

Department of Sociology-Anthropology: Assessing Senior Seminar Papers

Learning Outcomes

The department has defined a set of learning outcomes for all of our majors. The outcomes are organized into four categories:

- Conceptual Skills
- Methodological Skills
- Applied Skills
- Faith and Learning Skills

(See exhibit 1 for the specific learning outcomes for each category.)

Assessment Strategy

The senior seminar paper, a requirement for all graduating seniors, was intended to be a global reflection of student learning in all four of the skill areas. In order to develop a rubric and benchmarks for student learning we wanted to have a feel for the overall quality of the papers

1. We read 16 papers from the Spring 2005 seminar as the basis for developing a grading rubric.
2. Each department faculty read and evaluated 3-4 papers in light of 3 specific learning standards. We then met as a group to discuss them in order to develop the grading rubric.

Results

Excerpts from two of the papers are provided below with the evaluative comments of faculty related to one learning outcome.

Example 1:
Paper Topic: "Rationalization in Society"

Learning Outcome: Students can write effectively in sociological or anthropological style.

Learning Outcome: Students would understand and be conversant in the main theoretical perspectives in one of the two disciplines, particularly current theoretical models and paradigms.

Excerpt from Paper: "A preliminary distinction between formal and substantive rationalization must be made. Formal rationalization refers to a universal set of principles and laws utilized to achieve an end, while substantive rationality refers to the social and moral values of actions (Ritzer 1999, p. 62). Substantive rationality guides its means to action within the context of social values and conventions. The appeal for guidance is made to morals and traditions. Formal rationality is the type referred to by Weber and other sociologists."

Faculty Comment: "This paper clearly evidences a sophisticated style of sociological writing. It incorporates and critiques aspects of sociological theory, both old and new from Max Weber to George Ritzer. The learning outcome has been admirably achieved. The writing combines excellent and accurate handling of the English language as well as suitable utilization of sub-cultural expression."

Example 2:

Paper Topic: "Domination"

Learning Outcome: Students can write effectively in sociological or anthropological style.

Learning Outcome: Students would have a working knowledge of the foundational concepts of sociology or anthropology

Learning Outcome:

Excerpt from Paper: "Sociologists agree that a stratification is the dominant and subordinate culture; dominant culture is the culture of the most powerful group in society (Andersen, 72; Starbuck; Marx). This culture contains the social groups that have the power to assign others to subordinate culture (Andersen, 318)."

Results, continued

Faculty Comment: This excerpt represents the entire text of the second paragraph of this paper. This paragraph like many others in the essay is undeveloped with little linkage to the text above and below. It is unclear how well the student actually understands the concepts being employed. Not only is the use of language improper --"a stratification"--but also the citation format is incorrect. The paper represents an unacceptable level of writing for a senior sociology major.

Interpretation

- The papers were missing evidence of major skill areas even when the topics naturally lent themselves to such inclusion. In particular we found the lack of methodological and faith and learning skills to be of concern
- The papers were too disparate in content and quality to compare.
- When we collectively developed the seminar course, we believed that we had been clear about what the seminar paper was to accomplish. We found this was not the case.

Response

1. Our original learning skills, developed several years ago, were put in the format of a list. As a result of this assessment process, we have now regrouped them into four skills areas to help students develop a clearer understanding of what was expected of them.
2. We clarified the assignment guidelines that are being used in the Spring 2007 and subsequent seminars. Part of the new guidelines:

All papers regardless of focus or topic must:

- a. have a reference list of at least twenty academic sources;
- b. include a literature review;
- c. demonstrate competence in the use of the applicable concepts;
- d. reflect educated, scholarly use of language;
- e. represent the ability to analyze and critique research related to the topic;
- f. be based upon a theoretically informed, evidence-based argument; utilize the proper citation format of either the American Sociological Association or the American Anthropological Association;
- h. be free of any form of plagiarism;
- i. be well-written and well-organized;
- j. include a mature discussion of the relationship of faith to the topic relevant to the format of the paper.

(See exhibit 2 for the complete description of the assignment guidelines)

3. We developed a grading rubric defining A—superior papers, B—excellent papers, C—good papers, and D-F—unacceptable papers. The descriptors for one criterion are provided below. Please see exhibit 3 for the complete rubric.

	A—Superior Paper	B—Excellent Paper	C—Good Paper	D-F—Unacceptable Paper
Central Problem, research question, or hypothesis	Easily identifiable, plausible, novel, sophisticated, insightful, and clear; the topic is clearly sociological or anthropological in orientation; is approached in a manner that reflects a sociological or anthropological imagination.	Easily identifiable and plausible, but may be less original; the topic is clearly sociological or anthropological in orientation; is approached in a manner that reflects a sociological or anthropological imagination.	Identifiable but may be unclear, (contains some vague terms); appears unoriginal but is worthy of exploration; structure evident but not always clear; topic is related to anthropological and sociological thinking; has grasped some elements of the sociological or anthropological imagination.	Difficult to identify at all, may be bland restatement of obvious points; minimally related to one or more of the disciplines; reflects a minimal understanding of the sociological or anthropological imagination; provides little around which to structure the paper.

4. We developed this benchmark: all seminar papers will meet the criteria of a "good paper." Sixty percent of the papers will meet the superior or excellent criteria.