In the last two decades, formal assessment of student learning in higher education has become institutionalized. This paper summarizes current research and writing about the key components of assessment plans (statement of purpose, goals and outcomes objectives, and assessment mechanisms) and about the work involved in conducting an annual assessment program. We discuss the evolution of assessment within sociology and the paucity of both descriptive and explanatory research on assessment of student learning. We also pose important research questions that sociologists could pursue to enhance understanding of the context, content, process, and effects of assessment. The paper also examines the assessment movement itself: forces that have stimulated the movement, the demonstrated benefits of conscientious assessment of student learning, sources of resistance to assessment, and the general status of assessment in higher education today.

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In the last two decades, an assessment movement has emerged and spread throughout a variety of social sectors including businesses, social services, and education. Within higher education, assessment can occur at the institutional, divisional, departmental, program, and class level and on both the academic and administrative sides of the institution. While the layers of assessment are naturally inter-related, this paper focuses on the assessment of student learning by academic departments. As such, the focus is on a process that includes (1) the department’s development of an explicit mission or purpose statement, (2) the formulation of broadly stated goals and more specifically stated outcomes objectives for student learning, (3) the systematic collection of information relative to the extent to which the objectives are being accomplished, and (4) based on the information obtained, collective efforts to identify and implement specific program changes to enhance student learning. Assessment is grounded in the belief that effective institutions and departments engage in a systematic and continuous process of improvement in order to better achieve their goals and objectives.

Work on this paper began when the five of us collaborated at a conference on The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Sociology held in Harrisonburg, Virginia in July 2000. The workshop brought together more than 40 sociologists from all types of institutions to review and extend current scholarship in sociology related to (1) the integration of styles of teaching and styles of learning, (2) the assessment of faculty, (3) partnerships between community and academy, (4) technology and its uses in teaching and learning, (5) the impact of...
institutional contexts on teaching and learning, and (6) the sociology curriculum and assessment of student learning. The authors of this paper worked to identify knowledge that already existed about the assessment of student learning and what still needed to be known. In the course of doing this work we hoped to establish and promote a research agenda for sociologists interested in contributing to an understanding of assessment and its effects on teaching and learning.

FORCES PROMOTING THE ASSESSMENT MOVEMENT

The primary stimulus for the assessment movement occurred in the early 1980s through increasingly vocal public dissatisfaction with the quality of higher education and increased calls for institutional accountability for educational promises. Well-publicized exposes of students graduating from college without fundamental reading, writing, and mathematics skills contributed to the suspicion that institutions were not fulfilling their obligations to students. When these complaints were coupled with requests by institutions for more public funds, legislators, parents, and students began demanding empirical evidence of the real— as opposed to claimed—outcomes and benefits of attending a college or university (Terenzini 1989).

These public outcries caught the attention of two especially important groups: the six regional accrediting agencies for colleges and universities and several state legislatures (Schechter, Testa, and Eder 2000). Though the terminology used by the accrediting agencies differs, all of them now place some emphasis on assessment (Maki 1999). For example, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) has placed extremely high priority on assessment (in recent years assessment has been the area in which institutions have been most likely to be judged in non-compliance by SACS), and places it in the context of institutional effectiveness. SACS’ Criteria for Accreditation (1998:19) describes institutional effectiveness as being “at the heart of the commission’s philosophy of accreditation” and “central to institutional programs and operations.” It expresses an expectation that “each member institution develop a broad-based system to determine institutional effectiveness appropriate to its own context and purpose, to use the purpose statement as the foundation of planning and evaluation, to employ a variety of assessment methods, and to demonstrate use of the results of the planning and evaluation process for the improvement of both educational programs and support services.”

State legislatures have also become centrally involved in the assessment and accountability movement. Several legislatures have applied significant pressure on public institutions of higher education to engage in a systematic process of assessment of their programs and to document the outcomes and value of the education provided. Some states have created specific performance standards to evaluate institutions and upon which to base budget allocations (Burke, Modarresi, and Serban 1999; Wellman 2001).

The same forces have in part been responsible for stimulating considerable interest in assessment throughout a wide variety of academic groups, academic foundations, and disciplinary associations. Groups such as the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) now promote the value of assessment as a legitimate means to improve student learning, encourage institutions to shape their own programs to be maximally beneficial, and sponsor annual assessment workshops.

Disciplinary associations, including the American Sociological Association (ASA), also support and encourage assessment activity and have become advocates for the development of sound assessment programs. For example, the widely-read Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major (ASA 1992:22-23), prepared by the ASA in conjunction with the Association of
American Colleges (AAC), identifies assessment as one of 13 recommendations for all sociology departments:

Departments should assess the major (curriculum, courses, and instruction) on a regular basis using multiple sources of data. To implement this recommendation, departments should routinely collect data by:

- examining the department’s goals, missions, needs, facilities, access to resources, etc.;
- examining the faculty’s goals, needs, resources, and perspectives on instruction;
- surveying present students, both majors and non-majors, on needs, goals, levels of satisfaction with courses and advising, social networks, career goals and actual plans, etc.;
- surveying graduates on similar issues, as well as on their identification with sociology;
- monitoring similar data in other “sibling” institutions and departments;
- articulating the findings’ implications for departmental programs.

RATIONALE FOR ASSESSMENT

The literature contains four primary arguments for conscientious assessment programs as they relate to student learning—increased faculty conversation about teaching and learning, improved classroom teaching, effective curricular reform, and, most importantly, enhanced student learning.

Conducting meaningful assessment requires faculty colleagues to engage in serious conversation about teaching and learning: about the mission of the department or program, about explicit goals and objectives held for students, about ways to determine the best manner to assess the extent to which students are achieving the objectives, and about ways that department organization, curriculum, and course instruction can be modified to enhance student learning. While many departments never engage in this type of discussion, proponents of assessment argue that they should and that the teaching-learning process will inevitably benefit (Howery 1992; Sharkey 1990).

The assessment literature suggests that conversation about teaching and learning and the self-reflection that it engenders leads to a second benefit: improved teaching. The process of mission, goal, and objective articulation forces faculty to think about their own courses and course components in a more focused way (Good and Brophy 1994; Posner 1995). It creates a greater awareness of how individual courses fit into the curriculum, and it helps guide course construction and delivery.

This benefit may be especially true in the case of classroom-embedded assessment techniques such as the use of primary-trait analysis (that is, the development of rubrics), which uses graded assignments that directly correspond to department and course learning objectives (Huba and Freed 2000), and with classroom assessment techniques (CAT), which use ungraded feedback mechanisms to monitor the progress of student learning during a course (Angelo and Cross 1993; Brookfield 1995; Nilson 1998; Tebo-Messina and Van Waller 1998). Because meaningful classroom assessment occurs only when we test what we teach (Cross 1999; Hilton, 1993; Lovell-Troy 1989) and when we are willing to continually evaluate what we are teaching (Angelo and Cross 1993), assessment creates a cycle of feedback, self-reflection, and effort to improve teaching. There is evidence that the use of these techniques constitutes good teaching as they both require students to focus on what they are learning (Eisenbach, Golich, and Curry 1998) and enable students to more actively monitor their own learning process (Cross 1999). Students typically respond favorably to these classroom techniques, expressing greater satisfaction with courses that use them (Steadman 1998). For these reasons, it is not unusual to see discussions of student assessment and faculty assessment in tandem, as willingness to engage in student assessment is seen as one measure of faculty affectivity (Centra 1993; Weimer 1990).

A third benefit of assessment cited in the literature is support for curricular reform. An
obvious sociological insight is that academic departments rarely equal the sum of their parts—they are greater or lesser depending upon the ability and willingness of members to work together for the common good. Similarly, sociology curricula do not simply equal the sum or aggregation of individually constructed sociology courses. Many of the key curricular issues identified in Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major—integration of the curriculum, meaningful sequencing of courses, requiring developmental levels, and overall curricular coherence—cannot be addressed by individual faculty members, no matter how conscientious they are. Assessment provides a means for discussion of the collective departmental mission, goals, and objectives; a technique for systematically collecting data to determine the extent of success in achieving the objectives; and a forum for consideration of curricular changes that would strengthen student learning (Ellis and Fouts 1993; Howery 1992; Posner 1995).

Ultimately, the legitimacy of assessment rests with the final perceived benefit: the genuine enhancement of student learning. The theoretical foundation of assessment is that the focus of higher education should shift from being teaching-oriented and input-oriented to learning-oriented and outcome-based. The measure of success shifts from what is being given to students or done to or for students to what happens to students as a result of their educational experience. Those who work in assessment agree that this is a profound change.

Much of the evidence that exists regarding the positive effect of assessment on student learning is based on either (1) the positive effects of clear goal- and objective-setting on student learning or (2) case studies of institutions and departments that have experienced enhanced student learning as a result of serious assessment. Examples in sociology of the latter include Sharkey’s report (1990) on Alverno College’s success in teaching analysis and valuing; Jackson et al.’s report (1992) on Rhode Island College’s success in teaching research methods and social theory; and Bradfield’s report (1992) and Eck’s reflection (2001) on James Madison University’s success helping students understand the core paradigms of critical, interpretative, and naturalistic analysis. Certainly, many more such examples exist, but most are only now finding their way into the literature.

THE CURRENT STATUS OF ASSESSMENT

In the last 15 years, assessment has been a primary movement within higher education. The insistence of state legislatures and accrediting agencies; the endorsement of higher education associations, foundations, and disciplinary associations; the institutionalization of assessment on campuses in the form of assessment directors and committees; and the ever-burgeoning growth of assessment conferences and assessment literature testify to the secure hold that assessment has obtained. Yet, most higher education experts around the country would agree that, to date, assessment’s record of accomplishment has fallen far short of the ideal or expected (Angelo 1999; Burke 1999; Lazerson, Wagener, and Shumanis 2000; Maki 1999.)

In 1997 the New England Association of Colleges and Schools (the accrediting agency in the New England area) surveyed its 188 constituent institutions about activities directed toward assessing student outcomes. A dozen years into the assessment movement, the great majority (92 percent) of the institutions indicated that they could “demonstrate not very well or only moderately well the success of their efforts to assess, verify, and enhance the achievement of their mission and purposes through student outcomes assessment” (Maki 1999:2). Sixty percent of administrators rated assessment as extremely important, but they estimated that 70 percent of the faculty viewed assessment as only somewhat important or not at all important.
A subsequent survey conducted by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) of 1,400 public and private institutions examined the nature, extent, and impact of student assessment strategies on a national basis (Wright 2000). Although the survey found fairly substantial institutional activity on collecting student assessment data, most of what was collected were institutional data on students’ academic progress, basic college readiness skills, academic intentions of students, and satisfaction with the undergraduate experience. Few institutions indicated an engagement in more complex assessment activities focused on evidence of student learning. Results also indicated that few institutions were making academic planning decisions based on the findings from assessment data. The NCPI report stated that while many state agencies and institutional accrediting bodies have stimulated the adoption of assessment activities, these activities have had little impact on how institutions have used student assessment data to improve student performance. While assessment holds much promise, the NCPI concluded that it hardly constitutes an academic revolution (National Center for Postsecondary Improvement 1999).

Lazerson et al. (2000), commenting on their survey of 320 institutions that underwent reaccreditation reviews between 1997 and 1999, acknowledged that some changes in teaching and learning in higher education have occurred in recent decades, “but there is little evidence that the changes add up to a systematic reconsideration of how and why students learn or of how institutions, rather than simply individual professors, can revise their approaches to teaching.” Palomba and Banta (1999) charge that although most institutions are now involved in assessment, their actions constitute little more than “a thin veneer of compliance.” Acknowledging that some academics and professional staff take their assessment activity seriously, most are only tangentially involved or not at all involved in genuinely using assessment to enhance student learning.

Yet, there are many examples of institutions and academic departments that do take assessment seriously and report positive findings. Publications such as Assessment Bulletin and Assessment Update routinely report specific examples of successful assessment programs. Books such as Banta et al.’s Assessment in Practice: Putting Principles to Work on College Campuses (1996) and Nichols’ A Practitioner’s Handbook for Institutional Effectiveness and Student Outcomes Assessment Implementation (1995) offer exemplars of effective assessment activity. It seems clear, according to Hutchings and Marchese (1990), that where assessment works, it does so because it is an integral part of the entire educational experience. It is not a separate function on its own but rather a process woven into the daily fabric of college.

**REASONS WHY ASSESSMENT HAS NOT HAD MORE SUCCESS**

What guidance does the literature offer to help explain why assessment has not reached a higher level of acceptance nor led to more frequent genuine enhancements of student learning? Four of the key factors are summarized here.

First, conscientious assessment constitutes a significant departure from the traditional academic culture throughout higher education but especially in larger, research-oriented institutions. Traditional academic culture often is very individualistic, with maximum emphasis placed on each faculty member enacting his or her own career without much interference or influence by department or college. Teaching and curricular matters may rarely be discussed, and no one is likely to impinge on what occurs in individual classrooms. Meaningful assessment requires faculty to discuss matters such as the mission of the program and its specific objectives, mechanisms to genuinely assess student learning, and changes in curriculum, policies, standards, course organization, and pedagogy that
could positively impact student learning. This requires coordination, collaboration on teaching-learning matters, and some willingness to prioritize the common good or the student good over personal desires.

In a paper presented at the 1999 Assessment Institute, Banta et al. posited that the very definition of assessment implies collaboration, but that higher education contains a variety of barriers to collaboration which make genuine commitment to assessment very difficult. While the reasons for lack of greater assessment success at large universities and small colleges may not be identical, Banta et al. identified the following barriers: disciplinary traditions, the faculty reward structure (as it relates to engaging in individual research projects and securing grants), and the traditional configuration of teaching as an individually practiced profession. Keith and Myers (1992) concluded that many faculty have little interest in collaboration for the sake of student learning, have not been convinced of its desirability, and resent its interference with their own interests and autonomy.

Second, the manner in which the assessment mandate has been presented to faculties has further contributed to their resentment of it. The traditional mistrust between college faculties and state legislatures comes to the surface in cases where legislators enact policies that directly or indirectly dictate to the professorate (as occurs with performance standards). While regional accrediting agencies have been among the leaders in supporting and requiring assessment, they have sometimes acted with such heavy-handedness in working with constituent institutions that faculties come to see assessment mostly or entirely as a mandate associated with reaccreditation rather than a genuine technique to enhance student learning (Sharkey 1990). This factor is further exacerbated by the fact that doing good assessment does require time. Faculty members will inevitably resent having any time-significant task imposed on their workload without some corresponding reduction in other responsibilities.

Finally, Peter Ewell (1997) has suggested two additional reasons that institutions of higher education have not had more success in enhancing student learning. He suggests that those in higher education lack a clear understanding of what collegiate learning really means. This is consistent with the oft-expressed idea that student learning is such an obvious and taken-for-granted concept that neither individually nor collectively have we thought through its meaning. Angelo (1999:3-4) argues that “most assessment efforts have resulted in little learning improvement because they have been implemented without a clear vision of what “higher” or “deeper” learning is and without an understanding of how assessment can promote such learning.” This brings us to Ewell’s other conclusion regarding assessment: that assessment initiatives have, for the most part, been attempted in a piecemeal fashion within and across institutions. This perception of haphazardness also contributes to a failure to view the teaching/learning process as part of the social institution of education.

THE ENACTMENT OF ASSESSMENT: ASSESSMENT PLANS AND ANNUAL ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES

As the assessment movement has evolved and as the literature on assessment and the number of workshops and sessions at professional meetings of academic disciplines and higher education associations have increased, the basic expectations for assessment have crystallized. Essentially, but with some important variations from region to region, academic majors and programs within higher education institutions must (1) construct an assessment plan consisting of a statement of purpose, a set of outcome objectives for students majoring in the discipline and a roster of mechanisms used to assess success in achieving the objectives, and (2) conduct an annual assessment program in which a limited number of the objectives are assessed and
the results used to identify and implement changes to enhance student learning. The following sections summarize current knowledge about these components of assessment and suggest questions to which sociological analysis might be brought to bear.

Sociology is especially well-positioned to offer both descriptions of what currently exists with regard to assessment plans and programs and analyses of factors that contribute to or impede effective assessment. A sociology of assessment practice could easily draw upon the insights of the discipline with regard to the institutionalization of a new paradigm and new activities. Such an approach would be enhanced both by macro-level investigations of political, economic, and socio-organizational factors that affect the introduction and dissemination of assessment and by micro-level analyses of the processes by which assessment questions are framed and assessment results used to modify curriculum and pedagogy. It could benefit from all major theoretical analyses and use both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain comprehensive understanding of assessment. Potentially, these analyses can offer important practical guidance to faculty and departments as they work and sometimes struggle to understand and effectively utilize results of assessment to enhance student learning of sociology.

**The Statement of Purpose**

The statement of purpose is designed to be the foundation and inspiration for all assessment activity. Sociology purpose statements, like those for all majors and programs, are intended to articulate the contribution of the discipline to the mission and goals of the institution and describe the purpose of studying the discipline (for example, what sociology majors ought to learn and be able to do as a result of studying sociology). While purpose statements often are written generically, the best statements are tailored to the specific programs and emphases of a particular department (Gardiner 1989).

The Program Assessment Consultation Team (PACT) at California State University at Bakersfield (a typical institutional assessment committee but one that has published an impressive assessment document) notes that the mission statement should identify the values and philosophy of the department and a vision of what the department is doing. It can include a brief history and philosophy of the unit, the type of students to be served and their geographic area, the academic environment and primary focus of the curriculum, faculty roles, contributions to and connections with the community, the role of research, and a nondiscrimination statement (PACT Outcomes Assessment Handbook, 2000). A well-written statement should be used to guide decision-making about curriculum, policies, and standards and should provide the framework for the program’s goals and objectives.

The literature on higher education contains numerous essays and reflections on the importance of purpose statements, key components of well written statements, successful processes for writing statements, and ways to link purpose statements with goals and objectives. However, there has been almost no systematic research on the content of purpose or mission statements and on variations in statements based on type of institution. Many assessment experts believe that, despite the attention given to assessment in the last two decades, institutional purpose statements remain largely generic and not substantially different among various types of institutions—a pattern first reported by Weick in the mid-1970s (Weick 1976).

This pattern was affirmed in recent research by Delucchi (2000) who analyzed the academic mission statements of 303 liberal arts colleges in the United States. Among his findings was that 70 percent of colleges making liberal arts claims in their mission statements actually awarded degrees primarily in professional disciplines. He concluded that the claim to liberal arts often failed to reveal the actual motives that shaped the curriculum, and...
that it may be both politically and methodologically more valuable for sociology faculty to frame their assessment of student learning within the context of the discipline as opposed to the mission of a particular institution.

Powers (2000:42) offers an excellent explication of the role of a guiding mission statement in his description of Santa Clara University’s efforts to build a developmental curriculum. His department’s mission is to “offer students sociological tools and insights they can use to improve the effectiveness of the organizations they are a part of and enhance the quality of the communities they live in.” This mission statement has become the department’s organizing focal point for the construction of specific learning objectives, curriculum design, and assessment techniques to gain feedback on the department’s success.

Clearly there is an important research agenda for sociologists who want to shed light on the context in which sociology purpose statements are written, the content of the statements, the process by which they were written, and the effects or outcomes of having a purpose statement in place. The following offers a beginning list of questions that sociologists might pursue. Given that we are at a very early stage of sociological research on assessment, most of the identified questions are descriptive in nature.

**Context.** What is the institutional setting in which the department has been asked to write a purpose statement? Is there administrative support for the work of departments in writing a mission statement? What guidance do institutional administrators offer, and what resources, if any, have been made available to assist in the work? What rationale does administrators and department chairpersons offer for faculty to take assessment responsibility seriously? How much time is given to draft the statement? What institutional rewards and sanctions are used to stimulate this work? What is the influence of these factors on the content, process, and outcomes of writing the statement?

**Content.** To what extent and in what ways are sociology purpose statements linked to institutional purpose statements? What do sociology faculties identify as the fundamental purpose of their department and its fundamental contribution to the institution? To what extent are statements focused on students’ learning versus a research mission or a community or public service mission? To what extent does the purpose statement focus on the cognitive abilities of students versus more generic skills (such as critical thinking and effective writing), value acquisition, and post-graduation employment?

What major emphases and directions are identified as characterizing the sociology program? What elements of educational philosophy are included? Is attention given to the purpose of sociology as a general education requirement? To what extent does the content of purpose statements differ in private versus public institutions, church-related versus secular institutions, small versus large institutions, single-sex versus coeducational institutions, or by institutional location (e.g., urban versus small town and south versus midwest)?

**Process.** What process is used to write the statement? To what extent is it created out of group discussion and collaboration versus the work of the chair or a single individual? How is the process subsumed within the traditional organizational bureaucracy of the department? What occurs when most or even some faculty refuse to participate or undermine the work of others? How does the department assessment leader encourage follow-through on collective decisions? What strategies are used to encourage faculty to keep an open mind about or support conscientious assessment?

**Effects.** Is the statement supported by faculty? Is it used as a framework for identifying goals and objectives? Is it viewed as a useful activity? Does it affect the level of acceptance of the statement? Does the purpose statement lead to departmental, curricular, or
pedagogical decisions that affect the teaching and learning of sociology? Are changes made to enhance curricular coherence and student learning? Are improvements made in positive student outcomes?

**Goals and Objectives**

“The departmental purpose statement is to lead to the formulation of a list of goals and outcomes objectives for students majoring in the field. Goals are statements about general aims or purposes of education that are broad, long-range intended outcomes that can be used in policy making and general program planning” (Johnson, Potts, and Hood 1999). They are “general aims or purposes of the program and the curriculum; include broad, long-range intended outcomes, wishes, desires, and intentions, as well as statements about content knowledge, skills, attributes, broad knowledge/values, and perspectives expected in graduates” (PACT Outcomes Assessment Handbook 2000:11).

Each goal has one or more corresponding outcomes objectives. The best-written objectives are concise, clear statements that describe a measurable learning outcome. They are focused on the specific types of performance that students are expected to demonstrate at the end of instruction (Johnson, Potts, and Hood 1999). Objectives “...flow from the goals; [they are] operational definitions that let you know if goals are being reached; [they are] tangible/observable outcomes expected in your students” (PACT Outcomes Assessment Handbook 2000:11). They should include the knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, and achievements expected of students in the major.

The emphasis within the assessment movement is on objectives that are clear, measurable, and outcome- or result-oriented rather than process-oriented. This is contrary to the tradition of most academic departments, which are more accustomed to identifying what the faculty will do than what will happen to students. While some departments still include some process-oriented objectives, the emphasis now is on identification of what students will be able to do as a result of studying sociology.

Much education literature exists on the importance of clear articulation of goals and objectives. Empirical research (both laboratory and in the field) across a wide range of organizational settings strongly supports the positive effects of goal-setting on learning and performance improvement. In an early review of 17 empirical studies, Locke et al. (1981) found that setting challenging goals versus more vague “do your best” goals increased performance in every one of the studies. How did clear goal setting lead to improved performance? It led to more focused attention and action, greater mobilization of energy and effort, greater persistence on task, and increased motivation for goal attainment. Educational treatises today routinely cite the positive effects of carefully designed, clearly expressed, explicit learning goals (see Ellis and Fouts 1993 on clear goal-setting contributing to effective schools; Good and Brophy 1994 on goals as motivators; Posner 1995 on the contribution of goal setting to coherent curricula; Cross 1999 on goal-setting as a motivator specifically among college students; and Johnson, Potts, and Hood 1999 on the contribution of department goal setting to course instruction).

There is a small body of literature in sociology that specifically addresses the importance of goal- and objective-setting in shaping the curriculum and in assessing student learning. Given the demonstrated value of goal articulation for student learning, it is surprising that more sociologists have not addressed this issue. Interestingly, some sociologists were addressing this issue before the assessment movement in higher education really became visible. In an early *Teaching Sociology* article, Miriampolski (1978) reflected on goals that would be appropriate in a humanistic approach to introducing students to sociology. (He recommended understanding social determinism, relativizing culture, instilling a sense of social realism, and developing skills in critical evaluation.)
Among the earliest attempts to discover the content of goals emphasized in sociology is the work of Vaughan (1980:268). She analyzed textbooks; study guides and instructor’s manuals for the introductory sociology course; course syllabi for the introductory course (that were collected by the ASA Section on Undergraduate Education); and surveys of departmental chairpersons to assemble a list of Stated Goals for Undergraduate Instruction in Sociology. She identified the following goals: (1) to transmit a body of knowledge to the students, (2) to develop certain substantive understandings in the students, (3) to contribute to the general intellectual and personal development of students, and (4) to contribute to students’ vocational preparation. Others who reflected on appropriate goals for sociology include Bradshaw and McPherron (1980), Hazzard (1991), McMillan and McKinney (1985), Rhoades (1980), and Stephan and Massey (1982).

In 1991, Wagenaar extended and formalized much of this thinking by drafting a list of 10 goals for undergraduate sociology (which linked goals and outcomes objectives). These goals later became the basis for a list of 12 learning goals for the sociology major that was included in *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major* (ASA 1992). These two sets of goals have been widely cited and used as a foundation for their own goal-setting by sociology programs around the country. The *Liberal Learning* goals are contained in Table 1. Also, in 1992, the ASA’s Teaching Resources Center published *Assessing Undergraduate Learning in Sociology*, edited by Sharkey and Johnson, which has also been an extremely useful document to many sociology programs.

Much of the writing by sociologists on goals and objectives has been prescriptive, reflecting efforts to recommend goals and objectives that sociology departments might consider. What is needed is more empirical research—both descriptive and explanatory—that relates to the context, content, process, and effects of goal- and objective-writing.

### Context

What is the institutional setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Learning Goals for the Sociology Major (from <em>Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major</em>)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The sociology major should study, review, and reflect on:</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1) the discipline of sociology and its role in contributing to our understanding of social reality, such that the student will be able to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- describe how sociology differs from and is similar to other social sciences, and give examples of these differences;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- describe how sociology contributes to a liberal arts understanding of social reality; and</td>
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<tr>
<td>- apply the sociological imagination, sociological principles, and concepts to her/his own life.</td>
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<td>(2) the role of theory in sociology, such that the students will be able to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- define theory and describe its role in building sociological knowledge;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- compare and contrast basic theoretical orientations;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- show how theories reflect the historical context of times and cultures in which they were developed;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- describe and apply some basic theories or theoretical orientations in at least one area of social reality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) the role of evidence and qualitative and quantitative methods in sociology, such that the student will be able to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- identify basic methodological approaches and describe the general role of methods in building sociological knowledge;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- compare and contrast the basic methodological approaches for gathering data;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- design a research study in an area of choice and explain why various decisions were made; and</td>
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<tr>
<td>- critically assess a published research report and explain how the study could have been improved.</td>
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Table 1. con’t

(4) basic concepts in sociology and their fundamental theoretical interrelations, such that the student will be able to:
- define, give examples, and demonstrate the relevance of the following: culture, social change, socialization, stratification, social structure, institutions, and differentiations by race/ethnicity, gender, age, and class.

(5) how culture and social structure operate, such that the student will be able to:
- show how institutions interlink their effects on each other and on individuals;
- demonstrate how social change factors such as population or urbanization affect social structures and individuals;
- demonstrate how culture and social structure vary across time and place, and the effect of such variations; and
- identify examples of specific policy implications using reasoning about social structural effects.

(6) reciprocal relations between individuals and society, such that the student will be able to:
- explain how the self develops sociologically;
- demonstrate how societal and structural factors influence individual behavior and the self’s development;
- demonstrate how social interaction and the self influence society and social structure; and
- distinguish sociological approaches to analyzing the self from psychological, economic, and other approaches.

(7) the macro/micro distinction, such that the student will be able to:
- compare and contrast theories at one level with those at another;
- summarize some research documenting connections between the two; and
- develop a list of research or analytical issues that should be pursued to more fully understand the connections between the two.

(8) in depth at least one area within sociology, such that the student will be able to:
- summarize basic questions and issues in the area;
- compare and contrast basic theoretical orientations and middle range theories in the area;
- show how sociology helps understand the area;
- summarize current research in the area; and
- develop specific policy implications of research and theories in the area.

(9) the internal diversity of American society and its place in the international context, such that the student will be able to describe:
- the significance of variations by race, class, gender, and age; and
- will know how to appropriately generalize or resist generalizations across groups.

(10) one or more areas within sociology, such that the student will be able to:
- compare and contrast the basic theoretical orientations in the area;
- show how sociology helps understand the area;
- summarize current research in the area; and
- develop policy implications of the research and theory in the area.

Two more generic goals that should be pursued in sociology are:

(11) To think critically, such that the student will be able to:
- move easily from recall analysis and application to synthesis and evaluation;
- identify underlying assumptions in particular theoretical orientations or arguments;
- identify underlying assumptions particular methodological approaches to an issue;
- show how patterns of thought and knowledge are directly influenced by political-economic social structures; and
- present opposing viewpoints and alternative hypotheses on various issues.

(12) To develop values, such that the student will see:
- the utility of the sociological perspective as one of several perspectives on social reality; and
- the importance of reducing the negative effects of social inequality.
in which the department has been asked to write learning goals and objectives? Is there administrative support for this work? What guidance is offered by institutional administrators, and what resources, if any, have been made available to assist in the work? What rationale do administrators and department chairpersons offer to faculty to justify this work? How much time is given to write goals and objectives? What institutional rewards and sanctions are used to stimulate this work?

**Content.** What are the goals and outcome objectives that sociology programs have adopted? How do they compare with the goals and objectives identified in *Liberal Learning*-are they more or less inclusive? Do they follow from the institutional and program statement of purpose? How do they compare with the goals and objectives written in other social science departments at the same institution?

To what extent do they focus on the cognitive learning of sociology versus skill development (for example, theory construction or interviewing skills) versus generic skills (for example, effective writing and oral presentation)? Is there any focus on value socialization or on enabling students to understand their own education as being part of a larger social institution that has social, political, cultural, and economic consequences? To what extent does the content of goals and objectives differ in private versus public institutions, church-related versus secular institutions, small versus large institutions, single-sex versus coeducational institutions, or by institutional location (e.g., urban versus small town and south versus midwest)?

**Process.** What process is used to write the goals and objectives? To what extent are they created out of group discussion and collaboration versus the work of the chair or a single individual? How is the process subsumed within the traditional organizational bureaucracy of the department? What occurs when faculty refuse to participate or undermine the work of others? How does the department assessment leader encourage follow-through on collective decisions? What strategies are used to encourage faculty to keep an open mind about or to support conscientious assessment?

**Effects.** Are the goals and objectives supported by faculty? Does the process by which they have been written affect their level of acceptance? Do the goals and objectives genuinely influence decisions about curriculum, policies, and standards? Are faculty familiar with them? Are students familiar with them? Do they influence course content and pedagogy? Are they periodically reviewed? What factors influence the degree to which the goals and objectives are used as guides? To what extent do they differ in private versus public institutions, church-related versus secular institutions, small versus large institutions, single-sex versus coeducational institutions, or by institutional location?

**Assessment Mechanisms**

Being accustomed to conceptualizing, operationalizing, and measuring human attitudes and behaviors, sociologists likely have as much experience as any academicians with mechanisms for assessing student learning. Early assessment programs often consisted of little more than administering test scores to measure student outcomes (Schilling and Schilling 1998). Today, however, assessment of student learning occurs through a wide variety of techniques based on the collection of information from current students, from alumni, from relevant constituencies (for example, employers and graduate schools), from external reviewers, and from the monitoring of institutional data. Table 2 identifies some of the commonly used assessment mechanisms in sociology.

Most of the increasingly voluminous literature on assessment mechanisms focuses on one of three topics: (1) a discussion about methodological issues involved in assessing outcomes (e.g., *Assessment in Higher Education: Issues of Access, Quality, Student Development, and Public Policy* [Messick 1999]), (2) a description and evaluation of one or more
specific mechanisms (e.g., Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers [Angelo and Cross 1993]), and (3) a description of the mechanisms used in particular institutions (e.g., Assessment in Practice: Putting Principles to Work on College Campuses [Banta et al. 1996]).

The literature on assessment methodology typically centers on recommendations for ensuring the validity and reliability of assessment findings. Common in these recommendations (American Association of Colleges 1992; Banta et al. 1996; Schilling and Schilling 1998) are the following five features:

1. Assessment mechanisms should provide answers to genuine questions that faculty have. If faculty do not care about the results of questions asked, then the mechanism is a poor one.
2. Assessment mechanisms should actually measure what they are intended to measure. Assessment mechanisms should enable faculty to draw correct conclusions about the extent to which objectives are being met. (One of the best-condensed discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of specific assessment mechanisms is the Cal State-Bakersfield PACT Outcomes Assessment Handbook described earlier.)
3. Both quantitative (e.g., numerical data such as scores on comprehensive exams and number of students doing independent studies) and qualitative (e.g., assessment of student portfolios) measures should be used.
4. At least two mechanisms should be used to assess each of the objectives.
5. Assessment information should be collected from a variety of constituencies. For example, departments might focus on current majors and minors, students in the introductory class, non-majors taking electives in the department, recent or older alums, faculty in other departments, student services staff, etc.

### Table 2. A Partial List of Assessment Mechanisms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From Current Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom-embedded techniques that focus on a direct educational outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance in senior capstone course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major papers and projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationally-normed examinations</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-house examination administered in the capstone course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-house essay administered early and late in major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student portfolios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys and Focus groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awards/grants/publications/presentations/honors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior exit interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement records (education, employment) of graduates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni surveys</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>From Alumni</th>
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<tr>
<td>Focus groups of faculty in related programs and with staff in Admissions, Academic Services, and the Registrar’s Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys of employers and faculty in graduate programs in which graduates have matriculated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>From Program Reviewers and College Data</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring of background/quality of students declaring major, grades, performance in campus-wide competitions</td>
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</table>
There is significant sociological literature (primarily in Teaching Sociology) about the use of various pedagogical strategies and classroom projects and activities. Some of these articles include systematic evaluation of the technique, while others are simply anecdotal reports. Many have potential to be considered in an assessment context, though this connection typically has been implicit. Nevertheless, there are several good examples of assessment-related thinking. Watts and Ellis (1989) discussed using occupational status and mobility of graduates as an assessment mechanism; Sharkey (1990) discussed several issues related to organizing an entire curriculum around learning outcomes; and the ASA Teaching Resources Center publication on assessment, edited by Sharkey and Johnson (1992) includes pieces by Thompson on assessing learning in research methods, by Vera on assessing reading ability, and by Hartman on using a senior-level paper to assess the major.

Given the expertise of many sociologists in the conceptualization and operationalization of social variables and the exercise of sound research techniques, there is considerable potential for greater sociological contributions to understanding assessment mechanisms. Research is needed on the advantages and disadvantages of each assessment mechanism relative to the quality, depth, and quantity of learning that occurs. In sociology, examples of specific questions are: To what extent do we obtain accurate assessment data from examining performance on the Educational Testing Service Major Field Test or on some other nationally-normed examination? Are helpful in-house comprehensive examinations being used? If so, what can we learn from them? Is performance in capstone courses or in internships and independent studies genuinely reflective of student learning in the major? How are student portfolios used to assess sociology learning? How do sociology faculty compare assessment mechanisms on the quality of information collected?

Which mechanisms are most appropriate to use with particular learning objectives? Do we receive reliable data when we use multiple mechanisms to assess a single objective? Do external assessors (e.g., graduate schools and employers and outside reviewers of a department) confirm other indicators of student learning? What is learned by studying the observations of alumni graduates? Are their perceptions similar to those reported by seniors?

An Annual Assessment Program
The Assessment Plan simply identifies the working pieces of the assessment process. Assessment becomes real each year when faculty select a small number of outcome objectives (typically about three to five) upon which to focus, carry out the necessary mechanisms, examine the results and compare them to pre-formulated expectations (that is, criteria of success), and, most importantly, identify and implement specific actions designed to enhance student learning (this final process is referred to as closing the loop). This final stage is the ultimate purpose of assessment and reconnects the process to its underlying rationale: that genuinely effective departments and programs continually look for ways to improve student learning and that they base their analysis on data that have been systematically collected (Nichols 1995).

With regard to the assessment program, there is again an extraordinary need for empirical research. In addition to the same kinds of questions suggested for analysis of purpose statements and the writing of goals and objectives, other specific questions can be asked: How has sociology shaped the implementation of annual assessment programs? How are assessment activities scheduled into the routine administrative tasks that are accomplished during the academic year? How do departments configure themselves to accomplish annual assessment?

Are there particular objectives that sociology programs typically achieve? Are there particular objectives on which
Sociology programs typically fail? In what ways have sociology programs changed in response to assessment? What kinds of changes typically succeed and what kinds typically fail? What factors influence the conscientiousness with which departmental assessment is conducted and with which efforts to enact program improvements are made and carried out?

The Next Decade: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and the Assessment Movement

Assessment-focused research indicates the potential for substantial enhancement of student learning. Yet, much remains to be learned about the manner in which assessment makes a positive contribution, about how assessment can be configured to provide the most and best data about student learning, and about ways to overcome resistance to assessment. This is true for all of higher education, and it is true for sociology.

The need for more research and reflection on assessment of student learning coincides with the development and continued refinement of a scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) within sociology. Defined as the systematic reflection on teaching and learning made public (McKinney 2000), SOTL seeks to promote the research that faculty members conduct on their daily activities. Research on assessment can contribute to the knowledge base about this important movement within higher education and can provide information that contributes in a very practical and direct way to improved teaching and learning. This paper ends with a call and encouragement for sociologists to participate in the scholarship of teaching and learning in general and to assist in conducting research on the assessment of student learning in particular.

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