

UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES):

Sociology

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September 2015

INTRODUCTION

Research on learning in college shows that learning is profoundly shaped by the goals, practices, cultures, and values of the academic disciplines¹, particularly the disciplinary practices in students' majors. Therefore, if we are to understand the kinds of experiences that students find intellectually rigorous (and, thus, engaging), we need to examine challenge in the major. Understanding challenge in the major is important because at every stage of their college experience, students report that they want to be challenged, that they perform better in courses that are challenging, and that they value classes that stretch their thinking and ask them to demonstrate learning more than they value classes that ask little of them.² Although learning about where students experience challenge is important, asking students to describe challenging learning experiences in their majors requires some prior understanding of how those majors operate. The Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) designed the UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES) to accommodate these needs.

METHOD

Qualitative methods are recommended when researchers are seeking to understand the complex learning experiences of students, as well as the meaning they ascribe to those experiences³; therefore, we designed the UW ACES to be primarily an interview study.⁴ Using a "citizen science" model, OEA asked departmental advisers if they would be willing to volunteer to interview seniors in their departments who came in to advising to apply for graduation. Advisers are knowledgeable about their academic programs, understand disciplinary practice in their departments, and are trusted by students in the major, so they have the best chance of gathering good information from seniors about their experiences in the major.

Sixty-six advisers from 32 undergraduate programs volunteered to participate. During the 2012-13 academic year, the volunteer advisers asked students if they would participate in brief (5-10 minute) interviews about challenge in the major. If the students agreed, advisers asked them to respond to four open-ended questions, entering students' responses directly into a Catalyst survey form that OEA researchers had designed for that purpose. The questions were as follows:

¹ Beecher & Trowler, 2001; Bransford et al., 2000; Beyer et al., 2007; Donald, 2002; Pace and Middendorf, 2004; Wineburg, 2001, 1991; Neumann et al., 2002; Shulman, 1988; Biglan, 1973.

² Beyer, et al., 2007.

³ Merriam, 2001.

⁴ One participating department asked students to respond to the open-ended questions in writing.

1. What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.
2. What made the project/class/activity challenging?
3. What did you do or learn that enabled you to meet those challenges?
4. What do you think you learned by completing this project/class/activity?

In addition, advisers asked students in what course the challenging work took place and how many quarters they had until they graduated.

Researchers in OEA conducted training workshops in interviewing skills with all participating advisers, provided individual departments with survey customization if required, and monitored all resulting interviews, reporting back to advisers about the interviews they had conducted. By the end of the academic year, departmental advisers had interviewed 1,237 students. Students' responses were analyzed using a constant comparison method⁵, an inductive process designed to let themes emerge, rather than imposing assumed categories on students' comments.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

If we interviewed students post-graduation, they would be likely to identify their capstone courses or their advanced senior-level courses as the ones asking for their most challenging work. However, because we wanted to attach the interview to a time when students would normally see their academic advisers, we interviewed students when they came into the advising office to apply for graduation, which often meant that they were two or three quarters away from graduation. Senior-level courses, particularly capstone or capstone-like classes, are those which students often say are their most challenging and satisfying. Although interviewing students as they applied for graduation meant that we might not gather information about late-senior year courses, we felt that it would be interesting to departments to learn the kinds of challenges that lead to and prepare students for those more advanced experiences.

SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENT RESULTS

The Sociology Department was one of the UW ACES' 32 participating departments. Susanna Hansson, Ande Reisman, and Adam Lind asked 34 students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and all but one of them (97%) agreed. The 33 students who were interviewed represented about 10% of the 339 seniors in Sociology who graduated during the 2012-2013 school year.⁶

Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge

Fifteen (46%) of the students interviewed reported having two quarters until graduation. Eight (24%) said they had three quarters remaining; eight were in their final quarter; and two students indicated still having four quarters to go before graduation.

⁵ Merriam, 2001.

⁶ The number of undergraduate degree completions is based on the 2012-13 UW Profiles reports published by the UW Office of Planning and Budgeting (<https://uwprofiles.uw.edu/Viz/View/13-SummaryandTrendsDegreeAttributes>)

Overall, the 33 interviewees listed 17 courses in the Sociology major as presenting them with significant challenges. In addition, one student said “all Sociology courses” and one student cited Physics 115. Students identified four (24%) 200-level courses, nine (53%) 300-level courses, and four (24%) 400-level courses as the sites of their most challenging academic experiences. The course mentioned most frequently was SOC 316: Introduction to Sociological Theory, cited by approximately one-half (48%) of interviewees.

The list of courses in the major, the number of students who identified them (only one if not otherwise noted), and the instructor when noted were as follows:

- SOC 201: Introductory Topics in Sociology (Lee)
- SOC 221: Statistical Concepts and Methods for the Social Sciences (2; Ross & Adolph)
- SOC 270: Social Problems (2; one citing Harris)
- SOC 271: Introduction to the Sociology of Deviance and Social Control (Weis)

- SOC 300: Foundations of Social Inquiry (Pettit)
- SOC 316: Introduction to Sociological Theory (16; 9 citing Pfaff, three citing Kiser, and one each citing Quinn and Wine)
- SOC 351: Intimate Relationships (Schwartz)
- SOC 352: The Family (Dechter)
- SOC 360: Introduction to Social Stratification (Rosenfeld)
- SOC 366: Sociology of Organizations
- SOC 371: Criminology (Matsueda)
- SOC 374: Law and Society
- SOC 376: Drugs and Society (2; both citing Wender)

- SOC 401: Special Topics in Sociology (Lee)
- SOC 494A: Practicum (Fernandes)
- SOC 494B: Practicum (Fernandes)
- SOC 494D: Practicum (Fernandes)

1. Students' Greatest Challenges

Students were asked: “What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by “challenging” I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.” About 46% of the interviewees gave more than one response to this question.

Two clear themes emerged from students’ responses.

A course. Twenty-seven (82%) interviewees stated that a course or courses had presented them with their most challenging work in the major. Of those students who cited a course, two out of three indicated that it was the writing required in the course that made it particularly challenging and seven of those students specifically mentioned the writing required for SOC 316: Sociological Theory. Students who said that both a course and the writing in it presented them with their greatest challenges were coded twice, as the theme that follows this one indicates. The following quotations illustrate this category of response—students who responded that a whole course presented them with their greatest challenges:

- *I think it's the classes themselves. All of them are very interesting and relatable to my daily life. Sometimes I don't think about those things, but with the sociology classes I have a better understanding of why things are the way they are and how to relate that to my life. I started to fall in love with Sociology. It's interesting.*
- *The theory class was most challenging, it stressed me out. I think it was pretty hard. The PowerPoints and lectures were so wordy it was hard to memorize them.*
- *Actually the class I'm taking now, SOC 316: Sociological Theory has been the most challenging. That's really the only class I've had challenges in because we've been writing papers every two weeks. We will write these papers before the subject is fully talked about in lecture so we have to write them on our own.*
- *I'd have to say my sociological theory class was my greatest challenge. I wrote two papers and it really made me just think more outside the box and really concentrate on my Sociology. That was a big challenge, but it was good.*
- *In SOC 316 we had to write three papers analyzing the theories of various theorists and analyze them to see how well they explained whatever phenomena they were trying to. That was very good and difficult. We'd write the paper and the professor would lecture on it the day after we wrote the paper, so it was interesting to see what they said and what I got from it.*

A paper/writing in the major. Twenty-three (70%) of the interviewees said that a paper or, more generally, writing in the major, presented them with their most significant challenges. Eighteen of these students also identified a course as presenting them with their greatest challenges. In the words of four students identifying writing as their greatest challenge in the major:

- *Definitely, it would have to be the papers just because it is hard to try to draw from all the different sources and make sure that every source contributes to the point I'm trying to make. Just research papers in general are a challenge. This is good though. It's a skill you need to learn.*
- *The theory paper sounds like it's going to really stretch my thought process. I want to do it on leadership and I don't even know where to begin.*
- *I think the most challenging but the aspect I also enjoyed the most was my research paper on the homelessness of African Americans in Seattle. We had to apply a theory, and I chose the structural theory. It is not something I'm used to in Political Science, so it took me a while to choose which theory to write on. I took big steps and read articles and essays before I finalized the paper. The paper did change my perspective on the issue, and now I try and think more before I make judgements on issues.*
- *It would probably be a paper that I wrote for Sociology of Law. It just took a lot of different research and over the quarter I had to compile a bunch of things. It was difficult and time consuming.*

In addition, three students each mentioned the following challenging aspects of the Sociology major:

- Applying sociological concepts to the workplace
- Exams

- Commuting from outside of Seattle

2. What Made Those Activities/Classes Challenging?

When asked what had made those activities challenging, 22 (79%⁷) of the interviewees identified a single challenge. There were several minor themes from students' responses to this question and numerous individual responses.

Weighing multiple perspectives/thinking critically. Nine (32%) interviewees explained that the activities were challenging because they required them to set aside their own perspectives and think about everyday issues from a variety of different sociological perspectives. In the words of four students:

- *It was a challenge to think about theories from different perspectives rather than your own.*
- *The course challenged me to rethink why my family parented the way they did.*
- *It is really interesting to integrate the theories with real life to gain an understanding of what happened and how to prevent it from ever happening again.*
- *The topic we had to write about was applying Marxist theory to a book we read and saying whether we agreed with it or not, but the two things seemed really different, so it was hard to make a connection.*

Aspects of required papers. Six (21%) of the interviewees noted that aspects of the papers required in the major were challenging including the number of papers, the length required, and the amount of time and effort required to write them. For example:

- *The number of them was the challenge. There were a bunch, like five or something, and I hadn't written papers like that before.*
- *I just had to think about the paper all quarter. It was due at the end, so I had to think about it and compile things throughout the whole quarter and remember and figure out how to put it all together.*
- *It was challenging because it takes me longer to do the essays.*
- *[The paper] was challenging because it is not something where you can just read a book and do a little bit of analysis. You really have to think above and beyond.*

Sociological theory is difficult to understand. Another five (18%) interviewees explained that the activities were difficult because they required a strong understanding of sociological theory, a complex subject requiring a lot of time and effort to master. In the words of three students:

- *I think just the topic. It was pretty intellectual. We had to take a lot of what we were learning and come up with a thesis and get our point across and be effective.*
- *Deciding on different theories was difficult because they all make sense in some way or another.*
- *You had to have a pretty in depth or solid foundation of Sociology. I don't know, those classes, he really forced you to think outside the box*

⁷ Five participants did not offer a response to this question (n=28).

Amount of reading/class tried to cover too much. Four (14%) interviewees mentioned that sometimes the class tried to cover too much material and or/assigned a lot of difficult reading. Some examples of this category of responses include:

- *The class time was very short and I feel like it was more about the material we had to cover than what we were learning.*
- *I think the reading content was very long. There was a lot to synthesize and then some of them were written a long time ago so I didn't really understand the words and phrases.*
- *I guess because we had to incorporate the majority of the readings' 400 pages. I was focusing more on the logistics of the reading rather than the content of the presentation. At the end of the semester, I was done with everything so it was hard to get it all done.*

Other. Three interviewees gave the following responses in answer to the question of what was difficult about the courses or activities they described as their most challenging in the major:

Writing about concepts/theorists that had yet to be covered in class. (3) *Mostly the structure of the way the class was designed. If we had just broken down the readings and talked about them ahead of time but I had to do it myself and then write the paper and you don't know if you're doing it right. I understand that you read prior to classes, but to write prior to class, that's hard.*

Finally, individual students gave the following responses:

- *The fact that it's not as structured as other classes (316 SOC).*
- *Physics was hard because I didn't understand the concepts. No, it was all aspects of Physics.*
- *I don't like to think about problems in a mathematical way. I would rather rationalize it through human interaction or a brain function, not a math or science answer with mathematical terms.*

3. What enabled students to meet those challenges?

The majority (84%) of interviewees identified a single source of help for meeting the challenges they described. Overall, students' responses yielded two major themes and one minor theme.

My own efforts. Twenty-three (72%⁸) of the interviewees explained that their ability to meet the challenges posed by the Sociology major were a result of their own efforts. Students explained that they put in the time and effort required to succeed including completing the readings, paying attention in lectures, refining their time management skills, and using strategies when studying. Some students reported that they went above and beyond their typical efforts by completing additional independent research, redoing assignments, and pulling "all-nighters" and others noted that they took the initiative to seek out or ask for help from TAs and others. As seven of the interviewees explained:

- *I just worked really hard on it and focused on what I needed to say to get a good grade.*

⁸ One participant did not answer this question (n=32).

- *When I took notes on the material, I made my brain connect the theory and the theorist in the broadest way I could remember, so when I had the exam I could recognize this so I could pass it.*
- *By reading other ethnographic work and actually repeating the assignment on my own time I learned how to better get an objective take on the people around me.*
- *I definitely used the library system, and I learned how everything relates to one another.*
- *Time management has been different and I practiced writing essays before the test.*
- *I remember after failing the first time I scheduled a bunch of meetings at the writing center and that helped me a lot. I met with my TAs a lot more than the first time and that helped a lot too. I think we have the best writing center.*
- *I think I made lots of appointments with the TA, I spoke with her, and emailed her several times too and worked things out. I didn't really get to see the professor because he was so busy but the TA, she was really helpful.*

Looking at things from different perspectives/thinking critically. Twenty-two percent of the interviewees said that they had met the challenges in the major by learning how to think critically. More specifically, they explained that the sociological perspective taught them to view everyday concepts and occurrences from a variety of perspectives. For example:

- *I learned to approach it with a different type of thinking. Essentially, it is thinking outside the box.*
- *I just learned how to analyze theories and work through certain processes to do so.*
- *It wasn't just something I completed over one night. I really had to think about it. I tried to gain new perspectives about what I learned in class or from outside sources.*
- *I learned that I have more to say than I previously thought aside from just the material that we were supposed to learn. I learned to be confident and learned to think critically and creatively.*

Working with peers/group work. Four (16%) interviewees commented that the opportunity to work with peers was instrumental in helping them to meet the challenges they encountered in the major. In the words of two of these students:

- *I try to pair up with people in my class to get different perspectives and understandings from one another. It helps to have that support.*
- *In meeting the challenges, it was really helpful to be able to work with a partner.*

Individual students noted the following as helpful:

- Using Sparknotes to better understand classic works
- Life experience
- Dropping the class

4. What did students learn by completing this project/class/activity?

We asked students what they felt they had learned by meeting the challenges they had described, and about 19%⁹ of the interviewees mentioned more than one lesson learned. Two strong and two minor themes emerged from their responses.

Developed critical thinking skills. Thirteen (41%) interviewees explained that, as a result of their experience, they developed stronger critical thinking skills, such as the ability to entertain and weigh multiple perspectives and, more generally, approach everyday life with a more analytical mindset. Three of the ten participants specifically cited the phrase “exoticizing the familiar” as their approach. In the words of six students:

- *It kind of gives me a new perspective on everyday life, I can bring what I'm learning to my everyday life and it's interesting in that sense. I've developed my critical thinking skills for sure, more than I did in the beginning of my college career.*
- *I learned that everyone has different views.*
- *There's a lot that I learned. When thinking about society, you can't think about things that are just on the surface level, but you have to think above and beyond and think about what causes what. The professor uses the term “exoticizing the familiar.” It is like being a tourist to where you're comfortable, exploring every little crevice.*
- *I definitely think those classes are life changing. It definitely taught me to be a critical thinker. He was a big proponent of “exoticizing the familiar.” So in my every day experiences, it has taught me to have a more critical eye.*
- *I learned to think more critically, I feel like everyone says that, but I have a better critical eye now.*
- *I learned how to pull important aspects of what we are supposed to learn, rather than the more opinionated stuff.*

Specific content knowledge. A second strong theme in response to this question, noted by one-quarter of participants, was that students had learned specific content knowledge in the process of meeting the challenges described. For example:

- *I learned a lot of philosophy and economics. It was one of the more challenging classes for me but I got through it. Happy about that!*
- *I learned that Marx's theories are totally wrong and don't apply to today because he predicted the proletariat would overthrow the bourgeoisie and that's not what's happening right now.*
- *Just the fundamentals of sociology, theoretically speaking.*
- *It gave me a broader sense of sociology, the historical view.*

Enhanced writing/communication skills. Five (16%) interviewees reported that their writing skills had improved as a result of the challenges posed by the major. The following examples illustrate this category of response:

⁹ One interviewee did not answer this question (n = 32)

- *I learned how to communicate my ideas effectively.*
- *I learned to write essays, especially the theory essays.*
- *I think I learned to be a better writer.*
- *I learned how to compose a pretty good research paper and being able to draw from different sources and create my ideas from that.*

Gained study skills. Four (13%) interviewees commented that their study skills had improved after meeting the challenges in the major. Specifically, they learned to put in more time and effort and manage their time more effectively. In the words of two students:

- *I learned how to manage time and be more prepared. Since this class was a lot harder than other classes, I learned that you have to be prepared and do more for good grades.*
- *I learned time management skills.*

Other. Two students said that they had learned the following:

***The importance of seeking out help from the TA's/professors (2);** I learned to contact your TAs and professors earlier. When I am struggling I tend to think it's my fault. Talking to them right after the midterm instead of before the final is better. Often TAs are a lot more understanding than you think they might be. The biggest thing I've learned is that if you have a problem and don't tell anyone about it, no one can help you.*

In addition, single individuals said that they had learned the following by completing the challenges they had described:

- Not to take physics in the future
- How to do better qualitative research
- Sociology uses a scientific approach

SUMMARY

A dominant theme that surfaced from students' challenging work in the major was their newfound ability to approach social life with a more analytical mindset. More precisely, using their understanding of sociological theory, students described moving beyond a reliance upon personal opinion to an informed evaluation of social life.

The great majority of participants cited a course in the major as the most challenging work with two-thirds of those participants commenting that it was the writing in the course that made it most challenging. Moreover, several of these students noted that the writing required for Sociological Theory (Sociology 316) was the most demanding aspect of the major thus far. As one student explained:

I'd have to say my sociological theory class was my greatest challenge. I wrote two papers and it really made me just think more outside the box and really concentrate on my sociology. That was a big challenge, but it was good.

Students explained that the classes and writing were challenging because they required them to set aside their preconceived notions and, instead, apply a wide variety of sociological perspectives to

everyday issues. Students commented that sociological theory is complex and noted that it requires a high level of dedication to master. Regarding the complexity, one student said:

I think just the topic, it was pretty intellectual. We had to take a lot of what we were learning and come up with a thesis and get your point across and be effective.

In addition, students mentioned aspects of the papers that made them difficult including the number, length, and the amount of time required to write them, along with the critical thinking required.

When asked what they did or learned that enabled them to meet the challenges discussed above, students most commonly cited their own efforts which included completing the required readings, paying attention in class, managing their time effectively and using new strategies for studying. Students also often noted that they went above and beyond their typical commitment, explaining that they completed additional research, did assignments more than once and pulled “all-nighters.”

A sizeable percentage of students noted that they received help from faculty, TA’s, and the writing center in order to meet the challenges in the major. Students also explained that learning to look at things from multiple perspectives as well as working with peers helped them to meet the challenges in the major.

When asked what they learned as they met the challenges discussed above, students were most likely to report that they had developed strong critical thinking skills, explaining that they now approach everyday life with a more analytical mindset. Several students, including the following, mentioned that the experience had a particularly strong impact on their thinking:

I definitely think those classes are life changing. It definitely taught me to be a critical thinker. He was a big proponent of exoticizing the familiar. So in my every day experiences it has taught me to have a more critical eye.

Furthermore, students explained that they gained content knowledge and enhanced their writing and communication skills as a result of meeting the challenges posed by the major.

In sum, students’ responses broadly reflect the learning goals put forth by the Sociology major including an understanding of the sociological perspective, the analytical skills to needed to apply the sociological perspective to everyday life, and evaluate sociological arguments. Moreover, it is clear from students’ responses that they improved their communication skills, particularly written communication.

Finally, students’ responses to the UW ACES interview questions Sociology majors viewed the challenges they described as rewarding. These responses to challenge are consistent with research on student learning, which shows that when an assignment is challenging for students and when instructors help students meet those challenges, students are engaged in their courses and, therefore, learn more than when coursework is easy.

Two Students' Responses to All Four Questions

Course where greatest challenges occurred: SOC 316: Sociological Theory

Q1. What was the most challenging work you did? *Actually the class I'm taking now, SOC 316: Sociological Theory has been the most challenging. That's really the only class I've had challenges in because we've been writing papers every two weeks. We will write these papers before the subject is fully talked about in lecture so we have to write them on our own.*

Q2. Why was it challenging? *Basically like I was saying, just writing papers before the subject is fully talked about. There are different theorists we aren't done talking about. Kind of like a different perspective, different than what I'm used to I guess.*

Q3. What helped you meet that challenge? *I do a lot of research on my own. I try to pair up with people in my class to get different perspectives and understandings from one another--it helps to have that support. Also, just making sure I have enough time set aside to get these papers done, good self-management.*

Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge? *It kind of gives me a new perspective on everyday life, I can bring what I'm learning to my everyday life and it's interesting in that sense. I've developed my critical thinking skills for sure, more than I did in the beginning of my college career.*

Course where greatest challenges occurred: SOC 316: Sociological Theory

Q1. What was the most challenging work you did? *I'd have to say my sociological theory class was my greatest challenge. I wrote two papers and it really made me just think more outside the box and really concentrate on my sociology. That was a big challenge, but it was good.*

Q2. Why was it challenging? *I think just the topic. It was pretty intellectual. We had to take a lot of what we were learning and come up with a thesis and get our point across and be effective.*

Q3. What helped you meet that challenge? *I just worked really hard on it and focused on what I needed to say to get a good grade.*

Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge? *I learned a lot of philosophy and economics. It was one of the more challenging classes for me but I got through it. Happy about that!*

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