since her father was mostly absent, she hooks up with "guys that she can fix so that she does not have to focus on trying to fix herself." This causes major tensions in xx's intimate relationships, including her friendship with xx.

2) xx's Social structure and her relationship with her mother xx

Xx's project focuses on her relationship with her mother xx, who she calls "the most interesting person I have met in my lifetime." As an African American woman, her mother has always tried to fight against racist stereotypes: "To me, she's always carried on the Black feminist trope: Well kempt, intelligent, nurturing, and very strong-willed." She is someone others in her workplace and community respect, and xx is clearly inspired by her mother's "built-in nurturing instinct," which have made her a mentor to those around her. Xx defines social structure as: "[A] system with sets of rules, morals, and norms we have to follow. It is all about what should be done and what roles we should all be taking part in to survive... [It also serves to] preserve culture. Practices like rituals, language, and norms and values are passed down from generation to generation." She argues that her mother demonstrates a positive kind and effect of social structure: "This applies to my project on my mother because motherhood and mentorship are forms

of social structure that maintain Black culture. My mother displayed ways of raising her children, caring for other children and advising others. It's a learned process for young Black women (men too!) to nurturing and guiding the younger generation. It's a collectivist thought that runs deep through Black culture. One person's suffering is considered a burden to us as a whole."

3) xx and her status as "wallflower" within her community of friends.

Xx's project was surprisingly original and her presentation resonated among fellow students. Although usually quiet in class, her writing was exceptional: "Imagine a bubble. Now inside this bubble is a single golden triangle and all around it are blue smaller squares. Within those blue squares is a lone silver circle small enough to be a dot. This silver circle usually stays on the outside rime of the bubble occasionally drifting towards the center, but never long enough to be in the spotlight. This is a drawing of a wallflower, of myself and my relations with everything I know." Her paper on herself uses sociology to evaluate her self-image and role as wallflower: "Someone who fades into the background, but they see, hear, and observe more than a person who likes to be the center of attention." She draws on Nicholas Abercrombie's notion of community ("as an active network of supportive personal relationships [that] is more nearly realized the more that the social ties of family, work, friendship, and neighbors overlap and reinforce each other") to make sense of her status within her inner circle of 13 friends. She observes how she has drifted to the outside of the group and become an observer looking in, closely examining a tragic event during a camping trip. By trying to take the lead as organizer of the trip, she was excluded and the trip was cancelled. She was also not invited for the following year's trip. Based on such personal experiences, xx paints a detailed picture of the pros and cons of being perceived (and perceiving herself) as "wallflower."

4) Xx's use of habitus to study his twin sister xx

Xx's project analyzes his twin sister in relationship to herself, her peers, and the wider public. Instead of first defining the concept of habitus, he starts with a story illustrating his sister's habitus: "An example of my sister's habitus at the age of 12 years old is when she sang the national anthem for the WSU Cougars men's basketball game. She walked out on to the court in front of 5,000 plus in attendance and looked so small compared to the giant basketball players. I was sweating in fear that she might freeze up and not sing. She cleared her throat and sung her heart out. It was amazing. She didn't miss a note or forget the lyrics. Halfway through the song I saw her fears escape her and she was feeling the music, and letting the performance be part of her. The song ended and the crowd went wild... This moment shaped xx habitus." While xx demonstrates his basic understanding of habitus ("a system of embodied dispositions, tendencies that organize the ways in which individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it"), here he provides a beautiful illustration of how his sister's "embodied dispositions" took over, allowing her to sing her heart out without thinking or worrying about what she was doing, and letting the performance be part of her. The rest of the project explores how xx's habitus has evolved, especially after injuring herself playing soccer (requiring extensive knee surgery and 6 months of physical therapy) and now as sorority and student leader at EWU.

5) Xx's use of symbolic interactionism to examine herself in relation to her brother

Xx clearly articulates Mead's symbolic interactionist theory for examining "how the self emerges from the ability of human beings ability to see themselves as 'the other' internalized through their attitudes and perceptions." She relates this approach to her relationship with her brother xx, with whom she grew up in several foster families. She describes the traumatic event she shares with her brother in detail: "It's best to start with my first defining moment in life which happened to be when I was five and was taken out of the custody of my biological parents, along with my sister and two brothers who were four. This was a defining moment to me as I immediately had to switch my role from sister to mother being placed in an abusive home... I personally remember being afraid and confused but did not show this as I felt obligated as a big sister to stay strong for my little brothers... As I talk to my brother and sister they both express to me that I was the nurturer, the one who has encouraged them to do well in school and always ask how they are doing and what I can do to help." With this powerful narrative, xx sets up an extensive project to explore what has happened to her troubled brother (whose twin committed suicide several years earlier) and especially her relationship with him. Her use of symbolic interactionism is therefore far from abstract or academic; it becomes a way for her to understand (and survive) her own life and continuing to do the best she can as "nurturer" of her brother (and sister). She shows, for example, how her brother has a hard time maintaining close relationship with people in his "inner circle," but also has a strong desire to build intimate relationships with total strangers.

6) Xx's use of socialization to study his little brother Abraham

Xx is a Latino from Othello, a small farming community. His project explores how his father's severe injury due to a farming accident has affected the socialization of his brother xx. Here is what he says about socialization: "We as humans are socialized in different cultures and subcultures within society. I believe that intimate relationships, especially in one's youth, play a vital role in developing oneself and socialization theories are part of it. An important and primary agent of socialization is the role of family. Here we are actively taught and learn expectations not only for society but parental expectations." He directly relates this description to his own family, emphasizing that he and his brother were both raised with plenty of care, discipline, and affection, and that how his parents handle setbacks as well as success is an important part of the family culture. Xx's project focuses primarily on how his father's accident and the hard work he did to recover have left a deep imprint on his brother. His brother suffered his own severe injury as football player in high school, preventing him from going to a division 2 college with a scholarship for wrestling. Instead of becoming desperate, however, xx took inspiration from his father and has "developed a mindset in which he creates his own reality... one in which giving up is not an option." He is committed to recovering from his injury and making a major comeback as a wrestler. He has also become a role model for his friends and an active volunteer in the local community. Xx is particularly fond of one statement by his brother: "I don't want to be a product of my environment, I want my environment to be a product of me." Although using everyday language, this statement highlights the "agency" aspect of the sociological imagination.

7) Xx's study of her partner xx's habitus

Xx's project is an in-depth examination of the relationship with her boyfriend xx, based on their recent experience of buying a house together. Xx understands xx's concept of habitus as the "socially engaged set of patterns that we execute in our daily lives," adding that it "is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time." She argues that xx's life-long interactions with his Dad have shaped his habitus in particular ways, which have become apparent to her in their recent search for a house. In turn, xx's habitus (especially concerning financial decisions) have affected her relationship with him. Here is how she describes what happened: "Recently xx and I... bought a house. We had been looking for months, mostly because xx didn't want a fixer upper or it wasn't a good investment financially—I usually leave those decisions to him because he's a finance major—but that is one of the ways that his identity has actually shaped our relationship. He handles finances and investments [that] we are involved with. As for the house that we ended with, a lot of the reasons why we bought it was because he could only see it in one way, as an investment. He had a harder time actually seeing us live in this home, he only saw it... as a commodity... That investment side of him so strongly comes from his father. This is why I chose this as my key event because I believe that it thoroughly shows that because of the structure xx had at a young age to his adulthood it caused him to think of money, investments, and security in ways that seemingly reflect his father." The rest of her project paper explains and illustrates her main argument in concrete detail and link the formation of xx's identity to capitalism and the US class system: "His idea of success is money and the power of security that comes along with it. It has been fed to him through his family and through the people he was exposed to as he grew up."

8) Xx on her sister xx's habitus

Xx was one of the most vivacious and engaged students in our Capstone course. She loves to share her views in class, but also eagerly listens to what her peers have to say. Her project focuses on many different aspects of her sister's habitus, from their foundational years (when they constantly moved from one divorced parent to another) to the ways they dressed as young kids to their coming out as lesbians. Although she does not clarify her interpretation of habitus as clearly as xx, for example, she does a great job applying the concept to specific events and experiences. Here is how she describes the coming out process: "I know that when I came out, my labeling of myself did a great deal for my identity and shaped my habitus. I finally understood myself and could finally connect the dots that laid in my past. I am surrounded by a community of people who understand and live... the same type of life as I do. It was never a plan to be surrounded by primarily queer women, it just happened that way. We all were seeking a community and we established one and now it is engraved in our social world. Xx agrees with this statement for her own label and we both think from experience with other community members that this sense of safety and pride is very common amongst those of us who got to re-identify from the straight label that was placed on us at birth." Later in the paper, Xx depicts both the similarities and differences with her sister: her sister is interested in "saving the world" by studying environmental science, while she is less structured about yet equally committed to caring for humanity: "Xx and myself may have started out as one entity but through life experience and activation of our learned practical wisdom we have been able to turn one perfect set of twins into two perfect adult women seeking to change the world."

9) Xx and her husband-to-be xx: A symbolic-interactionist approach

Xx's project (like xx's) delves into her relationship with xx and emphasizes how each perceives the notion of home: "Home to me means roots, staying somewhere long enough to know the house inside out, and make memories that will last a lifetime... Home has two very different meanings for xx and I because we grew up in two very different houses, with two very different experiences that went into shaping how we perceive our future home together." Throughout her paper, she carefully describes her own and xx's background, and then engages in sociological analysis. She explores intimate relationships, relationships with familiar people, and relationships in public life. She defines symbolic interactionism as the study of how people "act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them" and how "these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation." She uses this understanding to show how xx's perspective of the home is significantly different from her own: "xx views a house as an investment, something that we should be able to get more out of when we are ready to sell it... I on the other hand view a house as a home; I tie my emotions into a place we are going to live. I do this because we aren't just going to live in a house; we are going to raise a family in a home and make life-long memories. I don't see a home as a commodity. I view a commodity as something that has use for a limited amount of time and then doesn't necessarily mean much after its use is completed... When xx talks about his idea of the American Dream it makes me nervous. I don't want to strive to be rich in this world. I want to live a happy comfortable lifestyle with my family and friends." In short, xx's project is an in-depth exploration of how each experiences the idea of home, but also of how sociology can help make her life and her relationship with xx meaningful. It does not merely try to demonstrate academic understanding of sociological theories like symbolic interactionism, but shows how such theories are relevant for her identity, her feelings toward herself and others, and her future as member of wider communities.

10) Xx's study of her reflective journals and herself

From my perspective, Xx's project is the most original and insightful of this Capstone class. She uses the concept of social structure to study changes in herself, as she confronts various personal troubles and moves from university to university: "I now see this as the building, demolishing, and rebuilding of my social structure... Some people are fortunate enough to have a very solid structure during their time [after] high school..., as they remain at one university, in one major, in one Greek sorority or fraternity, or with the same circle of friends... Not only did my physical location change, but my emotional state changed in big ways as well; I struggled with depression my first two years of college and I journaled my way through those very dark days. With the help of therapy, anti-depression medication and some serious mental and emotional work, I survived two very difficult years in which I was extremely unkind to myself." She carefully examines the countless journal entries she has kept from those years to get a better sense of who she was, how she has evolved, and who she is becoming: "If I go back and alter anything that is inside my journals from past entries, then I am not honoring who I was and what I knew in that exact moment I was writing. We all grow up one single day at a time and yes, if given the dreamy opportunity to redo part situations with current experience levels, we could really fix a lot of hurt, pain, and unfortunate things from happening. But since we cannot, we only do the very best that we can, when we can, with what we have."

Her paper and presentation were truly amazing, relating detailed journal entries to deep personal reflections, with significant relevance for others and society.

b. Analysis of findings:

My analysis of each student's work is based on project papers that are available upon request. Here are my qualitative interpretations of each student's project paper:

In my view, Xx devoted significant time and energy to explore her relationship with xx (as demonstrated in other parts of her paper and during her presentation). But although her work was sufficient, she could have done more to develop her understanding of symbolic interactionism and examine its relevance for her study of xx in more detail.

Xx obviously put heart and soul into her project. Her in-class presentation was very emotional, largely because she was dealing with some personal troubles of her own. Fellow students were very supportive in response, which encouraged xx to continue with her and her Mom's often painful life stories. Xx's understanding of key concepts like social structure was not as strong as that of other students. She did not consider when and how social structures sometimes reproduce the status quo in some situations and contribute to social change in others. Nevertheless, xx was a valuable participant in our class and experienced significant intellectual and psychological growth during the course.

Interestingly, xx often acted as a "wallflower" within our class as well. She rarely spoke up voluntarily, despite the fact that the atmosphere was open to multiple viewpoints. And due to serious health problems and a busy work schedule, she often couldn't attend class. Her project and presentation showed, however, that xx had learned to use sociology to make sense of her own life, share her thinking with peers, and consider alternative strategies for interacting with herself and others in social contexts. Although she could have developed the concept of community in greater depth, her illustrations and analyses demonstrated deep knowledge of feeling and acting as an "outsider within." Overall, the quality of her work was very good.

I have worked with xx in several courses and really saw him flourish in the Capstone course. While he has exam anxiety and difficulty concentrating due to several past concussions (as soccer player), he has clearly grown intellectually and as a classmate. He worked closely with other students outside of class and did his best work for the Capstone project. He clearly showed that caring about the subject of study (his own twin sister) contributes significantly to the quality of learning and depth of knowledge gained. I have no doubt that xx will continue to use his sociological imagination in life after graduation.

Although xx's project is complex and requires further organization, her insights are original and use of sociological ideas quite sophisticated. Her project is another example of how sociology is not just an academic field, but a source of practical knowledge for understanding and changing our ways of life. Xx did very good work.

Like xx, xx was also relatively quiet in class, listening carefully to what others said. While xx experienced a lack of motivation in previous courses, he clearly made the most of his Capstone project. By investigating his own family, especially his brother's relationship with his father, he gained much deeper insight into his own life and social world than any textbook or power point slide could provide. His writing also clearly

improved, mixing a personal voice with a more academic voice. All in all, xx did a great job on his project, both with his paper and his presentation.

Xx's capacity to relate the development of xx's identity (through his relationship with his father) to the US class system is outstanding. While most Sociology majors learn to critique capitalism by the time they are seniors, very few are able to use their sociological imagination to show this link in such fine-grained and personal detail. Jordyn's writing style is also excellent: the organization of her paper is coherent, her definitions of key concepts are clear and concise, and her arguments are detailed and persuasive. I have no doubt that xx learned a great deal from this project and gained practical knowledge that will be relevant for her relationship with xx and her well-being in life.

For xx, sociology clearly allows her to make sense of her own past and identity, while recognizing the beauty in people and the world around her. She was probably the most idealistic Sociology major in the class, but also excelled at using complex ideas like habitus and queer theory to make sense of specific events and experiences. It is impossible to adequately evaluate her intellectual growth as Sociology major without witnessing her daily interactions in the classroom, observing her behavior outside of the classroom, and getting to know her as a human being. Xx greatly contributed to the relaxed and fun atmosphere of our class, while inspiring everyone to appreciate the power of sociological insights. As teacher, I learned at least as much from her as she did from me.

While the topic of xx's project is similar to xx's, her approach and style are unique. Like xx (and unlike xx), xx is always very active and vocal in class, expressing a wide variety of ideas. Her paper shows xx's capacity to use diverse thoughts to understand what is most important in her own life: her relationship with xx (who is now her husband). Although she clearly loves xx deeply, she also uses sociology to express concern about his notion of the American Dream, for example, because she knows how strongly ideology can shape the thinking and actions of individuals. Sociology has been eye-opening to xx, allowing her to see and respond to her social world in new ways. And her enthusiasm contributed not only to her own learning, but also to that of everyone else in the class.

It is impossible for me to describe the depth of xx's insights in her project paper in detail here. For her, taking sociology courses has been a vital part of what ancient Greek philosophers called "care of the self." More than any Sociology major I have encountered during my 13 years at EWU, xx has drawn on sociological ideas to survive painful traumas, reflect on who she was and who she wants to be, and express her thoughts and emotions in powerful and coherent language. Even a grade of 4.0 does not come close to capturing what she has learned and gained as Capstone student. In my view, she personifies what Socrates meant when he said: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Based on my qualitative analysis, I argue that 4 students did excellent work (xx, xx, xx, and xx), 4 did very good work (xx, xx, xx, and xx), and 2 did adequate work (xx and xx). Overall, I am very satisfied with students' performance in the Spring 2016 Capstone in Sociology course, which strongly reflects what Sociology majors have learned during their Sociology courses at EWU. Although there is always room for improvement, I see no reason for dramatic changes in the course.

5. What program changes will be made based on the assessment results?

a) Describe plans to improve student learning based on assessment findings (e.g., course content, course sequencing, curriculum revision, learning environment or student advising).

Although I don't feel that much has to change, I can continue to improve on paying more in-depth attention to key sociological concepts during the course. By making some changes in lesson plans, I can try to indicate how significant and relevant sociological theorizing really is for shaping everyday life and responding to social situations. The Sociology major already pays more attention to theory and critical thinking than most majors, but we can always continue to improve our pedagogical approaches. As for course content, students indicated that they learned a great deal from Whitlock and Bronski's *Considering Hate*, but not as much from the readings in Abercrombie's *Sociology* and Schwartz & Sharpe's *Practical Wisdom*. As usual, I will continue to search for (and experiment with) other books to encourage Capstone students to think deeply about the relevance of the sociological imagination in personal and social life.

b) Provide a broad timeline of how and when identified changes will be addressed in the upcoming year.

I will make necessary changes to the Capstone course in Spring of 2017.

6. Description of revisions to the assessment process the results suggest are needed and an evaluation of the assessment plan/process itself.

Although not the conventional way of doing a program's SLO assessment, I am satisfied that qualitative analysis allows for deeper and more useful insights into the student learning process and possibilities for ongoing pedagogical improvement. I am considering using self-assessment essays by students to improve my evaluation of significant learning in the future. (Since my 2014-2015 program assessment report indicated that no significant changes were required, the follow-up section "Closing the Loop" is not applicable.)