

Macalester College Sociology Department
Department Assessment Plan, Updated 2013

Departmental Mission Statement

The Sociology Department seeks to advance the mission and learning goals of Macalester College by enabling students to situate events and peoples' lives in the broader contexts that influence them and to understand the development, interplay, and influence of social, cultural, political, and economic forces. Training in sociology cultivates skills graduates use in a variety of civic activities and career paths. We promote a sociological perspective on the world befitting Macalester College by emphasizing the specialized fields in the discipline that have a special relationship to the college's Mission and Statement of Purpose and Belief.

Departmental Learning Goals and Outcomes

A sociological perspective on the world incorporates theoretical and methodological pluralism, constructive critical thinking, and situating people, events, and phenomena in context. These components of the department's curriculum and our associated learning goals contribute to the college's general education goals as well as multiple interdisciplinary courses of studies (both majors and concentrations).

Despite the range of contributions that the department's course offerings make to student learning for both majors and non-majors, the department's course of major study does not require that students meet any of the college's general education goals within the major. In fact, we anticipate that our students will connect their learning in the major with other elements of their Macalester education, including specific facets of the college's learning goals and general education program. Yet, given the myriad ways that the department's offerings serve these broader goals and constituencies, we are unable to further require students to meet these goals as part of their major course of study without unduly restricting a range of diverse, effective pathways through the sociology major. Accordingly, we focus this assessment plan on learning outcomes common to all students pursuing a major in sociology. The following learning goals and outcomes, therefore, do not exhaust the range of ways that the department's pedagogical activities contribute to student learning at Macalester College.

Macalester sociology graduates will be able to draw on diverse perspectives to inform inquiry.

Students will use an appropriate range of academic material to ask questions, develop hypotheses, or craft explanations about a substantive topic relevant to sociological inquiry.

Students will distinguish and compare alternate interpretations to weigh the quality and utility of explanations.

Macalester sociology graduates will be able to evaluate multiple forms of evidence to interpret outcomes, experiences, and events.

Students will assess the strengths and limitations of different forms and sources of evidence.

Based on scientific, pragmatic, and ethical considerations, students will make informed choices about appropriate sources of evidence and appropriate procedures for gathering and handling evidence.

Macalester sociology graduates will be able to integrate evidence and ideas to develop comprehensive accounts of elements of social life.

Students will relate ideas to evidence by using theoretical categories, concepts, or predictions to organize the presentation of empirical findings.

Students will explain the significance of empirical findings by interpreting evidence in light of theoretical ideas and by appraising the correspondence between evidence and theoretical ideas.

Macalester sociology graduates will communicate ideas effectively.

Students will use principles of effective organization and composition to write clearly and in ways that engage their intended audience.

Students will use appropriately crafted and effectively delivered oral presentations to communicate findings and ideas to their intended audience.

Department Assessment Strategies

Students enter the sociology major through a variety of pathways. Similarly, within the diverse methodological approaches, theoretical paradigms, and substantive areas of inquiry, students develop distinct focal areas within the major. Yet, each graduating senior produces a capstone thesis that draws on perspectives from elective courses and skills built in required courses in methods and theory. Accordingly, we have found that the senior thesis provides an illuminating vantage point to assess the department's goals and outcomes in practice. In addition, all full-time members of the department have team-taught the Senior Seminar during recent years, providing a common framework for the assessment activities and interpretation of findings.

We have a number of department assessment strategies, which we briefly describe before indicating which strategies we plan to use to provide insight about department objectives:

Thesis Rubric: We have developed rubrics that we use to evaluate students' draft theses. During some offerings of the Senior Seminar, we use these rubrics to evaluate and provide feedback to students on a first final draft of the thesis.

Peer Feedback: Based on the thesis rubric, we have prepared peer feedback forms that students complete on one or two other theses. These completed feedback forms give information both about the student whose papers is evaluated and the student completing the evaluation.

Portfolio Review: During the Senior Seminar, students complete four main assignments—a research proposal (which may also include a Social Science Institutional Review Board protocol), a preliminary analysis, a first final draft, and a revised final draft. Together, these four assignments comprise a portfolio that we can use for assessment of students' performance and semester-long trajectory.

Embedded Reflective Writing: We pilot-tested in-class reflective writing during the Senior Seminar two years ago as a means to help students develop creative insights and to foster inquisitiveness. As we discussed these exercises, we realized that these embedded reflections can demonstrate students' progress on some of our learning objectives.

Embedded Assessment of Oral Presentations: Students who complete the Senior Seminar present a summary version of their findings during a class session or out-of-class session symposium. In addition, a substantial percentage of students present their research findings at professional meetings (most notably, the annual Midwest Sociological Society annual meetings). We have an oral presentation rubric that we use for these presentations and have also used qualitative insights based on differences faculty members have observed between presentations during the Senior Seminar and professional meetings.

Indirect Instruments: Aside from course evaluations (which we customize for the Senior Seminar), we have developed indirect instruments to get feedback from students to reflect on their own work (e.g., post-conference reflections on their presentations).

Retrospective Surveys: We have used surveys of seniors during the spring semester as a means to assess how students viewed their preparation for the thesis or connected their thesis to previous work in the major.

Exit Interviews: We have used exit interviews—typically in conjunction with one or more other methods—to provide more detailed insight about students' experiences of completing the thesis.

For each outcome, we have identified a number of strategies that could provide useful information. For the sake of brevity, we simply list the strategies that may apply to each outcome here:

1. Students will use an appropriate range of academic material to ask questions, develop hypotheses, or craft explanations about a substantive topic relevant to sociological inquiry.

Peer Review, Embedded Reflective Writing, Thesis, Rubric, Exit Interviews, Portfolio Reviews, Indirect Instruments

2. Students will distinguish and compare alternate interpretations to weigh the quality and utility of explanations.

Portfolio Reviews, Thesis Rubric

3. Students will assess the strengths and limitations of different forms and sources of evidence.

Embedded Reflective Writing, Thesis Rubric, Peer Review, Portfolio Review, Indirect Instruments, Retrospective Surveys

4. Based on scientific, pragmatic, and ethical considerations, students will make informed choices about appropriate sources of evidence and appropriate procedures for gathering and handling evidence.

Portfolio Review, Exit Interview, Retrospective Surveys

5. Students will relate ideas to evidence by using theoretical categories, concepts, or predictions to organize the presentation of empirical findings.

Peer Review, Thesis Rubric, Portfolio Review, Embedded Reflective Writing, Indirect Instruments

6. Students will explain the significance of empirical findings by interpreting evidence in light of theoretical ideas and by appraising the correspondence between evidence and theoretical ideas.

Embedded Reflective Writing, Peer Review, Thesis Rubric, Embedded Assessment of Oral Presentations, Portfolio Review

7. Students will use principles of effective organization and composition to write clearly and in ways that engage their intended audience.

Peer Review, Thesis Rubric, Portfolio Review, Indirect Instruments

8. Students will use appropriately crafted and effectively delivered oral presentations to communicate findings and ideas to their intended audience.

Embedded Assessment of Oral Presentations, Indirect Instruments

Timeline to Implement Strategies

As a four FTE department, we have found that the collection of evidence to assess departmental learning outcomes is the most taxing part of the assessment process. Particularly for assessment of capstone work, given the marginal time commitment required to collect information on a single additional outcome by reading a portfolio or interviewing students is lower than the marginal time commitment of conducting such an assessment for another year, we prefer to cluster assessment activities within a particular year. Accordingly, our assessment timeline has uneven levels of work from year-to-year. Additionally, we often use findings from one round of assessment to inform strategies and questions for subsequent assessments. As a result, we may modify some strategies based on findings. Finally, we also see our assessment activities as a chance for self-reflection on the quality of information we get from the assessment, meaning that we frequently incorporate questions about the strengths and limitations of our assessment data (appropriate in that we have a learning outcome that asks students to do the same).

Calendar Year 2014 (assessing AY 2013-14): We will pilot using embedded reflective writing as an assessment strategy for the four outcomes for which we have identified it as a potentially useful strategy. We may supplement this information with indirect instruments to get feedback from students on the assessment strategy. (Outcomes 1, 3, 5, and 6)

Calendar Year 2015 (assessing AY 2014-15): We will focus on using peer review and portfolio review to cover a larger number of outcomes this year and also attend to the qualities of peer review as an assessment method. (Outcomes 2, 6, and 7)

Calendar Year 2016 (assessing AY 2015-16): We will use a survey, a subset of portfolio reviews, and exit interviews to assess outcome 4 and use embedded assessment of oral presentations and indirect instruments to assess outcome 8.

Calendar Year 2017 (assessing AY 2016-17): Using insights from rubrics and focused portfolio reviews (and possibly other sources), we will assess outcomes 1 and 5.

Depending on circumstances, we may supplement the above activities with additional information (such as a retrospective survey).