

# **Sociology and General Education**

2007

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## Executive Summary

The Task Force on Sociology and General Education was established by the ASA governing Council to develop models and rationales for the various ways in which sociology courses contribute to general education requirements and liberal arts skills. The ASA Council asked the Task Force to focus on six specific content areas, including multicultural education/diversity, international/global issues, quantitative literacy, writing-intensive experiences, introductory first year survey courses, and interdisciplinary freshman seminars.

In accepting the spirit of this charge, the Task Force centered its work on two inter-related questions. First, how might sociology courses effectively contribute to general education learning requirements? Second, how might sociology most effectively utilize general education requirements in the development of its majors? The Task Force illustrates promising practices where sociology courses have creatively met or extend general education requirements within higher educational contexts.

A challenge of higher education is to engage students actively in continued intellectual development. The problems of today are not likely to be the same problems that will confront these students and their societies in the future. While the content of a curriculum will most certainly change, the process of learning is likely to remain central to the mission of higher education. Toward this end, sociology contributes to students' learning outcomes in several fundamental areas, including quantitative literacy, knowledge of society, multiculturalism and diversity, global awareness, critical thinking, civic engagement, communication, moral reasoning, and collaborative work.

Sociology can contribute to important areas of student learning. But we can and must do more to advance student learning. As a result of our work, we now know that sociology, while acknowledging the importance of these learning outcomes through reports such as *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major*, has not assessed students' performance in these areas either systematically or comprehensively. Much work remains to be completed in the areas of curriculum development and assessment of student outcomes in ways that attend to the relationship between sociology and general education. We offer six recommendations, which build upon the preceding and ground breaking efforts of earlier ASA Task Forces.

*Sociology departments<sup>1</sup> should:*

Recommendation 1: Participate in building a consensus on general educational goals, definitions, and what it is that undergraduates should learn in the general education curriculum, taking into account the institutional mission, type, size, and student characteristics.

Recommendation 2: Emphasize with examples the discipline's important contributions to desired student learning outcomes.

Recommendation 3: Develop curricula within the department and in the general education curriculum around a set of collaboratively designed, well-articulated learning outcomes.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that the requirements of the major are mapped to general education learning outcomes and explicitly conveyed to students in order to strengthen their foundational knowledge within a study-in-depth experience.

Recommendation 5: Collect and analyze systematically assessment data and communicate these results to faculty, students, and appropriate publics to ensure that student performance is consistent with the general education learning goals.

Recommendation 6: Share accomplishments in general education with the community of sociologists, at professional meetings, on the ASA website, and in publications appearing in scholarly work on teaching and learning.

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<sup>1</sup> This report centers on sociology departments, which have responsibility for courses and curricula. Sociology can be housed in joint or interdisciplinary departments or programs in many variations, of course. And some campuses have only one sociologist. Whatever the configuration of sociology on the campus, the spirit of these recommendations should be relevant.

## Table of Contents

	<i>Description</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. Introduction		
A. General Education		5
B. The Sociology Major		7
II. Educational Contexts		8
A. Higher Educational Trends		8
B. Accreditation Associations		10
C. State Articulation Agreements		12
D. Institutional Missions		15
III. Contributions of Sociology to General Education		15
A. Content and Contexts		15
1. Sociology as Habits of the Mind		15
2. Sociology and General Education		17
B. Learning Outcomes		18
1. Quantitative Literacy		19
2. Knowledge of Society		20
3. Multiculturalism/Diversity Awareness and Understanding		21
4. Global Awareness and Understanding		22
5. Critical Thinking		25
6. Civic Engagement		26
7. Communication		27
8. Moral Reasoning		28
9. Collaboration and Teamwork		29
IV. Contributions of General Education to the Sociology Major		29
V. Assessing the Effectiveness of General Education Learning Outcomes		35
A. Assessment of General Education Learning Outcomes		36
1. Quantitative Literacy		36
2. Knowledge of Society		37
3. Multiculturalism/Diversity Awareness and Understanding		38
4. Global Awareness and Understanding		38
5. Critical Thinking		39
6. Civic Engagement		39
7. Communication		40
8. Moral Reasoning		41
9. Collaboration and Teamwork		41
B. Assessing General Education’s Contribution to Sociology Majors		42
1. General Education Learning Outcomes Beneficial to Sociology		42
2. The Role of Introductory Sociology		43
3. Articulating General Education Assessment Between Institutions		43

VI. The Means to Realize these Contributions	44
VII. Opportunities and Challenges for Sociology in General Education	45
VIII. Collaboration to Strengthen General Education in Sociology	46
IX. Recommendations	47
X. Some Considerations in Implementing the Recommendations on Your Campus	48

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Linking general education to an undergraduate major requires that each be clearly understood. While a major is commonly viewed as a study-in-depth of a particular field, general education courses aim at breadth and foundational exposure. In some cases, general education is defined as a set of core competencies that all students must acquire as a foundation for future learning. In many colleges and universities, students select courses from subject-area clusters, with the assumption that this approach will provide intellectual breadth and exposure to many disciplines, from which a selection of a major can be made.

Recently, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) developed the perspective that the general education component of undergraduate study is critical in preparing students for challenges that will confront them throughout their lives. This perspective parallels that promoted by the ASA Task Force on the Undergraduate Major (McKinney and Associates 2004). Toward this end, the general education curriculum ought to expose students to multiple disciplines and develop in them the intellectual capacities and skills that provide a foundation for engaging these future challenges.

### **A. General Education**

The AAC&U (2002:25) defines general education as “the part of a liberal education curriculum shared by all students.” Liberal education exposes students to an educational process that develops in them the ability and confidence to pursue self-directed learning. In this regard, general education becomes a practical education because it develops in students’ tacit knowledge and capacities, including the analytical and communication skills, practical intelligence, ethical judgment, social responsibility and civic engagement needed by every citizen.

This definition of general education is noteworthy because it establishes the parameters of education based on educational outcomes rather than content (AAC & U 2005). Students, as self-directed learners, are informed by knowledge and methods of inquiry about the natural and social worlds; they are empowered through the mastery of intellectual capacities and practical skills; and they are responsible for their personal actions and civic values (AAC&U 2002). In this regard, the AAC&U (2002) is less inclined to define content than domains, recognizing that faculty, as a community of scholars within their respective institutions, must define the mechanisms through which their students achieve these desired outcomes. This strategy has also been promoted concurrently by the regional accreditation associations that comprise the Commission on Higher Educational Accreditation (CHEA) in the United States.

To illustrate, the AAC&U (2002, pp. 22-24) offers operational definitions of these domains for the development of informed, empowered, and responsible learners. These examples are reprinted here because of their central importance to our Task Force’s purposeful focus on general education and the sociology major.

#### Informed Learners:

- explore the human imagination, expression, and the products of many cultures
- study interrelations within and among global and cross-cultural communities
- model aspects of the natural, social, and technical worlds
- understand the values and histories underlying democracy

#### Empowered Learners:

- communicate in diverse settings and groups, using written, oral, and visual means, and in more than one language
- understand and employ both quantitative and qualitative analysis to describe and solve problems
- interpret, evaluate, and use information discerningly from a variety of sources
- integrate knowledge of various types and understand complex systems
- resolve difficult issues creatively by employing multiple systems and tools
- derive meaning from experience, as well as gathering information from observation
- transform information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment and action
- demonstrate intellectual agility and managing change
- work well in teams, including those of diverse composition, to build consensus

#### Responsible Learners:

- foster intellectual honesty and engagement in continued learning
- demonstrate responsibility for society's moral health and social justice
- actively participate as a citizen of a diverse democracy
- maintain respect for and the appropriate use of intuition and feeling
- discern the consequences, including ethical consequences, of decisions and actions
- demonstrate an understanding of one's self and one's multiple identities that connect habits of mind, heart, and body
- respect the complex identities of others, their histories, and their cultures

The challenge for any institution of higher education is to integrate these foci into a coherent general education program that contributes to and is supported by the study-in-depth programs of a major (AAC&U 2004:iv; McKinney et al. 2004). Implicit in this perspective is the view that student learning is transformational with demonstrable value added by the institution through the general education and majors programs respectively (Mezirow and Associates 2000). Students' growth in these domains occurs through cycles of learning that transform the whole person over time through structured experiences (Kegan 1982); the intellectual capacities developed through an integrated liberal education program appear to be foundational to growth in other domains (Mentkowski and Associates, 2000). This finding is consonant with the view that liberal learning transforms frames of reference through the critical reflection of assumptions (one's own and those of others) and social contexts (Mezirow and Associates, 2000; Kegan, 1982; AAC & U 2007).

## **B. The Sociology Major**

Sociology majors experience relatively little required study-in-depth in their undergraduate programs. In a recent study on the sociology major, Berheide (2005) reports that the organization of the sociology curriculum at present often begins with a required introductory course followed by a loose configuration of required and elective courses. For example, of the sociology departments surveyed by the ASA in 2000-2001, the median number of methods, statistics, and theory courses required respectively in the major was one each (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2003:18). According to Kain (1999), approximately 90 percent of the sociology departments he examined require at least one methods course while 81 percent require exactly one such course; 50 percent of the departments require at least one statistics course. Moreover, Kain reports that only 20 percent of these departments required a capstone course. Few departments advance clear, measurable goals for the major (Wagenaar 1991).

These findings prompted the ASA Task Force on the Undergraduate Major (McKinney et al. 2004) to recommend that sociology departments require coursework in introductory sociology, theory, methods, and statistics, along with a capstone course. Additionally, the Task Force recommended that departments structure their sociology curricula of required courses and substantive electives around four hierarchically nested and integrated levels of study. Illustratively, students begin with an introductory course, proceed to the required courses in methods, statistics, and theory, incorporate substantive electives, and conclude their major with a capstone experience. The report emphasizes the importance of sequenced courses that provide repeated and developmental exposure to key sociological ideas.

Given this curricular structure, what intellectual capacities and skills are students likely to develop in a sociology major? Sociology departments appear to maintain less consensus on this issue than is apparent from a review of the curriculum. For example, based on a survey of 301 sociologists, Wagenaar (2004:9) reported that respondents believed a sociology curriculum ought to center on critical thinking, cultivating a sociological imagination, analytical skills, and stratification, though no more than ten percent of those surveyed agreed on any one of these areas. Thus, anything advanced on the relative contributions of a sociology major are partially confounded by a general lack of consensus on what a sociology major ought to produce (Keith and Ender 2004). That said, the ASA Task Force on Assessing the Undergraduate Sociology Major (ASA 2005:57-71) provided a template for assessing student learning outcomes based on the goals provided in the report by the ASA Task Force on the Undergraduate Major (McKinney et al. 2004). Learning outcomes endorsed by the ASA include:

### **Discipline Specific Knowledge:**

- demonstrate an understanding of the discipline of sociology and its role in contributing to our understanding of social reality
- demonstrate the role of theory in sociology
- converse on two or more specialty areas within the discipline

### Intellectual Skills:

- demonstrate the role of evidence and of quantitative and qualitative methods
- use computers for purposes of data analysis and information retrieval
- write in an appropriate style for conveying findings of research

### Intellectual Capacities:

- identify and apply the principles of ethical disciplinary practice
- articulate an understanding of how culture and social structure operate
- articulate the reciprocal relationship between individuals and society
- articulate distinctions between macro and micro levels of analysis
- articulate the internal diversity in the United States and its place in the international context
- demonstrate critical thinking
- develop personal values

## SECTION II: EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

Sociologists confronting their role in general education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will discover that there is a complex, changing social and institutional context within which they must work. Consequently, and not surprisingly, considerable diversity persists in the structure and content of general education curricula. Among the factors influencing the ways in which institutions organize their general education curricula are the influences of higher educational trends and discourse, regional accreditation association guidelines, specific institutional missions, and state legislative articulation agreements. In this section, we review these factors and identify some of the issues sociologists may need to consider in making a case for sociology's contributions to general education within the confines of their respective institutions.

### A. Higher Educational Trends

Traditional approaches to general education typically take one of two forms: a) a distribution requirement, in which students are required to complete courses from a variety of disciplines to counter the narrowness of the major; or b) a prescribed curriculum that requires students to complete a common set of courses. Most colleges and universities developed requirements that lean in one of these two directions—although many have elements of both—and combine them with skill requirements in areas such as writing and mathematics. General education is normally understood to be something that either precedes or parallels course requirements for the major.

During the past two decades, the focus of general education has shifted away from content knowledge alone to lifelong learning outcomes, or those capacities faculty desire in a college-educated person. Clearly no individual could master or keep up with the knowledge explosion; thus the liberally educated person “learns to learn,” how to retrieve, assess, and apply knowledge. One proponent of this perspective—the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U 2002)—has influenced discussions of general education through their publication of *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*. As the report's title makes clear,

a college education ought to be integrated, connected, and coherent, organized around a set of learning outcomes that develop in students a capacity to be informed, empowered, responsible, self-directed learners. Reforming general education is central to this project. Liberal education exposes students to an educational process that develops in them the ability and confidence to pursue self-directed learning, helping them to become informed, empowered, and responsible individuals. In this regard, general education is a practical education because it develops in students the capacities needed by every citizen, including analytical and communication skills, practical intelligence, ethical judgment, and social responsibility (Brint et al. 2005). Accordingly, students are informed by knowledge and methods of inquiry about the natural and social worlds; they are empowered through the mastery of intellectual capacities and practical skills; and they are responsible for their personal actions and civic values.

The ASA, through its publication, *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major Updated*, has made a similar case. Accordingly, McKinney et al. (2004) called for integrated study-in-depth experience, which underscores the centrality of social inequality in society. They argue for a major that has coherence and depth, which infuses the empirical base of the discipline throughout the program. In effect, the ASA calls for sociology to develop in students the capacities and skills underscored by promising practices in higher education.

An assessment of student learning ought to include demonstrable evidence of students ability to communicate, think critically and creatively, reason analytically and quantitatively, gather and secure information, engage in teamwork, and problem-solve (ASA 2005). This awareness ought to empower students with the confidence and capacity to anticipate and respond effectively to the challenges that will confront them throughout their lives, adapting their knowledge and skills to new contexts and challenges. Moreover, liberal education ought to imbue in students civic responsibility, ethical reasoning, and a foundation for lifelong learning.

Similarly, others have argued for an emphasis on engaged student learning as a basis for retention and success in college. For example, Upcraft, Gardner and Associates (1989) demonstrated the importance of a comprehensive approach in students' first-year to enhance their collegiate success. This goal requires a clear definition and direction for liberal education, a commitment to the incorporation of opportunities and support mechanisms, and a continual assessment of students' progress toward these ends. In many respects, this focus underscores Tinto's (1987) findings that integration and involvement among new students are the critical factors in their retention and educational development. Similarly, Kuh (2005) emphasizes the importance of holistic student engagement within collegiate environments. His work with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is one example of efforts to identify institutional benchmarks and problems with student engagement. Mentkowski and Associates (2000) emphasize the integration of learning through a focus on the design, development, and assessment of the curriculum. They argue that the assessment of student performance informs faculty and administrators on the extent to which their

students develop according to the established learning outcomes, providing opportunities for reflection, refinement, and the continual evolution of their curriculum.

Another resource is the American Library Association (ALA)'s work on information literacy standards for sociology students. The Anthropology and Sociology Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries has guidelines that speak to general education goals of information retrieval, evaluation, and application. The guidelines also emphasize professional ethics (e.g., avoiding plagiarism, properly citing the work of others). These guidelines, available on the ASA website, provide additional language and support for sociology courses' contributions to general education goals.

All of these approaches underscore the view that general education must be more than an introduction to a wide variety of subjects or a mechanism through which students are weeded out of or directed toward specific majors. Each of these approaches highlights the centrality of general education to a liberal education, which involves the interplay between the breadth and depth components of a curriculum. General education supports and strengthens the major, which in turn, reinforces the learning outcomes explicitly defined as liberal education. General education is not confined to the first or second year of a student's academic experience and should not be thought of as the courses "to get out of the way" before getting to the subjects of interest!

## **B. Accreditation Associations**

Another important set of institutions shaping contemporary discussions of general education is the regional accreditation associations. There are six regional accreditation associations, each an independent body of higher educational institutions that are managed by commissions whose representatives are drawn from among the member institutions. These associations are loosely coupled through the Commission on Higher Educational Accreditation (CHEA). Each accrediting body has developed a set of guidelines for general education that independently structures institutional evaluations of member institutions' general education programs. Table 1 below summarizes the curricular guidelines developed by each of the regional accrediting bodies on learning outcomes.

Table 1: General Education Requirements by Accreditation Region

Required Learning Outcomes in General Education Programs	Higher Education Accreditation Association Region					
	Middle States (MSCHE) <sup>2</sup>	Northeast (NEASC) <sup>3</sup>	North Central (NCA) <sup>4</sup>	Northwest (NWCCU) <sup>5</sup>	Southern (SACS) <sup>6</sup>	Western (WASC) <sup>7</sup>
Communication	X	X	X	X		X
Quantitative Reasoning	X	X	X	X		X
Scientific Reasoning	X	X	X			X
Information Technology	X	X				
Information Literacy						X
Critical Thinking	X	X				X
Logical Reasoning	X	X				X
Ethical Reasoning		X				
Continued Intellectual Development		X				X
Creativity			X			
Historical Awareness		X				
Social/Cultural Awareness		X	X	X		X
Multicultural/Global Awareness			X			
Diversity			X			
Teamwork						X

Two things are worth noting about these guidelines. First, while there is an emphasis on general education across the regional associations, no two are identical. This observation may reflect the fact that the guidelines were developed independently as

<sup>2</sup> Middle States Commission on Higher Education. 2006. *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation*. Philadelphia, PA: Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

<sup>3</sup> New England Association of Schools and Colleges. 2005. *Standards for Accreditation*. Bedford, MA: New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

<sup>4</sup> North Central Association Higher Learning Commission. 2003. *Handbook of Accreditation*. Chicago, IL: North Central Association Higher Learning Commission.

<sup>5</sup> Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. 2003. *Accreditation Handbook*. Redmond, WA: Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

<sup>6</sup> Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. 2004. *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*. Decatur, GA: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. SACS requires that all institutions within the region “identify college-level competencies within the general education core and provide evidence that graduates have attained those competencies (Principles of Accreditation, 2001:24, standard 3.5.1),” but does not define for institutions within its region the required elements of general education.

<sup>7</sup> Western Association of Schools and Colleges. 2001. *Handbook of Accreditation*. Alameda, CA: Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

well as in conjunction with CHEA and groups such as the AAC&U. The one notable exception to this rule is the observation that SACS requires all institutions within its region to “identify college-level competencies within the general education core and provide evidence that graduates have attained those competencies” (Principles of Accreditation, 2001:24, standard 3.5.1).” In effect, SACS appears to defer to institutions the definition of general education but places the onus of assessed outcome on the institution. The other regional accrediting associations are more explicit in articulating a definition of general education, which presumably cuts across higher educational environments. Otherwise, one is struck by the degree to which the various frameworks embody common elements and reflect also the general movement away from traditional requirements based on disciplinary content areas. Second, while these frameworks are intended to serve as guidelines for institutions, they are very broad and leave colleges and universities with considerable latitude to develop their own individual response to them.

### **C. State Articulation Agreements**

Higher educational opportunities vary also by the organization of their respective state educational systems. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the articulation arrangements between two and four-year schools. Articulation essentially represents an agreed upon transfer of credits or courses between higher educational institutions. For example, students may complete some number of courses at one school and are permitted to apply these courses and corresponding credit hours toward the completion of a degree at another school. The types and degree of articulation agreements established for the purpose of transferring students across institutions reveal considerable variation across the states. Some states legislate explicit agreements, which mandate detailed articulation agreements while others legislate intent without the benefit of any detail. Other states maintain articulation agreements within state higher education systems (e.g., multiple campuses within a university system) but not beyond the specified system. Still other states say little about articulation, leaving it up to institutions to forge their own agreements among one another.

The ASA Task Force on the Articulation of Sociology in Two-Year and Four-Year Sociology Programs (Zingraff et al. 2001) identified the presence of three types of articulation agreements: statewide facilitation of general education credit transfer among all institutions; credit transfer within particular segments of higher education in the state; local, institution by institution, arrangements. As shown in Table 2 below, Zingraff et al. (2001) report that 22 states have legislated statewide articulation mandates, 13 additional states maintain articulation agreements within segments of higher education, such as within state university systems, while another 15 either lack such agreements or allow for only local arrangements.

In a recent publication on students’ probability of inter-institutional transfer, Anderson, Sun and Alfonso (2006) contend that only 12 states actually maintained legislative articulation agreements providing for a statewide mandate by 1991. By contrast, Keith (1996) shows the presence of 13 articulation agreements by 1989 from a

comprehensive analysis of published state statutes among the 48 contiguous states; of interest is the observation that only five of these states overlap with the report by Anderson, Sun and Alfonso (2006). More recent work by Keith and Roksa (2006) provides evidence that 26 states have legislated articulation agreements by 2005.

Table 2: Variation in Existing State Legislative Articulation Mandates by Source

State	Keith (1996) 13 by 1989	Anderson, Sun, & Alfonso (2005) 12 by 1991	Zingraff et al. (2001) 22 by 2001	Keith and Roksa (2006) 26 by 2005
Alabama			X	X
Alaska		X	X	
Arkansas	X	X	X	X
California	X			X
Colorado	X	X		X
Connecticut				X
Florida	X	X	X	X
Idaho			X	X
Illinois	X		X	X
Kansas		X		X
Kentucky	X		X	X
Louisiana			X	X
Maryland	X		X	X
Massachusetts	X			X
Minnesota	X			X
Missouri			X	X
Nebraska				X
New Mexico	X		X	X
Ohio		X	X	
Oklahoma			X	X
Oregon				X
Rhode Island		X		
South Carolina			X	X
South Dakota				X
Tennessee				X
Texas	X	X	X	X
Utah		X	X	
Virginia		X		
Washington	X	X	X	X
West Virginia		X	X	X
Wisconsin	X			X

While the transfer of general education requirements clearly varies by state, part of the discrepancy among the entries in the table above is conceptual and definitional.

Agreement on a common definition of articulation is a necessary condition for determining, systematically, the impact of articulation on the transfer of student credit hours and courses.

#### **D. Institutional Missions**

Guidelines such as those generated by the AAC&U and the regional accreditation associations exert considerable influence on general education in the United States. Nonetheless, even the most cursory examination of actual general education programs reveals that particular institutional approaches toward general education vary enormously. Even similar institutions may not develop similar types of general education programs. If one compares two major research universities, or two small liberal arts colleges, or two denominational schools, one is likely to find that they differ in very significant ways based on missions, histories, and faculty preferences.

Trends in general education, as described above, have been widely disseminated and discussed on American college campuses. But, these ideas are not intended to be fixed models that all institutions must adopt. There is not one recommended model of liberal education and the general education embedded within that liberal education. Instead, institutions develop their general education programs in variable, complex ways, which are drawn from their unique institutional missions and, to varying degrees, the availability of resources. This document and others such as *Greater Expectations* (AAC&U 2002) provide direction, not mandates. Efforts at developing general education programs and linking them to undergraduate majors ought to be grounded within the missions of colleges and universities, accounting for institutional contexts such as institutional culture, type, size, and student populations. Thus, each institution will have to carefully craft its own general education program taking these factors into account. While there is no one “right way” to meet general education goals, it is important that each institution have a focused plan.

An emphasis on institutional context provides both an opportunity and a constraint. The opportunity for departments and institutions is that it enables tremendous flexibility. The constraint is that the process of articulating general education requirements requires a good deal of reflection.

**Recommendation 1: *Sociology departments should actively participate in building a consensus about general educational goals, definitions, and what it is that undergraduates should learn in the general education curriculum, taking into account the institutional mission, type, size, and student characteristics.***

This suggestion assumes, of course, that faculty are both aware of and in agreement with the institution’s mission. When this assumption is valid, faculty and other publics who shape the institution and its corresponding mission must work proactively through local politics to develop consensus about general educational goals, definitions, and what it is that undergraduates should learn in the general education curriculum. While

this document does not provide a “how to manual,” it should facilitate informed discussions on how the faculty of a particular institution might enhance general education within the context of the major.

### **SECTION III: CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOCIOLOGY TO GENERAL EDUCATION**

#### **A. Content and Context**

The role of sociology in general education may be self-evident to most sociologists. But we cannot assume that it is as clear for all of our colleagues in other disciplines. In discussions about general education, it is important for sociologists to demonstrate, with evidence, the kinds of contributions sociology makes.

Sociology as a discipline clearly contributes to knowledge of society that is embedded in spatial and temporal contexts (Alexander 1988). Indeed, much of this knowledge appears to incorporate many of the higher order thinking skills associated with liberal learning. For example, Wagenaar (2004) shows that the sociology curriculum is structured to develop in students skills that emphasize critical thinking, ambiguity, complexity, analysis, and communication. This perspective coincides quite closely to that presented by Roberts (1986) nearly 20 years before. In particular, Roberts argues that sociology promotes multiple perspectives, developing in students an awareness of the social construction of knowledge and a view that all science is open to new investigation. Roberts also shows how sociology provides students with a deep understanding of social structures, their corresponding effect on individuals, and an awareness of the contextual importance of symbols in understanding culture and situations. Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop (2003) provide further support of this perspective on the sociological enterprise in acknowledging the central importance of the discipline in critical thinking—what they define as a key component of the sociological imagination.

If these capacities represent fundamental elements of sociology, they also align quite well with the stated purpose of a liberal education through the auspices of the AAC&U and regional accreditation associations. Toward this end, sociology courses ought to provide important support to the general education curriculum in place at most colleges and universities. One function of the ASA Task Force on Sociology and General Education is to help articulate the contributions of sociology to general education and to better prepare those in our discipline to make a case for sociology within their respective institutions.

In parsing out the unique contribution of sociology from other disciplinary foci, we distinguish between two kinds of contributions: those involving habits of the mind and the special content of sociology.

##### *1. Sociology as Habits of the Mind*

Greenwood (2007) observes that perhaps one of the most obvious contributions of sociology to the general education of undergraduate students is the way it can help students to develop a world view. As educators, most of us want our students to complete our sociology courses having developed a wider perspective on the social world than the one they brought with them to college. As sociologists, most of us want our students to grasp the importance of social structure as an explanation for social phenomena and a frame for various social issues. Indeed, the theories and concepts prevalent in the discipline provide a broad understanding of the multiple social worlds in which we live. By gaining broader perspectives, new vocabulary, and coherent theoretical understandings of social reality, students are better prepared to make informed, reasoned choices in their personal lives, families, careers, and communities. In short, sociology helps to provide students with the intellectual resources that prepare them for civic engagement in whatever walks of life they encounter.

An important aspect of most sociology courses today includes opportunities for students to acquire a sociological imagination. Nearly fifty years ago, C. Wright Mills (1959) wrote about the sociological imagination as the ability to see the connections between the wider society and the individual. The sociological imagination requires one to see things from multiple perspectives—to step outside of one’s own role or position and to see the society or others from alternative perspectives. Insofar as role-taking is a key element of “deep learning” (Roberts 2002), acquiring a sociological imagination helps students to begin to see these connections. This perspective is important in providing the intellectual foundation for good citizenship in a democracy and civic engagement. If students understand why and toward what end their behavior matters, they will be more likely to remain proactive, critically empowered members of their societies.

Another important habit of the mind that sociology offers students is the interplay of problem identification with empirical confirmation as a strategy in building a reasoned assessment of a complex problem. Understanding the application of a scientific method to explain social behavior allows students to have the tools to refute or build on common sense understandings of social phenomena. Similarly, insofar as disciplines vary in what is considered evidence and the appropriate strategies employed in gathering evidence, ensuring that students learn what constitutes legitimate evidence in a given discipline and how to use evidence to support arguments in the construction of knowledge are valuable skills for the undergraduate student that will serve him or her well throughout life (Stokes, Roberts, Kinney 2002, Ch. 8).

In sociology, unlike many other disciplines, we use multiple perspectives and theories to introduce sociology to our students. Many other academic disciplines do this only much later in students’ academic careers, in upper division courses or in graduate programs. This provides students with opportunities to observe how sociologists think critically about social issues; it provides students with opportunities to examine social issues from various theoretical perspectives and compare and contrast them. Such opportunities, to observe and learn critical thinking skills, are an important learning outcome in general education.

## 2. Sociology and General Education

Sociology makes contributions to many aspects of students' general education. We think sociology is well situated in academe to provide students with intellectual capacities and skills that prepare them for the challenges they will confront throughout life.

**Recommendation 2: *Sociology departments should emphasize with examples the discipline's important contributions to desired outcomes of student learning.***

What follows is a review of some of the ways in which sociology contributes to the general education component of students' undergraduate studies.

a. Sociology illustrates the interplay between the macro and microstructures of the social world. Students learn that social forces and institutions influence the behavior of individuals while in turn being shaped and changed by such individuals. Illustratively, in considering the issue of immigration, one might look at the individual reasons for migration and the structural forces that either enhance or impede the flow of people across borders, and the unintended consequences stemming from changes in extant structural properties such as national policies (Massey et al. 2002).

b. Sociology demonstrates and explains the structured aspects of inequality. In today's world students often come to us with little or no understanding about "why does racial and ethnic tensions persist?" or "why do some people have to be poor?" Sociology offers explanations for these issues. Illustratively, we explain why poverty can't be solely attributed to personal causes and why it is so difficult to eradicate. We also help to provide insight about the intersections of race, sex, gender, class, religion and regional differences in the United States and the world and how these concepts are related to inequality and conflict. Sociology also furthers students' growth and understanding of cultural diversity, globalism, and multiculturalism in today's world.

c. Sociology can describe, explain, and predict the properties of social groups. We know a lot about the structure of groups, including how status distinctions affect group decision-making and organizational behavior.

d. Sociology demonstrates the importance of context in understanding social behavior. In addition to structural components, we can show how an understanding of social behavior must take into account spatial and temporal properties, including cultural contexts and dynamic processes. Some recent examples of how sociologists provide clear explanations of the persistence of poverty include Rank's book, *One Nation: Underprivileged*, (2004) or Massey and Denton's text, *American Apartheid* (1993).

e. Sociology enables students to see how they, as individuals, are connected to society. We talk about the self-concept, how it is different from the notion of personality, and how the self emerges in social context. We show how social roles develop and how the

concept of the self changes over time. We demonstrate how the self relates to social groups and how social groups affect the development and/or emergence of the self.

f. Sociology provides explanations of social change. In order to live and operate effectively within the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, students need to have an appreciation for the dynamic interplay of social life. While changing rapidly, the world remains mired in tradition and social location. Sociology provides students with insight about collective behavior, how social change occurs, the political and economic aspects of social change, as well as the barriers to social change. In this way, we help better prepare students to live and work in an ever-changing world, yet be aware of those aspects of society we might choose to preserve.

## **B. Learning Outcomes**

Learning outcomes need to be clearly conceptualized and measured if we are to demonstrate the extent to which courses and majors in the field of Sociology contribute to general education goals. Consider how general education is built into, or should/could be built into, all course offerings within a department. Often a campus general education committee will ask for courses to be “nominated” as addressing a general education goal. Sociology faculty can submit course syllabi for approval and often special designation in the catalogue (e.g., a writing intensive course, a course addressing global awareness, and so forth). If possible, these proposals should be approved by the department as a whole, so that the general education designation is “significant and deep” in that course and that any faculty member teaching the course is committed to that learning objective.

**Recommendation 3: *Sociology departments should develop curricula around a set of collaboratively designed, well-articulated learning outcomes.***<sup>8</sup>

Faculty might then consciously integrate these learning outcomes into the department’s assessment plan within the major. Sociology need not address all learning outcomes identified by organizations such as the AAC&U and regional accrediting bodies; however, it should be very purposeful in its approach to developing clear connections to the contributions it claims to provide for general education. The disciplinary strengths, as demonstrated through a review of the extant literature, lie in several key areas. We will review those learning outcomes below that are arguably fundamental elements of the sociological enterprise, as illustrated by McKinney et al.(2004).

A cautionary note: It is relatively easy for sociologists to make the case that our discipline addresses common general education goals, such as cross-cultural

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<sup>8</sup> In the monograph *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major*, the appendix provides an example of how departments can identify goals for the major and then create a matrix to show where those courses are embedded in courses. The same logic can be applied for goals for general education. Simply articulate those goals and make a grid indicating courses with particular emphasis on those goals. The exercise is important because it: 1 – makes goals explicit; 2 – asks the department (including adjunct faculty) to intentionally address certain goals, regardless of what means they use to do so, and 3 – suggests that the accomplishment of these goals will be assessed for the program as a whole.

perspective, quantitative reasoning and so forth. But wishing – or asserting – does not make it so. It is important that the department, not individuals, identify which courses are strong contributors to general education, assessing students within specific courses in order to monitor and improve their learning. One successful example of a department's efforts to link goals to learning outcomes through the auspices of a course is presented by Glendale Community College (Jenkins 2005). While there is a great amount of academic freedom and professional discretion in teaching courses, there needs to be some consistency across instructors to make sure that the general education goals and course competencies are being met.

### *1. Quantitative Literacy*

The ASA Task Force on the Undergraduate Major (McKinney and Associates 2004) recommends that departments require courses on research methods and statistics. Furthermore, the Task Force report, endorsed by the ASA Council recommends that this empirical base be infused throughout the major, providing research opportunities for students at multiple points in their major, with ever more challenging opportunities to bring data to bear on important sociological topics. Indeed, McKinney et al. (2004) contend that the sociology major ought to be able to document students' mastery in managing evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, such that the student can identify basic methodological approaches, compare and contrast these different approaches, design a research project, and critically assess a published research report. Moreover, students ought to be able to demonstrate technical skills involved in retrieving, evaluating, and using secondary data appropriately.

Sociologists know that our work depends on a firm empirical base, but students (and the general public) are either unaware or do not necessarily share this view. Faculty are often confronted in class by students who allege that evidence is analogous to opinion. A convincing strategy would engage students in the discourse of sociologists by showing the blend of creativity and skills involved in quality research. The interplay of sociological concepts and theories with data collection and analysis to test hypotheses provides a solid foundation for the sociological imagination. But the empirical findings add credibility.

It is not unusual in many institutional settings to find that lower division courses tend to be large in number, enroll many non-majors, and rely extensively on textbooks and lecture methods. As a result, instructors generally offer summaries (empirical generalizations) of social science research rather than inviting critical thinking about the scientific process that produced the results. Increasingly, fewer lower division courses require students to engage actively in hands-on research. Given improvements in computer technology and access to reasonably priced computers and data sets, sociology faculty can now involve novice students in the excitement of testing ideas with empirical evidence.

Quantitative literacy (QL) is much more than mathematical computations. As a skill for the well educated person, it involves bringing the right data to bear on an important

issue or question, understanding the limits of the data, and being able to explain the results and their implications to a variety of audiences. The ability to use social data is highly relevant to students' lives, their occupational future, and their lives as informed citizens. Imagine if a baccalaureate recipient in any field could recall from her Introductory Sociology course how to draw on Census information to write a report about the number of elderly people in her community; or if a parent with a sociological imagination could look at the school system's retention data for students of color and make cogent conclusions about it at a PTA meeting; or if a recent college graduate looked at the Bureau of Labor Statistics job projections before making a move to city X instead of city Y.

Quantitative literacy, like reading literacy, is developmental. But some exposure is clearly better than none and the general education curriculum is committed to helping students gain initial skills and motivation for life long learning. Sociology departments will need to demonstrate that their courses, especially lower division course for non-majors, include explicit learning goals in QL. Toward this end, courses should include modeling of the approaches sociologists take to quantitative material, and ideally some hands on experience with the collection and interpretation of raw data. For a number of examples, see the special issue of *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 34, 2006.

The ASA's Integrating Data Analysis (IDA) Project (Howery and Rodriguez 2006) sought to close the quantitative literacy gap by developing QL modules for introductory courses. Those resources are available on-line for faculty to adopt, modify, and use as models in their own courses. As the IDA project demonstrated, "Almost every sociology department espouses the 'sociological imagination' as its goal for its major. Now some will increase the power of data to strengthen the connection between private troubles and public issues and to give students new tools to take action on those issues" (Howery and Rodriguez: 37).

## 2. *Knowledge of Society*

The *Liberal Learning* report (McKinney et al. 2004) recommends that departments structure the curriculum to develop students' sociological literacy, including substantive courses central to the discipline. The sociology major ought to be able to demonstrate the role of theory in sociology, showing how theories reflect the historical contexts of the times and cultures in which they were developed. Students also ought to be able to demonstrate the relevance of culture, social change, socialization, stratification, social structure, geographic location and an understanding of how differentiations by class, race, and gender can shape individual life chances. Moreover, the sociology major ought to demonstrate how culture and social structure vary across time and place and the corresponding consequences of such variation.

A central feature of sociology is the notion of a sociological imagination, which requires an awareness of the relationship between individual behavior and social structure. Students must develop an understanding that the life choices of individuals, circumstances, and challenges are shaped by larger social forces such as social class,

race and gender relations, and the corresponding structure of social institutions. In this regard, sociological knowledge requires critical thinking, a term that some believe is analogous to the sociological imagination (Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003). Karl Marx opined in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past” (cited in Burns, 1982:116). C. Wright Mills (1959) said as much nearly a century later, acknowledging the central importance of history and culture in understanding the relationship between the individual and society. If one is to understand social relations, one must incorporate sociology with history (Abrams 1982) to examine the interplay between individual action, in the form of agency, and social structure (Giddens 1979). Sociology is contextually bounded by parameters of space and time (Alexander 2003). Students of sociology must develop a habit of the mind by which they examine problems of agency and structure within the contextual boundaries of history and culture.

Roberts (1986) contends that students must move beyond the simple dualistic thinking of either agency or structure toward deep formal thinking before they can grasp fully the conceptual underpinnings of the discipline. He believes that this occurs through a sequential ordering of cognitive skills within sociology courses, beginning with role taking and awareness of socially constructed perspectives, and moving toward an understanding of the interplay between agency, structure, and the social formulation of cultural symbols. Clearly, this method reinforces critical sociological thinking and deep learning and aligns quite well with the recommendations proffered by McKinney and Associates (2004).

### *3. Multiculturalism/Diversity Awareness and Understanding*

The *Liberal Learning* report (McKinney et al. 2004) recommends that departments structure their curriculum to increase students’ exposure to multicultural and cross-cultural content relevant to sociology. This focus includes students’ demonstrable understanding of the intersections of class, race, gender, and regional diversity both within the United States and throughout the world.

Sociologists are well situated to enhance students’ awareness of diverse perspectives. However, many of the students in our classroom come to college with little prior contact with people of color or exposure to multicultural thinking. The challenge rests, as Moremen (1997:107) contends, “in getting them to question their underlying assumptions, to capture their attention without alienating them, to compel students who are privileged without blaming those who are disadvantaged, to create a safe place for students whose lived experiences may not resonate with the rest of the class, to inspire not offend, and to interest not anger.” In many important respects, this activity is an extension of role-taking and the sociological imagination described previously.

Most of the work in multicultural education has emphasized the particular experiences and perspectives of underrepresented groups in the U.S. Racism is ultimately an issue

of power and privilege. Sociology can deepen the discussion of diversity by bringing in and explaining models of power and privilege, and in examining race from a perspective of structured inequality. Similarly, as the population of the U.S. shifts to embrace an even larger number of previously marginalized groups, there is an emerging need to take a closer look at the changing role of Anglos and white-ethnic Americans (Howard 1993).

Informal interactions with diverse peers are especially important in expanding students' understanding of multiculturalism; students who have been exposed to the content of diversity and the interactions with students of color, often take their learning outside the classroom by engaging their friends in conversations about issues of diversity (Tatum 1992). Another way to incorporate diversity in student learning is to arrange service-learning opportunities with diverse populations (Myers-Lipton 2002). For example, students of color who have had the opportunity to examine the ways in which racism may have affected their own lives are able to give voice to their own experiences. This strategy allows students of color to move beyond victimization to empowerment, and to share their learning with others (Tatum 1992).

Intentioned teaching about the complexities and diversities in American societal life, can introduce students to a range of influences involved in establishing a sense of identity, a sense of place and how people pursue notions of community. The changing nature and structure of American rural life, changing demographics, changing capitals and resultant inter-group dynamics can provide insight into what happens when unlike peoples meet regardless of social location (Jenkins and Rakowski 2000).

The issue of supporting diversity in the classroom is not just a matter of social justice but also a matter of promoting educational excellence. Increasingly, institutional mission statements at colleges and universities across the country underscore the role of diversity in enhancing teaching and learning in higher education. Providing a forum in which these discussions can occur as a component of students' educational experiences allows personal and group development to unfold in ways that day-long or weekend programs cannot (Tatum 1992).

For departments wishing to examine their own curriculum and climate in terms of inclusion of content regarding people of color, consult Chin et al. (2002) and the ASA's report on the Minority Opportunities through School Transformation (MOST) Program (Levine et. al. 2002).

#### *4. Global Awareness and Understanding*

McKinney et al. (2004) recommend that departments structure the curriculum to increase students' exposure to cross-national content relevant to sociology. Public consciousness of global environmental problems and health issues, for example, underscores the need for an international perspective. As Pillay and Elliott (2001:9) suggest, "[I]t is no longer a question of whether individuals are part of the new global

order but rather how they deal with being part of that order while at the same time living and relating to others in local neighborhoods.”

The AAC&U, in recognizing that the world and its inhabitants are participants in an environment of continual global change, directs attention toward educational outcome goals that underscore an education centered on informed, empowered, and responsible learning. In many important respects, the AAC&U has taken a position juxtaposed to that of Allan Bloom (1987) or Charles Hirsch (1987), both of whom prescribe to a central focus on Western European culture and, in the case of Hirsch, a reading list of corresponding texts. The content of general education, according to Bloom and Hirsch, begins with Plato and Aristotle, moves through the Renaissance and Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment, and the founding of the United States. Conversely, the AAC&U has broadened considerably this definition of general education to include a concentrated focus on self-directed global learning.

Like general education itself, globalization is a term that is used often throughout higher education but with relatively little consensus on its meaning. At one end of the continuum is advanced a perspective, as illustrated by Chomsky (2004), that an understanding of globalization is important to ensure that the United States maintains its hegemonic position in a world order. At the other end is a view presented by Friedman (2005) that international labor markets are flattening; corporations and the individuals they employ are encountering economic relations that have dramatically altered job-market structures within the last 15 years. Instead of adopting a macro-level perspective on globalization, the AAC&U (2002) has directed its attention toward learning outcomes that develop students as self-directed learners who are informed, empowered, and responsible and who, based on their education and experiences, are well-positioned to navigate the challenges that are certain to confront them during their lifetimes. In order to develop global awareness, students are encouraged to study the culture, economics, politics, geography, religion, and the language of one or more societies different from their own, immersing themselves, when possible, into a foreign culture for an extended interval of time.

The AAC&U has argued consistently for an increased curricular emphasis on global awareness and understanding. In particular, the AAC&U recommends that students gain a deep, comparative knowledge of the world’s people and problems, exploring the historical legacies that have created the dynamics and persistent tensions of the world. Moreover, they contend that students ought to develop intercultural competencies so they can move across boundaries and into unfamiliar territory to see the world from multiple perspectives; this involves an understanding and ability to critique overarching framings such as democracy, human rights, and sustainable development within a global context while concurrently becoming engaged with fundamental issues that affect communities not yet well served by their societies.

Many campuses have developed their own vision of global learning, sometimes on a smaller scale or in conjunction with internal (or national) diversity goals and objectives. For example, the social science courses in general education at San Jose State are

intended to enhance students' understanding of human behavior in the context of competing value systems, economic structures, political institutions, and natural environments. At Boise State, students are expected to be able to draw comparisons between their own cultural perspective and those of other cultures. California State University at Los Angeles requires that students be able to demonstrate an understanding of the ways humans adapt to adverse and changing global environments.

Sociology is well poised to contribute to global awareness and understanding. Major paradigms for understanding global society are often grounded in sociological theory. Nevertheless, consensus among sociologists on how to develop a focus on global awareness is illusive. Coverage of international content in core sociology courses is minimal at best, often compartmentalized within a single chapter or section.

Exchange programs between institutions in different countries immerse students in cultures different than their own, thus forcing students to negotiate cultural boundaries. Several colleges undertake study abroad programs, which are becoming an integral component of students' educational experiences. For example, Goshen College in Indiana requires all students, regardless of major, to immerse themselves in another culture for at least one semester. A more common strategy is to "internationalize the curriculum," broadening traditional courses with an internationally comparative approach. While sociology departments have acknowledged the value of such efforts, there has not been widespread evidence that this has become a standard part of the undergraduate major (Martin 1994; McKinney and Associates 2004).

There exist, however, meaningful ways in which to approach global awareness and understanding. A capstone course or project can focus on a serious international problem (such as hunger, work/employment, poverty, pollution, or intolerance), offered by a team of teachers in many fields (e.g., Massey and Meyers 2006). Runte (2001) suggests that sister schools could adopt the same problem in a particular semester, sharing student work between institutions for competition and enrichment. A second approach might be to offer a team-taught course, possibly at the introductory level, conducted by an international team of faculty traveling from institution to institution. Readings could be put together by an international team, providing students in any particular institution more exposure. A third option might be to create an international learning community within an online, virtual classroom. Little, Titarenko and Bergelson (2005) report on their success doing so in a course focusing on social control but discuss how the format can be extended to other topics in sociology. Course designs such as these may enhance internationalized learning by offering global comparisons and perspectives, posing questions to one another from an "outsider's" perspective, responding to questions from abroad that frequently challenge "taken for granted assumptions," and encourage a reflective attitude toward the student's own society, culture and politics (Little et al. 2005). Additionally, sociologists teach courses at various places, the subject matter and course organization of which are inherently interdisciplinary. Typically organized as part of the structure of required general education courses but offered beyond traditional departmental boundaries, such activity can compliment the traditional introductory sociology course and help departments

recruit new majors while concurrently providing an important venue through which sociological knowledge and reasoning can be introduced into general education. In each of these examples, sociology faculty ought to look for ways to incorporate learning outcomes and electives from beyond the department into the major as a way of illustrating connections between general education and the major.

### 5. *Critical Thinking*

The *Liberal Learning* report (2004) recommends that departments structure the curriculum to develop students' higher order and critical thinking skills. Thinking critically requires that students be able to state what might be an ill-defined and complex problem, identify underlying assumptions of the theoretical orientations and methodologies employed, gather and analyze evidence, examine the evidence in light of the stated problem, and draw conclusions based on the observed results.

As one might expect, there are multiple ways of defining critical thinking. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy has often served as a conceptual framework for critical thinking as a sequentially embedded development of higher order thinking skills. However, Bloom's work has been criticized as being somewhat vague in the measurement of critical thinking (Ennis 1985). Ennis (1962) provided an initial foray into the measurement of critical thinking, focusing on the logical assessment of formal statements. McPeak (1981) expanded upon this perspective in emphasizing the formulation of problems, hypotheses, and theories of problem-based situations and the construction of plausible alternative solutions. More recently, Ennis (1985) has suggested that critical thinking entails creativity, reflection, and reasoning. Essentially, critical thinking is conceptualized as a process of creative and critical inquiry (Shepelak, Curry-Jackson, and Moore 1992) incorporating a rational evaluation of evidence (Browne and Litwin 1987).

Geertsen (2003) suggests that critical thinking skills are most beneficial when linked specifically to a discipline's knowledge base. Within the field of sociology, Green and Klug (1990:462) describe critical thinking as "the ability to create logical arguments based on the sociological imagination." Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop (2003:487) make sociology's contribution to critical thinking explicit in their term "critical sociological thinking," whereby, proficiency in critical sociological thinking, "requires sociological knowledge and skills and the ability to use this knowledge to reflect upon, question, and judge information while also demonstrating a sensitivity to and awareness of social and cultural contexts."

By highlighting the inter-relationship of the sociological imagination with that of critical thinking, sociological scholars such as Bidwell (1995), Geertsen (2003), Green and Klug (1990), and Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop (2003) provide us with conceptual guidance in linking together the discipline of sociology within the wider intentions of general education. Our contribution as sociologists to critical thinking includes the ability to connect the individual to the larger societal structures, construct

arguments that are grounded in the sociological imagination, and support those arguments through empirical evidence.

## 6. Civic Engagement

The twelfth recommendation in *Liberal Learning* suggests that departments structure the curriculum to prepare students for lives of civic engagement. The focus on civic engagement stems from the belief that a college education should provide learning experiences that help to create informed citizens needed in a democratic society, a concern for developing student character, and evidence that students today are less likely to be involved in civic activities than in the past (Rhoads 2003). Toward this end, the AAC&U (2002:33) proposes that colleges and universities foster “intentional learners;” one example of an intentional learner is the “empowered learner” who participates actively “...as a citizen in a diverse democracy” and understands “...oneself and one’s multiple identities.” The AAC&U suggests that faculty develop strategies to help facilitate these capacities in students. Such strategies can include service learning, debate, and personal writing, which require self-reflection in relationship to others. Banta (2005:3) defines civic engagement as “effective, mutually beneficial collaboration of students, faculty and staff and our community.” Civic engagement, then, can be defined as a learning outcome that includes faculty-led, service learning opportunities in the community, incorporating reflective writing experiences with the intent of creating an informed citizenry.

With the potential connection between service learning and civic engagement, service learning must be integrated into the curriculum in a meaningful way that requires weekly reflection, course integration, as well as faculty mentors (Cone 2003). Others have discussed the connections between service learning, reflection, and knowledge from faculty and coursework. Illustratively, Ostrander (2003) draws empirically informed conclusions about key program components that include student learning, curriculum transformation, community defined priorities, the creation of new knowledge and change in emphasis as the work develops. Jakubowski (2003:24) uses field trips as a context for critical pedagogy. She argues, “critically responsive pedagogy invites involvement, and, can be realized by utilizing a conceptual framework into which is incorporated experience, critical thinking, reflection and action.” Models of service learning are moving away from a “charity model” toward a curriculum-based “social justice model.” (Jakubowski 2003); others agree that service learning must go beyond the charity model. It should include collaboration with the community, and place the client or provider in control of the services to promote an equal relationship between students and community participants (Calderón 2003). The growing interest in community based research with teams of community members, faculty, and students deepens these benefits, as well as provides additional research training opportunities (Strand et al. 2003).

The contexts and placements for service learning are varied. Trostle and Hersh (2003) argue that civic engagement can occur through curricular and co-curricular pathways. The curricular context is a well-documented pathway in both sociology and higher

education, in general. Jakubowski (2003) uses a field trip to Cuba as the context for service learning. Others integrate service-learning components into a research methods course (Potter, Caffrey and Plante 2003). Johnson (2005) has developed a five-step process for teaching social problems to empower students by using the principle of civic education. Calderón (2003) incorporates service learning as a part of his rural/urban social movements course. His students work for a day labor center in the community. Another approach focuses on the links between service learning and academic course work in nursing home placements in order to facilitate critical thinking (Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer and Anaya 2003). Oates and Leavitt (2003) embed service learning in their learning community (2003).

## *7. Communication*

McKinney et al. (2004) recommend that departments structure the curriculum to develop students' written and oral communication skills. While communication is vital to a liberal arts education, students often enter college poorly prepared for writing at the college level (Brocato et al. 2005). However, students who completed a writing course developed specifically for majors were found to have fared better in upper level writing courses.

There are several strategies employed in the pursuit of improving students' communication skills. Park (2003) introduces a learning journal that demands students write weekly, including reflections on each lecture and article critiques. Some positive aspects students gained from the journal writing include ownership and awareness of learning, self-confidence, regular reading, engagement with the course material, and reflectivity. Coker and Scarboro (1990) describe two upper-level writing intensive sociology courses. In addition to increasing students' understanding of the subject and improving their writing skills, it is argued that writing helps students to open up to discussing their interpretations in class and to challenging reading materials.

Hinrichs (1990) develops a learning strategy that is intended to promote the development of written and oral communication skills. It includes oral discussion, written summary, and a discussion of the summary's accuracy. When incorporated into an introductory sociology course, Hinrichs found that the strategy improves communication skills. Indeed, even the addition of a poster session into research methods classes may improve communication skills, especially those related to conveying sociological research results (Lowry 1992). Lowry argues that written papers benefit from this activity. At the same time, posters allow students to discuss their research with others, including beginning sociology students, who may realize this interaction as a "socialization experience."

Several researchers have highlighted the social nature of writing. Karcher (1988:168) states: "If our concern is to make students continually more aware of the social world and the sociological principles operating therein, the teaching of writing becomes yet another opportunity to demonstrate sociological concepts." She emphasizes writing as a social event in which a writer and a reader interact with one another. Roberts

(1993:317) states: “writing is also a profoundly public activity, shaped by many norms and by the social context in which it will be read.” He suggests that writing often begins as a very personal experience but yet it must ultimately be social (with the exception of diaries). Writing will eventually be read, and a writer is likely to be influenced by the perceived audience. A problem with student writing is that it is often writer-based and insensitive to social context. Therefore, students need to transform their writing into reader-based writing that focuses on a wider audience. Anderson and Holt (1990) emphasize the idea that writing is a social act and that writing assignments should be sequentially based in order to pull students into the social process of writing. Grauerholz (1999) claims that poetic writing or creative writing is particularly useful for sociologists because it demands awareness of both the personal and public. Similarly, Singh and Unnithan (1989) discuss their use of free writing in sociology, suggesting that speculative writing is not just about writing but about thinking and cultivating ideas. Accordingly, these sociologists believe that writing enhances the sociological imagination. Writing may also promote other goals of sociological teaching. Basirico (1990) refers to two goals of his writing assignments. One is to have students apply knowledge learned in the class to personal situations. A second goal is to assess students’ ability to link theory and practice. In addition, writing may promote cultural awareness and lessen ethnocentrism (Grauerholz 1999). In either scenario, excellence and understandability in written discourse is almost always a general education learning outcome, which ought to be easily incorporated within the sociology major.

Several researchers assert that writing increases discussion, thereby providing opportunities for oral communication (Coker and Scarboro 1990; Hinrichs 1990; Singh and Unnithan 1989). Lowry (1992) suggests that the use of a poster session as a component of oral presentations, particularly in research methods courses, might improve students’ oral communication skills. And yet, many of these statements are more conjecture than observations drawn from solid empirical research. Notably, limited attention has been given to teaching oral communication in sociology. This is an area for future research. What are the benefits to including and teaching oral communication in a sociology class? How can sociology instructors incorporate oral communication within their courses, and how does promoting oral communication help build sociological skills?

#### *8. Moral Reasoning:*

In 2006, the ASA Council formed a Task Force to develop curriculum materials on ethics for undergraduate and graduate students, and for faculty and practitioners. With the ASA Code of Ethics as the foundational document, these materials will take the educative high road, to invoke the highest possible ethical practice by teachers, researchers, and practitioners. Ethical practice includes the development of moral reasoning, particularly the ability to identify the detrimental consequences of social inequality or the implications of the use or misuse of sociological work. Harry Lasker and James Moore (1980: 26) define moral development as a “progressive understanding of the process and principles through which social relationships and the

order of society are created and maintained.” A critical component of this discussion is to embed a definition on moral development within a curriculum intent on producing demonstrable outcomes in students. To reason morally suggests that students must grapple with problems that transcend disciplinary, cultural, and regional/national boundaries. In essence, students must be immersed within an environment that forces them to define the assumptions by which they reason and to challenge those assumptions through the interaction with multiple and often competing perspectives.

### *9. Collaboration and Teamwork*

Recommendation Eleven in *Liberal Learning* emphasizes the importance of diverse pedagogies, including active learning. Providing carefully constructed opportunities for collaboration and teamwork among students is one form of active learning, one that will model situations they will experience in the workplace, in their community, and so forth. Students’ education will be enhanced by the extent to which they are able to present opposing viewpoints and alternative hypotheses on various issues, and to engage in teamwork where many alternative viewpoints are presented. Collaborative learning draws on the notion of working with others, emphasizing that learning occurs through group work. Encouraging students to work together within the curriculum is not likely to happen serendipitously. It requires faculty members to intentionally structure learning activities for students and create a learning environment that enables students to contribute equally to academic activities. This form of learning requires students to learn to work with multiple perspectives on the same topic. Collaborative learning helps students become empowered learners who work well in teams, including those of diverse composition, to build consensus. It develops critical thinking skills by providing practice at learning to listen carefully, think and reason from all aspects of the topic, participate constructively, and collaborate to solve the problem (Rinehart 1999; Ross and Hurlbert 2004). The success of the individual is linked to the success of the group. This motivates students to help one another accomplish the goals of the group. The students are expected to actively help and support one another through shared resources and encouragement (Donaghy 2000). Doing so supports individual accountability but also rewards the team.

Collaborative learning develops in students an appreciation for life-long learning. It engages students of all backgrounds personally, by allowing individuals to contribute knowledge and perspectives developed from their own lives, and applying those experiences to education. In addition, the life experience of all students is used to help the group gain a better understanding of the content. Collaborative learning also assists students in learning valuable interpersonal skills, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and teamwork skills many employers consider a requirement for success. Thus, collaborative learning teaches not only the objectives of the course but also prepares students for their respective careers.

On a cautionary note, collaborative learning may be differentially valued by persons from various cultural backgrounds. Our understanding of when and how this strategy ought to be employed and assessed is a topic worthy of further investigation.

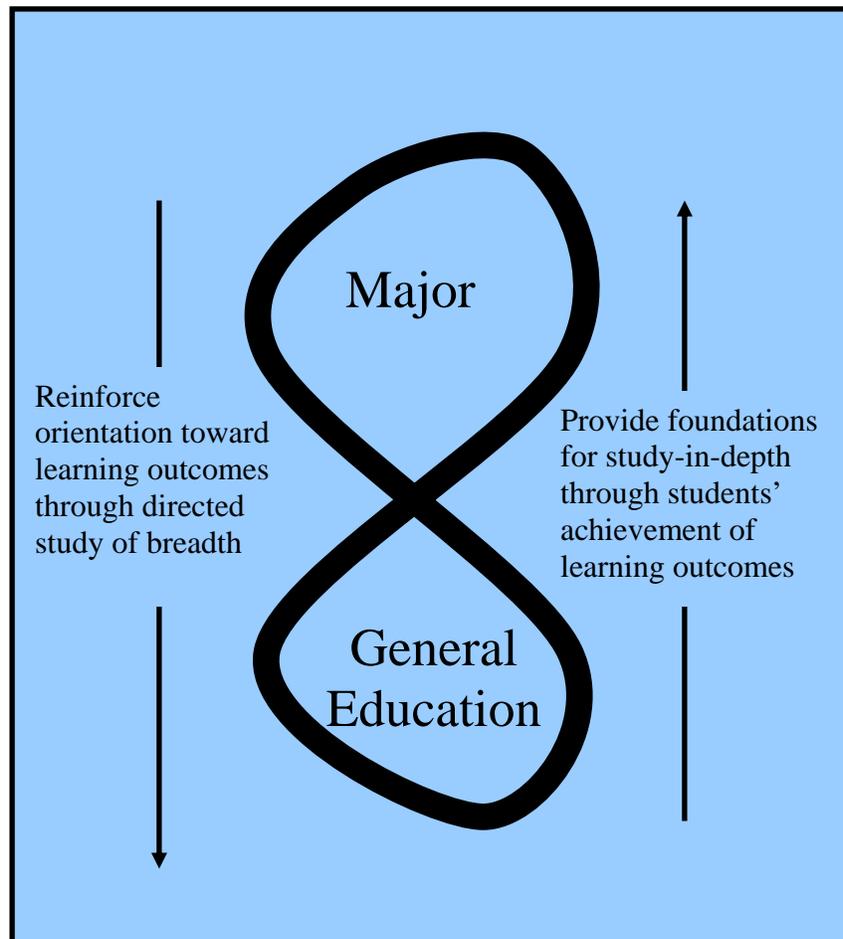
#### **IV. CONTRIBUTIONS OF GENERAL EDUCATION TO THE SOCIOLOGY MAJOR**

Thus far attention has centered on the contributions of sociology to general education. When portrayed visually, the relationship between sociology and general education appears unidirectional. Knowledge is compartmentalized within disciplines, each of which is thought to provide beneficial information to students' general education experiences. At an organizational level more encompassing than a department, this perspective creates the sort of unfortunate turf battles that persist within colleges where every discipline believes it ought to be represented in the general education curriculum. Higher educational trends have skirted this issue by focusing on learning outcomes rather than disciplinary-specific knowledge. Though, in either case, the visual image portrayed emphasizes the supremacy of majors (or study-in-depth) over general education.

An alternative perspective is to view learning as a complementary combination of breadth and depth of study. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, this perspective suggests that students' learning experiences are centered on a set of learning outcomes developed collaboratively by the faculty, which are supported by fields of study and, in turn, reinforce the foundations of those fields through students' study in depth. Students' achievement of general education learning outcomes supports the major by ensuring that students possess the requisite skills and knowledge to pursue advanced study of a field.

***Recommendation 4: Sociology departments should ensure that the requirements of the major are mapped to general education learning outcomes and explicitly conveyed to students in order to strengthen their foundational knowledge within a study-in-depth experience.***

Figure 1: Visualizing the Relationship Between General Education and the Undergraduate Major



General education learning outcomes compliment the goals of departmental programs for majors. Illustratively, the selection of learning outcomes reflective of critical thinking, civic responsibility, quantitative literacy, communication, and global awareness underscores the importance of sociology and its potential contribution to general education. But as importantly, students' demonstrable achievement of these learning outcomes within the early years of their collegiate experience serves to reinforce the very nature of sociology. Consequently, students with strengths in areas denoted by these learning outcomes approach the major in sociology with a foundation of knowledge that prepares them for in-depth study in the field. This symbiotic relationship is particularly important to a field like sociology.

The ASA Task Force report on *Creating an Effective Assessment Plan for the Sociology Major* (ASA 2005:57-71) provides guidelines for the assessment of student learning outcomes based on the goals presented in *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major* (McKinney et al. 2004). Students upon completing their sociology major ought

to have acquired disciplinary specific knowledge as well as intellectual capacities and skills. Disciplinary knowledge includes familiarity with two or more specialty areas in the field. Intellectual skills include familiarity with methodologies, data management and analysis, and communication. Intellectual capacities require students to synthesize and evaluate information, reason critically through problems, and understand distinctions between macro and micro levels of analysis, professional ethics, and the interplay between agency and structure over place and time. The combination of disciplinary knowledge, skills, and capacities develop in students the ability to approach an understanding of society with a sociological imagination.

Many of the recommended expectations of the sociology major, as illustrated by the *Liberal Learning* report (2004), are quite applicable to general education learning outcomes. Consider for example the parallels between the learning objectives endorsed by the ASA and those promoted by the AAC&U for general education in Table 3. With the exception of the discipline-specific learning outcomes, virtually all of the ASA's specified outcomes are echoed in whole or in part by the AAC&U's guidelines.

Table 3: The Sociological Emphasis on General Education Goals

<b>AAC&amp;U Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>Sociological Emphasis</b>
– Communication	Primary
– Creativity	Secondary
– Critical Thinking	Primary
– Diversity	Primary
– Ethics/Moral Reasoning	Primary
– Global Awareness	Primary
– Historical Awareness	Primary
– Information Technology	Secondary
– Lifelong Learning	Primary
– Quantitative Literacy	Primary
– Social/Cultural Awareness	Primary
– Scientific/Analytical Reasoning	Primary
– Teamwork	Primary

As has been noted in various places in this report, sociology departments often appear to be operating with a rather narrow view of how general education relates to the major. In many cases, perhaps reflecting the fact that most college/university students take only one Sociology course (McKinney et al. 2004), sociology participates in general education largely through a small number of basic introductory courses, such as “Introduction to Sociology” or “Social Problems.” At large institutions, these courses are typically taught as large lecture courses in which students read textbooks, have few opportunities to write, conduct data analysis, or achieve other learning outcomes, and are assessed through inter-subjective exams that emphasize rote learning more than critical thinking. Yet, these higher order thinking skills are precisely the learning outcomes emphasized by sociologists commenting on the importance of the introductory course and on its future in the curriculum (Sundgren 1994; Steele and Marshall 1996). Too often, the courses are taught by inexperienced graduate students or poorly paid adjuncts who have little responsibility for teaching more advanced students (and, thus, are less likely to think about how they are preparing students for subsequent courses).

Sociology departments could also learn from professional programs about the value of collaborating with other departments that offer general education courses serving their majors. While departments that contain two or more disciplinary fields may be more integrative than those with only one field, sociologists generally appear to be far less likely to engage in this type of inter-disciplinary collaboration. For example, schools of

education typically work closely with departments representing disciplines in the arts and sciences to ensure that their majors are exposed to material in these fields that is integral to their program goals.

The point is that general education is everyone's issue – what happens in general education courses affects a variety of learning outcomes that are central to those emphasized by the Sociology major. Sociologists need to become involved in campus discussions of general education. Sadly, many colleagues do not fully understand the contributions of sociology to the well educated person and need to be informed. More specifically, sociology could work collaboratively with other programs so that learning outcomes central to the major that dovetail with general education objectives are linked. It is not enough to simply believe and assert that sociology is valuable; departments need to demonstrate how sociological knowledge contributes to general education goals and which courses (and where and how within those courses) are those learning outcomes emphasized. At the same time, the Task Force recognizes that politics and turf battles can share a general education program as much as carefully crafted evidence does. However, if departments fail to become players in these campus discussions or opportunities at cross-disciplinary collaboration, then they face the very real possibility of the marginalization of sociology as a resource in developing the liberal arts foundation of students, both majors and non-majors.

Resources may prohibit departments from assigning tenured or tenure-track faculty to general education courses. If so, then the faculty teaching lower division courses need to be informed about and supported to explicitly address general education goals. Beyond the entry level courses, general education learning outcomes are embedded within the major. Whether or not a course is designated as a general education course, there are many places within the majors program where general education can or should take place. This is the argument behind the now well-established "Writing across the Curriculum" approach, which emphasizes the value of repeated, progressively more advanced writing assignments and rejects the idea that writing can be taught solely in introductory courses in an English department. A similar idea is implicit in the more recent attempt by the ASA to integrate quantitative literacy across the curriculum (Howery and Rodriguez 2006).

Sociology majors have been found to have average scores on tests of basic employment skills, including some that mirror general education outcomes such as logical reasoning and quantitative skills (see Velasco, Stockdale and Scrams 1992). There are obviously a variety of possible explanations for this finding. Nevertheless, it indicates that there is room for sociologists to devote more attention to general education outcomes in the classes at all levels that they teach.

Toward this end, sociologists ought to consider that general education, as a component centered on a set of learning outcomes, is cumulative and ongoing, in courses labeled general education and throughout the major. Capstone courses, for example, are not just a synthesis of what students learned in their respective majors but incorporate more

general skills and capacities acquired through general education (see, e.g., Mentkowski and Associates 2000).

## **V. ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GENERAL EDUCATION LEARNING OUTCOMES**

The importance of assessing student learning and program quality is now well-established within higher education. Reports on assessment now proliferate throughout higher education, providing detailed examples on how to design and implement assessment plans within organizational contexts (see, e.g., Banta et al. 1996). Indeed, as acknowledged by the ASA Task Force on Assessing the Undergraduate Major (ASA 2005), the methodology necessary to develop an assessment plan is fairly straightforward; assessment involves the systematic collection and analysis of evidence to inform and ultimately improve student learning. This process requires a statement of desired outcomes for the major—where do we want to take our students—and the incorporation of a plan that provides the evidence necessary to determine the extent to which our students achieve those outcomes. To the extent that faculty collectively develop learning outcomes and a program of study by which students can reach developmental goals, information gleaned from the corresponding plan represents a program review.

Too often, assessment becomes ritualized as the act of data collection. Systematic assessment and data collection ought to be ongoing rather than intermittent. When conceptualized more holistically, assessment becomes a process through which an organization manages change.

***Recommendation 5: Sociology departments should collect and analyze systematically assessment data and communicate these results to faculty, students, and appropriate publics to ensure that student performance is consistent with the general education learning goals.***

Accordingly, as suggested by Keith (2004), a focus on process is necessary because it draws attention to institutional context, thus emphasizing the importance of institutional culture. A focus on process underscores the relevance of collaboration, particularly among faculty and administration. And because institutional leaders frequently move between one institution and another, a focus on assessment provides a common understanding in managing institutional curricular reform.

Assessment begins with a learning model, which represents a theoretical statement that outlines the process through which students develop with respect to a desired learning outcome (Forsythe and Keith 2002:97). A learning model incorporates a process of student learning within a structured learning environment around a set of substantive activities. The learning model is, in effect, a theory about how students learn and develop with respect to particular types of educational outcomes. Essentially, a learning model assumes that student learning is developmental and transformational (Mezirow and Associates 2000).

Learning is viewed as a formative process that involves students' repeated interactive engagement with knowledge and a corresponding reaction, reflection, discussion, and synthesis. Learning is transformational when it requires students to interact with material in ways that develop critical, reflective thinking. Robert Kegan (1982) has argued that learning is an evolutionary process. Similarly, Sternberg and associates (2000) contend that practical intelligence—the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to succeed in a particular domain—is fundamentally a developmental process through which persons are exposed to material within a structured environment. In both cases, the application of knowledge requires the planned integration of analytical, creative, and practical skill sets and an assessment of students' ability to achieve desired learning outcomes.

Most sociology departments have assessment plans for their majors, but far fewer have developed assessment plans around learning outcomes in order to assess the extent to which the courses contribute demonstrably to an articulated set of learning outcomes. Weiss (2002) examined the state of assessment plans in 150 sociology departments, discovering that only about half (52%) of these departments have developed specific learning outcomes for students. Of those with learning outcomes, most have organized their learning models predominately for their majors instead of an integration of general education learning outcomes within the major. Wagenaar (2002) emphasizes this point in his discussion of how various components within the sociology curriculum help to enhance the general education learning objectives of an institution. And yet, sociology departments are well positioned to assist with strategies for systematic assessment of general education competencies and learning outcomes, which are consistent with institutional and program goals. See Jenkins (2005) for a good illustration of how one department has framed student learning around desired outcomes.

## **A. Assessment of General Education Learning Outcomes**

To the extent that the learning outcomes illustrated above are integrated within the sociological enterprise, results drawn from published assessments of the student outcomes ought to provide answers to important questions about student achievement (Allen 2006; Aloi et al. 2003). Indeed, sociologists are well positioned to contribute demonstrably to literature on the subject of general education assessment (Hohm and Johnson 1999). Does peer-reviewed evidence exist that allows us to determine the extent to which sociology courses develop students' capacities and skills in a direction consistent with these general education outcomes? Each of the learning outcomes reviewed previously are purported to be central to the development of sociological thinking. To what extent are multiple methods actually employed and reported on in the literature that provide a more holistic assessment of students' achievements in these areas? We examine evidence gleaned from extant literature to better understand students' achievement of these desired learning outcomes.

### *1. Quantitative Literacy*

Hubert Blalock (1972) noted that key challenges in developing students' quantitative literacy is to help them overcome their fears associated with mathematics and to integrate the application of statistical analysis within their particular fields of interest. Blalock (1989) argued further that there is a gap between sociologists' use of quantitative analyses and the manner in which such techniques are incorporated in students' course work. Not long afterward, Anderson (1990) provided a rationale and discussion of effectively incorporating computer modules for data analysis within the introductory sociology course.

Howery and Rodriguez (2006) report on more recent initiatives that address this gap by integrating data analysis (IDA) strategically throughout the curriculum, early, frequently, and consistently. Their project included 18 sociology departments, each of which agreed to develop quantitative modules that involved the participation of at least 50 percent or more of the department's faculty and concerted efforts at embedding these modules throughout the majors program. They report that departments struggle with requirements that demand systematic coherence and uniformity in curricular development. Such participation requires the implementation of mechanisms that encourage widespread participation and overcome obstacles with large class enrollments and the availability of technological resources. The report's preliminary findings suggest that the implementation of quantitative modules can improve student learning. However, this assessment is limited to separate reports presented on three of the 18 departments based on pre-post testing techniques; there is no evidence that any of the departments incorporated the use of control groups in their analyses of student outcomes.

In examining strategies to overcome problems with large class size, Bridges et al. (1998) assess quantitative reasoning using an experimental design; they administered a pretest on the first day of class and a post-test at the end of the term. Learning outcomes were measured using a ten-question quiz that measured quantitative reasoning and ability to read tables. Their results suggest that students' ability to interpret and analyze empirical data improved over the course of the term, though they too did not discuss the use of a control group, leaving the reader to assume that the observed results are wholly attributable to the pedagogy.

Certainly, Blalock is correct in deducing that students' appreciation and skill in managing data will improve and their level of anxiety will decline with exposure and application. The challenge for educators is to demonstrate the extent to which the incorporation of pedagogical strategies transforms students from neophytes to self-directed users of data. This is a question that existing research, particularly within the field of sociology, has not yet answered. We recognize the value of computer-based modules and offer illustrations of plausible sites where data can be obtained (see. e.g., Scheitle 2006) but provide little demonstrable empirical evidence that these efforts produce the desired effect in students' quantitative literacy.

## *2. Knowledge of Society*

An understanding of human behavior and its corresponding relationship to social structure is a central component of what sociologists claim to cover in their courses. Persell and Wenglinsky (2004) reports that students' ability to understand the complex interactions between agency and structure are enhanced significantly through the use of web-based discussions. Students become more engaged with the ideas of others when the accessibility of those various perspectives is enhanced; moreover, Persell finds that their thinking becomes more complex, within the context of this learning strategy, over the course of a semester.

Keith et al. (2002) report on a learning model that is designed to enhance students' understanding of human behavior. Their learning model is sequentially embedded within the general education program, the purpose of which is to measure students' critical understanding of a broad range of areas, including the levels of human behavior from the individual to society, the social, political, and economic contexts of the United States, and the nation-state interrelationships in the context of a global system. They report that students strengthen their understanding of these areas with a focus on the role of individual leadership within an organizational and multi-national environment.

### *3. Multicultural/Diversity Awareness and Understanding*

Our students will participate in a world that is much more interconnected and diverse than was that of their parents or grandparents (Friedman 2005). Indeed, most of our students will not be able to isolate themselves from diverse cultures and ethnicities (Bellah et al. 1985). An awareness and understanding of these differences is a first-order principle; an ability to navigate a diverse cultural terrain follows closely from exposure. Sociologists will need to consider how the material they incorporate in their courses prepares students for these challenges.

Greater diversity of students and learning environments is related to academic excellence (Levine et al. 2002; Gruin at al. 2002). Research on student interactions across race or on the topic of racial/ethnic issues finds that these interactions have a positive effect on students' likelihood of staying enrolled in college, their overall satisfaction with college, their intellectual self concept and their social self concept (Chang 1996).

### *4. Global Awareness and Understanding*

To some extent, we can assume that patterns of student learning about multiculturalism will be similar for global awareness. At present, there is little empirical evidence about how students most effectively learn about other cultures and adopt a less ethnocentric point of view. Little, Titarenko and Bergelson (2005) assess cross-national knowledge in a distance-learning context. First, faculty read students evaluations for comments about their international learning experiences. Secondly, faculty conduct a content analysis of on-line Student-Led Discussions (SLD). They evaluated 964 student posts for comments about international awareness including opinions and questions about specific countries and the world at large. Another useful resource is Stanley and Plaza (2002) work on he practice and assessment of

globalization in a one-week course on community-global connections.

Sociology departments could consider the following questions in beginning such an assessment: To what extent are sociology courses demonstrably assisting students in developing a deep, comparative knowledge of the world's people and problems, exploring the historical legacies that have created the dynamics and persistent tensions of the world? In what ways do our programs develop in students intercultural competencies that will assist them in negotiating cultural boundaries in unfamiliar environments? How successful are we in transforming students' ability to critique overarching framings such as democracy, human rights, and sustainable development within a global context?

### *5. Critical Thinking*

In a seminal article, Paul Baker noted the irony that sociology faculty frequently report critical thinking among the "top of their curricular goals" but have been remiss in studying it as a learning outcome (Baker 1981:326). He draws on Dewey and other conceptions of higher order thinking to help sociologists think more clearly about what they are trying to teach, and thus, whether they have been effective. In turning their attention to the issue of assessment of critical sociological thinking, Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop (2003:485) aptly acknowledge that, "Critical thinking seems to be much like good art: we know it when we see it, we have some sense of how we might encourage or even teach it, but we are not sure how to assess or measure it." Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop (2003) do develop a critical thinking scale based on a factor analysis. They show that, within the discipline, critical thinking involves sociological knowledge and awareness, specifically an awareness of social structure, use of sociological concepts, and a holistic, reasoned perspective. Shepelak, Curry-Jackson, and Moore (1992) show that critical thinking requires embedded structured activities within courses, which, when assessed in a sequential manner over time, can improve students' critical thinking skills. Green and Klug (1990) show that critical thinking can be incorporated into large lecture classes by subdividing the class into smaller groups, which engage one another in formal debates on social issues. Similarly, role-taking would appear to be a pre-requisite to critical thinking; one must be able to see the issue from multiple points of view, whether that entails a white male seeing a particular issue from the perspective of a black woman, a conflict theorist seeing things from the point of view of a symbolic interactionist, or an individual seeing personal troubles from a global/macro-level perspective (Roberts 2002). While these authors provide an excellent starting point for assessment of critical sociological thinking, they readily acknowledge that many more developments are needed within this area if sociologists are to systematically demonstrate improvements in critical thinking skills.

To add to the complexity of defining critical thinking, several assessment tools have been developed to measure students' level of critical thinking, including the Cornell Critical Thinking Test (Ennis and Millman 1971), the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (Facione and Facione 1994), the California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (Facione, Facione, and Giancarlo 1994), the Reflective Judgment Interview (Kitchener and King, 1981, 1994), Tasks in Critical Thinking (Pike 1999), and the

Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (Watson and Glaser 1952, 1994). As would be expected from the lack of consensus on defining critical thinking, each of the assessment tools draws from different conceptualizations of critical thinking with the advantages and disadvantages associated with the definitions. Generally, these tests measure short-term gains, leading Logan (1976) to question whether students retain critical thinking skills beyond graduation.

## *6. Civic Engagement*

Parker-Gwin and Mabry (1998) looked at both academic and civic outcomes in three models of service learning in sociology. The factor that was most important to student outcomes was the role that reflection played in student assignments. This corroborates findings of other research that reflective assignments in service learning are paramount in affecting changes in attitudes about civic engagement (Oster-Aaland et al. 2004).

Purposeful reflection within a sequentially-integrated program of study appears to be an important determinant in students' orientation toward civic engagement. When faculty develop a curriculum that extensively integrates service activities and formal coursework, students are more likely to increase their orientation toward civic engagement (Myers-Lipton 1998). A key component appears to be providing students with opportunities to understand the processes through which social problems are constructed, maintained, and resolved (Johnson 2005). Frequently, this orientation will require meaningful service and structured reflection (Oster-Aaland et al. 2004) over more than a single semester (Parker-Gwin and Mabry 1998). Moreover, as Lewis (2004) suggests, faculty must determine if they want a focus on service or learning; specifically, do students benefit from working a certain number of hours each week for a service agency (a clear benefit to and interest of the agency) or developing cognitively from the exposure to a service opportunity (community-based partnerships with educational programs).

Finally, we must ask the question does service learning change attitudes or behaviors about civic engagement? Myers-Lipton (1998) provides an example of a quasi-experimental design that illustrates that students who enroll in an integrated (within curriculum) service-learning course learn more than those persons in service learning alone or those without service learning. Similarly, Persell and Wenglinisky (2004) demonstrate that context matters; students in community colleges are likely to gain a stronger orientation toward civic responsibility than their counterparts who attend for-profit vocational schools. Dorfman et al., (2004) looked for change in attitudes in five cohorts of students who enrolled in their gerontology program. While only the first two cohorts showed changes in attitudes toward the elderly or about working with the elderly, the study helped to reveal program challenges such as cohort and client characteristics that might affect this outcome.

## *7. Communication*

Structured, sequential attempts to integrate writing within and across the curriculum are necessary if students are to demonstrably improve their writing skills. For example, Day (1989) found that requiring more writing assignments did not have a positive effect on students' writing skills. Instead, rigorous grading as formative feedback in conjunction with multiple attempts is associated with improved writing. Similarly, Hinrichs (1990) finds that communication skills improve through feedback, reflection, and additional attempts; small group discussions of students' written work appear to reinforce the emphasis on communication. Knudson (1998) finds that explicit instruction and discussion of synthesizing positions improved students' ability to state a problem and gather evidence in support of the problem over the course of an academic term. Similarly, collaborative teaching strategies that involve students are found to improve their orientation toward writing (Harris and Bretag 2003); their research suggests integrating oral and written communication skills with the course content through interdisciplinary collaboration, including support services available on college campuses. Likewise, students who encountered a curriculum that prepared them for the ACT Writing Skills Test were found to receive significantly higher test scores than their counterparts who participated in traditional programs that did not orient them toward the test (Rochford 2003).

In each of these studies, understanding the desired end state—i.e., knowing where one wants to take the students—makes a difference. Establishing a curriculum and pedagogical strategies that reinforces the learning outcome and provides students with collaborative, formative feedback over time appear to enhance their communication skills.

Grauerholz (1999) suggests that good writing habits are linked to an appreciation for the context in which they write. She suggests that students need to read sociological publications so they can see how sociologists write and write in response so they become part of the sociological dialogue. Furthermore, instructors should link reading and writing by having students write papers related to the readings (summaries or logs) to improve reading and writing. Roberts (1993) has several suggestions that are intended to increase students' comfort with writing as well as their writing skills. He suggests that instructors be less critical of early drafts where students' writing has not yet made the transition from private to public, give a more specific understanding of the audience for each particular assignment, encourage students to engage in role-taking, which is critical for writing as well as sociology, be sensitive to students who are still developing their own person writing process, and use class time to discuss writing, including peer critiques. Stokes, Roberts, and Kinney (2002) provide a strategy for departmental assessments of student writing performance, which integrate evaluation holistically throughout the major.

### *8. Moral Reasoning*

Moral development can be taught and strengthened. Academic environments that value and offer character-enhancing activities are likely to produce students who gravitate toward these outcomes. For example, Astin and Lising (2000) report that students who

attend schools identified by the Templeton Foundation as focused on student character are more likely to engage in community service and volunteerism. Moreover, moral development is found to be directly related to intercultural sensitivities and multicultural awareness. Intensive immersion experiences that force students to confront and grapple with multiple perspectives promote flexible thinking (Endicott, Bock, and Narvaez 2003).

### *9. Collaboration and Teamwork*

Sernau (1995) reports that the use of collaborative learning in his stratification courses helped students understand the concepts and methods discussed in the course. Similarly, Caulfield and Persell (2006) report that the incorporation of collaborative learning techniques in their sociology courses assisted students in becoming better engaged in working with each other, their understanding of the material, and the overall quality of their research project.

Because students can feel “math anxiety” when taking a statistics course, Helmericks (1993) reports the use of collaborative learning as a way to mitigate the level of anxiety. He reports that doing so changed the social statistics examination into a learning process and reduced the level of fear that students expressed. Other instructors of statistics courses report that collaborative learning techniques reduced student anxiety and improved statistical knowledge and skills (Auster 2000; Fischer 1996; Potter 1995; Schacht and Stewart 1992). Many instructors who have used collaborative learning techniques in their statistics courses report greater student satisfaction with the learning experience (Potter 1995), reduction of anxiety (Helmericks 1993; Schacht and Stewart 1992) and a belief that student performance was greater than students could have achieved through working independently (Auster 2000; Helmericks 1993; Wybraniec and Wilmoth 1999).

Although research conducted on collaborative learning tends to report positive results for the various techniques used by instructors, the assessment tends to be based subjectively on the instructors’ perceptions or relies on comments made by students when completing course evaluations. Future research should focus on studies to determine whether collaborative learning techniques are statistically associated with student achievement, demonstrated competencies of the course, and retention.

## **B. Assessing General Education’s Contribution to Sociology Majors**

### *1. General Education Learning Outcomes Beneficial to Sociology*

General education enhances sociology, enabling the discipline’s majors to become more grounded in both liberal learning and interdisciplinary knowledge. The breadth component of the general education curriculum can aid in the understanding and application of sociological principles. For example, how can the sociology major understand the contributions of Weber without some background in history? How can a sociology major understand the challenges of globalization without some background

in geography, demography and economics? Different models of general education result in different benefits for the sociology major, as well as different ways of assessing these benefits (see Cameron et al. 2002).

The learning competencies and outcomes associated with general education are often those faculty feel are necessary to succeed in sociology (as well as other academic disciplines). Angelo and Cross (1993) discuss some of these skills, including analysis, synthesis and critical thinking, problem-solving, application and performance, and self-awareness.

Service learning is often a requirement of general education models. Eby and Rioux (1999) describe the contribution of a service-learning component incorporated in an introductory sociology course, measured by using a pre-and post-course survey and compared to students who prepared a policy paper without the service-learning component. Findings drawn from Eby and Rioux (1999) suggest that students in the course developed a social conscience and increased their sense of social responsibility.

## *2. The Role of Introductory Sociology*

Introductory sociology provides a pivotal link between the learning outcomes reflected in a general education curriculum and the desired outcomes sought in our majors. The challenge is to structure the introductory course in a manner that provides students with knowledge of society while concurrently strengthening one or more learning outcomes in demonstrable ways. McKinney et al. (2004) recommended the sequential ordering of courses for majors, beginning with the introductory course, proceeding through theory and methodology courses, electives, and culminating in a capstone experience.

This structure is felt to provide majors with an understanding of society, the centrality of inequality within society, use of theory, the role of evidence in examining a problem, technical competence, and competency with basic sociological concepts. Such structure is equally important for non-majors, who are likely to complete only one sociology course in their higher educational experience. For the non-major, the introductory course can provide them with opportunities to gain knowledge of society within the context of specific learning outcomes. Illustratively, Massey and Meyers' joint efforts at the University of Wyoming are a case in point; their presentation at the Association of American Colleges and Universities Conference in 2006 demonstrated the applicability of combining sociology and earth science in an introductory geology course as a way of getting students to think critically and socially about the ramifications and implications of a geological phenomenon like global warming. To the extent that most students who complete an introductory sociology course never enroll in another sociology course, it is important for faculty and departments to reflect on the learning outcomes emphasized by and embedded in the introductory course.

The challenge for sociologists is to reinvent the introductory sociology course in ways that address the content of the discipline within the educational context of their institutions (Howard 2005). While the learning outcomes established for students at one

institution will most certainly vary from those at other schools, the introductory course is well-poised to incorporate many of those discussed throughout this report.

### *3. Articulating General Education Assessment Between Institutions*

The articulation of general education from one institution to another is quite complex, given the proliferation of student movement between institutions. Somewhat surprising is the absence of empirical research on student achievement of a particular general education goal for those who have pursued different pathways (transfer versus resident). At the very least we need to distinguish between vertical and horizontal transfers; i.e., vertical transfers complete general education elsewhere and transfer into sociology major as juniors whereas horizontal transfers begin somewhere in the middle of general education or in their major). Institutions that are aligned by state mandate ought to provide a transparent transition for transfer students, though we suspect that this is not the case. One of the most pertinent issues to assessment in this regard involves definitions of competencies and/or student performance based on common standards within state systems. Illustratively, although Arizona is not a state identified by any of the studies above where state mandated articulation agreements exist, various institutions within the state are recognizing a common standard through the careful development of a rubric (Jenkins 2005). This rubric, which is consistent with the guidelines provided in the *Liberal Learning* report (2004) and the Rural Sociological Society's *Curriculum Transformation for Integrated Learning*, demonstrates the important linkages between learning outcomes mandated by a political entity (Maricopa County Community College District) and the corresponding response by a college (Glendale Community College).

## VI. THE MEANS TO REALIZE THESE CONTRIBUTIONS

Sociology can contribute demonstrably to a large number of student learning outcomes as might be established within a particular institution. Thinking explicitly about faculty expectations and student learning outcomes must become second nature (Eckert et al. 1997) to be both manageable and meaningful. In order to realize these contributions, sociology departments and individual faculty might consider some of the following.

- Intentionally embed one or more learning outcomes (e.g., critical thinking, quantitative literacy, global awareness) within free-standing courses.
- Center on skill development within courses.
- Work with faculty collaboratively, both within and beyond sociology, to integrate and connect the curriculum in coherent, purposeful ways.
- Create developmental learning outcomes to direct attention toward students' first-year experience. The content of what students learn during this first year, and its relationship to key underlying outcomes, is as important as how students learn.

- Reinforce learning outcomes throughout the major, culminating in a capstone experience that requires students to select a problem central to the discipline and demonstrate their proficiency in several distinct areas as they integrate the disciplinary problem (depth component) across desired learning outcomes (breadth component).
- Develop co-curricular experiences to draw relevant connections between sociology with the perspectives and assumptions of other disciplines. Team teaching with a person from another department can provide an extraordinary opportunity to explore different ways of knowing—different ideas about what constitutes valid evidence in each discipline.
- Assessments of student’s learning outcomes through both formative and summative observations is necessary if faculty are to monitor curricular quality and integrity. The ASA report on assessment (ASA 2005) provides several excellent examples of strategies available to assess students’ performance against one or more learning outcomes.

Just as the development of learning outcomes and their incorporation within general education and majors programs is collaborative, assessment results ought to be discussed openly to improve student learning. Faculty are in the best position to gather meaningful assessments of student learning. Those assessments, however, must be communicated beyond the confines of a single course or department if they are to be used effectively as an evaluation of students’ achievement of general education goals. Assessment findings should be communicated to faculty, students, and appropriate publics for the purpose of ensuring that student performance is consistent with the desired general education outcomes.

An important observation of this report is the finding that little systematic analysis has been published on learning outcomes central to the discipline. Omitted from much of the extant literature are empirical findings of student assessments on many of the learning outcomes related to sociology—i.e., what works and what doesn’t and in what contexts. As importantly, there is a complete absence of meta-analytical literature on each of the learning outcomes discussed in this report. Assessment results ought to be used to inform the evolving scholarship on teaching and learning.

**Recommendation 6: *Toward this end, sociology departments should share accomplishments in general education with the community of sociologists, at professional meetings, on the ASA website, and in publications appearing in scholarly work on teaching and learning.***

## VII. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIOLOGY IN GENERAL EDUCATION

Perhaps by this point in the report a number of readers are convinced of the importance of sociological engagement in general education. For those ready to take the plunge, we acknowledge that the higher education scene is a rough terrain. The over 3,000 institutions that offer sociology differ widely in mission. There are a number of other factors that make the implementation of a general education program challenging, including:

- Transfer students and articulation agreements – for some institutions, such as community colleges, most courses are general education; for the institutions that receive those students and offer primarily upper division courses and majors, there needs to be a clear sense of what articulation agreements are in place, and what course equivalence means. Some four-year institutions offer a general education (broad survey) course requirement in the upper division. Some capstone courses in the major serve this function. Departments need to examine the primary “feeder schools” to see if some common learning goals can be set for general education courses in sociology.
- Large class sizes – Faculty need to be creative in moving from “sage on the stage” to more engaged pedagogies even with large classes. Non-sociology students need to have some sense of the habits of the mind of sociologists, how questions are posed, a theoretical context set, and data evaluated and brought to bear on the question. Courses need to emphasize these “habits” as much as specific terms and facts, which is often the tendency in large classes.
- Faculty time, part-time faculty, faculty assignments to general education courses – If part-time faculty, adjunct faculty, and graduate students are assigned to general education courses, they need to be oriented to understand the place of these courses in the curriculum, the learning goals, course competencies, and the methods of assessment. If possible, the faculty should meet and share ideas.
- Online and hybrid course formats – Faculty responsible for online and hybrid course formats need to remember that the format rarely alters the goals for the general education courses. These faculty need to be brought into discussions about the expected outcomes of general education sociology courses.
- The “outsourcing” or “cooptation” of sociology content to other fields – Partly because of the congruence between the learning objectives of sociology and liberal education outcomes, and partly because of the pressures arising from accreditation requirements, curricular innovations in departments other than sociology sometimes incorporate a “sociological” perspective without benefit of sociological expertise. On the one hand, this represents something of a sociological achievement; on the other, it often short-changes the sociological perspective, reducing what students receive to a bare, unprofessional minimum. Sociologists ought to be attentive to these developments, attempting to maintain professional standards of sociological competence throughout the curriculum.

## VIII. COLLABORATION TO STRENGTHEN GENERAL EDUCATION IN SOCIOLOGY

The Task Force urges the sociological community to become more engaged in the discussion and shaping of general education on campus. It seems wise to share our ideas and successes within our sociological networks across campuses, using national, regional, and state sociological associations. Sociologists turn to their associations for technical assistance and need to find venues where they can both find useful materials and share their own professional products relating to general education. The Task Force encourages these associations to figure out appropriate ways to:

- Include general education as a topic for conference sessions and workshops, newsletter articles, and so forth
- Disseminate publications, web resources and conference materials to members.
- Maintain a website to post discussions, assessment strategies, and curricular innovations that link together the discipline with general education.
- Collaborate with national higher education associations like the AAC&U, to promote common messages that underscore the credibility and legitimacy of our work in general education.
- Support members who are expert in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), including general education, such as ASA's Department Resources Group; the ASA also has members who evaluate promotion and tenure files on SoTL work
- Provide periodic reviews of departmental programs and their contributions to general education.

## IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force encourages department chairs and all sociology faculty to ascertain the stage of the “general education conversation” on campus and to become involved proactively in it. To that end, sociology departments should:

1. Contribute to a consensus about general educational goals, definitions, and what it is that undergraduates should learn in the general education curriculum, taking into account the institutional mission, type, size, and student characteristics.
2. Emphasize with examples the discipline's important contributions to desired outcomes of student learning.

3. Develop curricula within the department and in the general education curriculum around a set of collaboratively designed, well-articulated learning outcomes.
4. Ensure that the requirements of the major are mapped to general education learning outcomes and explicitly conveyed to students in order to strengthen their foundational knowledge within a study-in-depth experience.
5. Collect and analyze systematically assessment data and communicate these results to faculty, students, and appropriate publics to ensure that student performance is consistent with the general education learning goals.
6. Share accomplishments in general education with the community of sociologists, at professional meetings, on the ASA website, and in publications appearing in scholarly work on teaching and learning.

## X. SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN IMPLEMENTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS ON YOUR CAMPUS

The department can work on the general education agenda over the course of several months. Here are some steps to consider:

- Appoint a small committee to take the lead on this work.
- Document the status of the general education program on your campus – in place, under review, in controversy, working well? Who at the campus level is responsible for general education? When might the topic be raised again and by what process? (a faculty committee?)
- Document the status of the institutional accreditation process. When is the institution’s accreditation “up” again? Who will be responsible for leading that process and how?
- Try to describe the current general education requirement “structure” and sociology’s part in it? Engage the department to voice the implications of the current structure for the department: on intellectual grounds (is sociology included?); in terms of enrollment; in terms of faculty resources. What are the areas where the department would like changes to be made?
- Taking into account the institutional mission, where does the department see the need for improvements in the current general education program? In what ways can sociology courses contribute to these improvements?
- If a review of general education is not imminent, how can some of these suggestions for greater involvement of sociology content be transmitted and enacted? What are the steps to do this?
- Taking the current general education goals of the institution, make a matrix of those goals and the sociology courses currently being offered. What does this matrix reveal? (For example, sociology courses that don’t count toward general education requirements, but should; sociology courses that do not explicitly

emphasize general education goals; sociology courses that do not include assessment of general education skills).

- Identify a set of courses that contribute significantly to general education skills; how can there be consistency across instructors and time, to ensure that these goals are emphasized (granted through different approaches and means)?
- Using the list of nine general education skills that sociology can enhance, where are your department's current areas of strength? What would you like to improve and strengthen in the next two years?
- Identify how the department assesses general education learning outcomes in current courses and how this process can be improved.
- Develop an action plan and timetable to implement what you have learned.

A very useful article to help departments avoid pitfalls is over twenty-five years old but quite relevant to general education discussions today. Jerry Gaff (1980) wrote "Avoiding the Potholes: Strategies for Reforming General Education" to provide a very practical guide to these reform efforts.

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