

Sociology Program Review Spring, 2008

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Introduction

Sociology is an important and historically significant part of the liberal arts. Most colleges and universities include sociology in their general education curriculum and most offer a baccalaureate degree. Sociology is also relevant to many disciplines outside the social sciences, including humanities, religion, communication and media studies, and business.

The study of sociology is also consistent with the Christian mission of Pepperdine. Sociology is, essentially, the study of the social side of human behavior. This attempt to understand human behavior leads sociology to confront many of the questions historically confronted by Christians. In fact, one could reasonably argue that sociology's relevance is even more pronounced at a Christian school like Pepperdine. Sociology teaches us about ourselves. It teaches us compassion and empathy for others. It teaches us that we are products of our society. Sociology teaches us to think critically about the world. "The fascination of sociology," writes Peter Berger "is the fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives. It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this – things are not what they seem" (1963, p. 16). Yet, as we learn of society's power over us we are freed from society's influence, and empowered to bring about change. All of these ideals, which are so central to a sociological world view, are consistent with the ideals of Christianity.

History of the Sociology Program at Pepperdine

The sociology major pre-dates the current sociology faculty and has been part of the curriculum since the founding of Seaver College in 1972. During the past 30 years the number of sociology faculty has averaged approximately four.

Currently there are three full-time sociologists; Jon Johnston, Rebecca Kim, and Robin Perrin. A fourth sociologist, Liz Essary, joins us in the fall. In addition, Charles Hall, Dean of International Programs, is a sociologist who teaches one class a year and Joel Fetzer, a political scientist, teaches two classes cross listed with sociology.

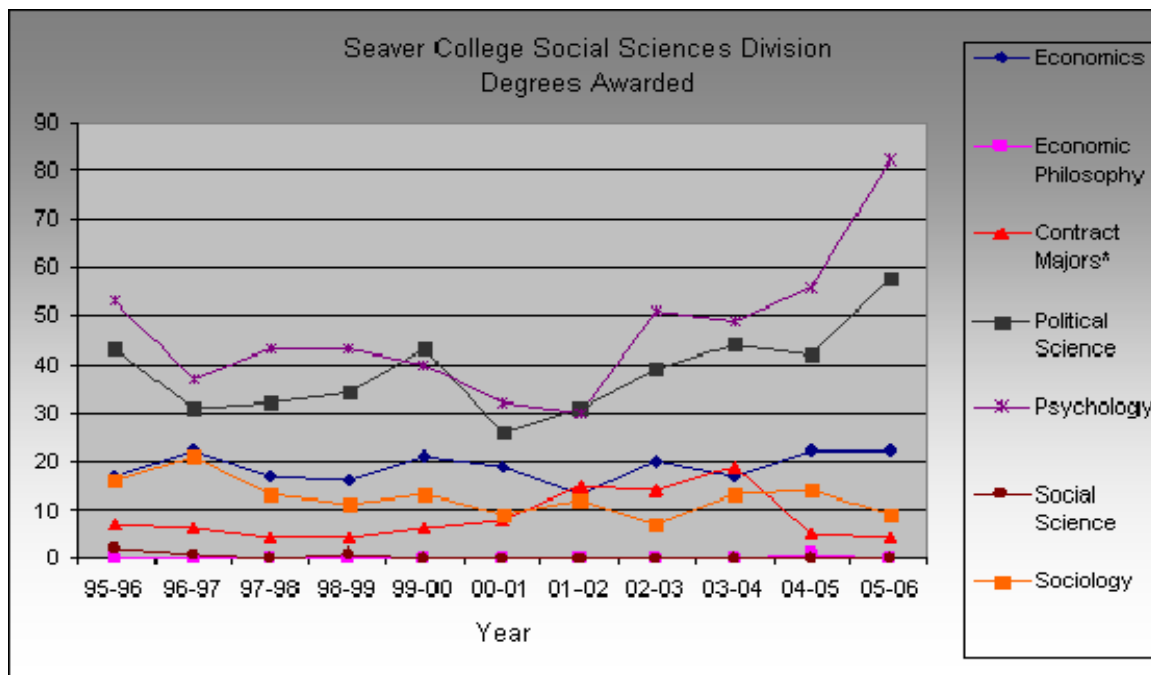
Prior to 1995, the sociology curriculum consisted of 4 core courses (Intro, Statistics, Research Methods, Theory) plus 20 additional units from a list of 12 upper-division electives. Currently, students take 5 core courses (the 4 listed above plus Senior Seminar), choose one course from 4 of 5 substantive areas (Social Inequality, Deviance and Social Control, Micro-Sociology, Social Institutions, Social Change), and take two additional upper-division courses.

Current Sociology Numbers

Sociology is the smallest major in the social science division, awarding an average of 11 degrees per year since 2000. The largest major in the division is psychology (50), followed by Political Science (40), and Economics (19).

Somewhat concerning is the fact that, while the other areas in the Social Science division have grown during the past 10 years, the number of sociology majors has actually decreased slightly. These trends are illustrated below in Figure 1.

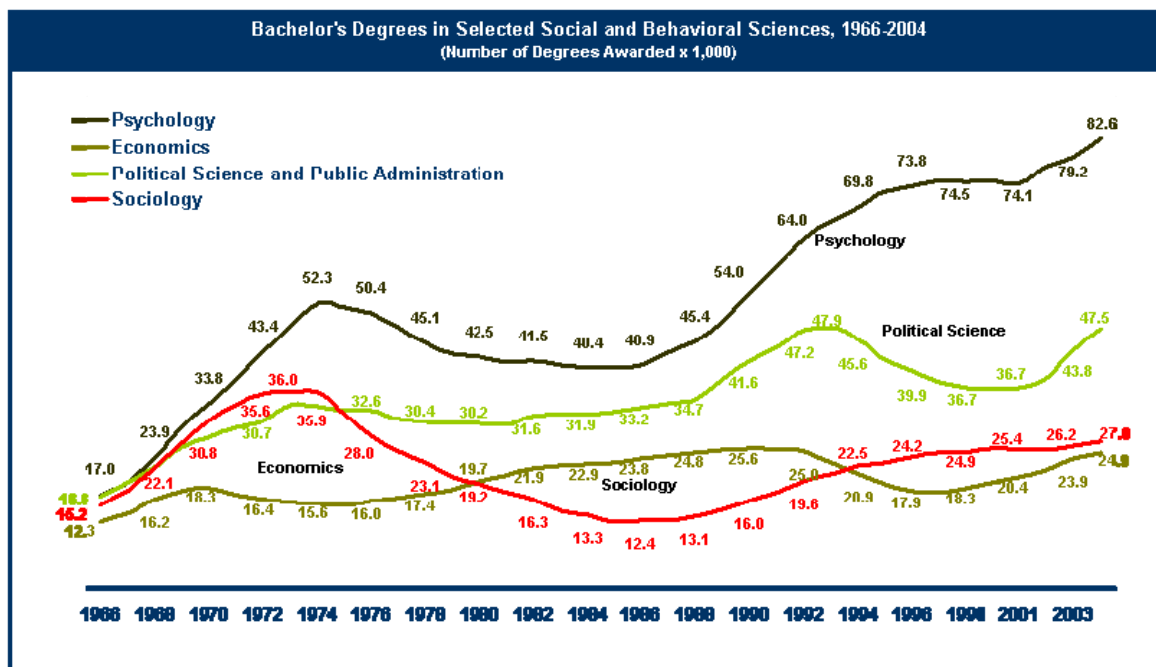
Figure 1: Social Science Degrees Awarded



National Trends

Nationally, sociology ranks fourth among the Social Sciences in number of BAs awarded (24,900 in 2003), behind Psychology (82,600), Political Science (47,500), and Economics (27,800). (See Figure 2) (Are there other social science fields besides these four like social work, anthropology, geography...; could we then say that we are ranked similar to the national average?)

Figure 2: National Trends in Social Science Degrees



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Completions, 1966-2004 (Washington, DC: NCES, 2006). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov> (November 8, 2006).

Comparison with Peer Programs

Compared to peer institutions, Pepperdine’s sociology program is quite small (See Table 1). Pepperdine has approximately 45 majors, second lowest to Pomona’s 40, a school half its size. Pepperdine has only 1.5 majors for every 100 undergraduates, tied with Calvin College for fewest number of majors. Pepperdine has the fewest number of faculty, relative to its size (1.3 faculty per 1000 undergrads).

Table 1

<i>School</i>	<i>Undergrads</i>	<i>Soc Majors</i>	<i># Majors per 100 Undergrads</i>	<i>Soc Faculty</i> ¹	<i># Soc Faculty per 1000 Undergrads</i>
Calvin College	4,100	60 ²	1.5	10	2.4
LMU	5,400	160	2.9	8	1.5
Occidental	1,800	75	4.2	4	2.2
Pepperdine	3,000	45	1.5	4	1.3
Pomona	1,450	40	2.8	5	3.4
Santa Clara	2,516	80	3.2	5	2.0
USF	3,700 ³	200	5.4	11	3.0

¹ “Faculty” is defined as tenured and/or tenure track faculty listed on the university’s sociology website.

² Plus 50-60 minors

Objectives of the Sociology Program

In meetings during Summer 2007, the sociology faculty identified 10 objectives.

Sociology students should...

1. Know the major theoretical paradigms in sociology.
2. Develop the ability to comprehend, analyze, synthesize and apply empirical data.
3. Be able to envision sociological problems as empirical problems, to formulate hypotheses, and to propose methods for testing these hypotheses.
4. Develop a “sociological imagination” (the ability to understand the interplay between the individual and broader social structural forces) and to apply the sociological imagination to his/her own life.
5. Be aware of (and minimize) bias, and see the importance of truthful reporting of research findings, respecting subjects who participate in studies, and other such ethical issues in sociological research.
6. Effectively communicate both orally and in writing.
7. Develop the ability to think critically about the world.
8. Understand of how societies work and how they are shaped by cultural and social structural forces (e.g., race, class, gender, and age).
9. Be prepared for advanced studies in sociology, anthropology, social work, and related fields.
10. Be prepared for a life of service and pursue positive social change and justice in line with the Christian mission of Pepperdine.

In an initial assessment of these 10 objectives, instructors in the 5 core sociology major courses were asked to assess the degree to which each of these 10 objectives were *introduced* (I) in the courses, *practiced* (P) in the courses, or *demonstrated* or *mastered* (D) in the courses. These 5 core courses are:

Soc 200: Introduction to Sociology
Soc 250: Introductory Statistics
Soc 310: Introduction to Research Methodology
Soc 391: Sociological Theory
Soc 497: Senior Seminar

The results are listed in Table 2.

³ College of Arts and Sciences at USF = 3,700. Total undergrad at USF = 4,800

Table 2: Sociology Assessment--Master Matrix for Core Classes

Students Will...		200	250	310	391	497
1	Know the major theoretical paradigms in sociology.	I			D	P
2	Develop the ability to comprehend, analyze, synthesize and apply empirical data.	I	D	P		
3	Be able to envision sociological problems as empirical problems, to formulate hypotheses, and to propose methods for testing these hypotheses.	I	P	D	P	D
4	Develop a “sociological imagination” (the ability to understand the interplay between the individual and broader social structural forces) and to apply the sociological imagination to his/her own life.	I	I	I	P	D
5	Be aware of (and minimize) bias, and see the importance of truthful reporting of research findings, respecting subjects who participate in studies, and other such ethical issues in sociological research.	I	P	P		P
6	Effectively communicate both orally and in writing.	I	I	P	P	P
7	Develop the ability to think critically about the world – to “see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all of our lives” (Peter Berger, Invitation to Sociology, p. 16).	I	I	I	P	D
8	Understand how societies work and how they are shaped by cultural and social structural forces (e.g., race, class, gender, and age).	I			P	D
9	Be prepared for advanced studies in sociology, anthropology, social work, and related fields.	I	P	P	P	P
10	Be prepared for a life of service and pursue positive social change and justice in line with the Christian mission of Pepperdine.	I			I	D
LEGEND						
I= the skill or ideas are INTRODUCED within the course						
P = the skill or ideas are PRACTICED within the course or some PROFICIENCY is attained.						
D= the skill or ideas are DEMONSTRATED or MASTERED within the course.						

**Course Assessment:
Soc 391 (Sociological Theory); Soc 497 (Senior Seminar)**

We decided to conduct a more detailed assessment of several objectives in 2 core courses, Soc 391 (Sociological Theory), and Soc 497 (Senior Seminar). During the Spring semester of 2008 we compiled a portfolio of papers from these two course.

Soc 391 (Sociological Theory)

The course description for Soc 391 reads as follows:

This course covers classic as well as contemporary macro and micro social theories. The topics that are covered include economics, revolution, feminism, religion, and suicide. The course will introduce you to classic social theorists like Marx, Weber, and Durkheim as well as multicultural social thinkers such as Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and Mao Tse-Tung. In the process, you will learn to think critically, creatively, and be encouraged to forge your own theories of the social world.

Given the content of the course, we have chosen to focus the assessment of Objective #1 (*Know the major theoretical paradigms in sociology*). With the exception of the two methods courses, every course in the sociology curriculum considers theoretical knowledge an important objective. In Soc 391, however, this becomes the primary objective, so it is logical to assess this objective in this particular course.

A review of the course syllabus suggests that course content is consistent with the stated objective of exposing students to the major theoretical paradigms in sociology. The Jonathan Turner text, *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, is a well-know sociological theory text which provides students with an overview of the history of social thought. The second text, *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*, edited by Charles Lemert, exposes students to original works in classical and contemporary theory.

Twenty percent of the grade in this course is based on a daily written response to the assigned reading. The daily response assignment is designed to be a relatively short review and critique of the day's readings. Students are also asked to pose questions that will direct discussions in the class. We examined 13 student responses from two class periods. In the first, students read original work from classical theorists Marx, Durkheim, and Weber (N=6). In the second, students read original works on feminism from Engles, de Beauvoir, Friedan, Collins, Anzaldua, Butler, Allen, and Hochschild (N=7).

In general, we are pleased with the quality of the work. The papers were generally well written, and the students effectively demonstrated an understanding and interest in the readings. The discussion questions they posed were interesting and insightful.

Our conclusion is that Soc 391 appears to be accomplishing its stated goal of exposing students to the major theoretical paradigms in sociology. The reading assignments are

appropriate and students appear to be comprehending the readings. The daily written assignments force the students to keep up, and provide for the professor an ongoing assessment tool. Students also do creative presentations that demonstrate their understanding of the theories before the three exams; they also get to produce a final theory paper that proposes their own theory/explanation regarding a social question after having critiqued present theories that address their social question of interest.

It is certainly reasonable to conclude that students demonstrate a level of *practice* or *proficiency* that is expected in a Sociological Theory course. What is missing, arguably, is a demonstration that the students have *mastered* the material (see Table 2).

Perhaps an additional requirement, in which students read and write more extensively on a single theory or theorist is in order.

Soc 497 (Senior Seminar)

The course description of Soc 497 reads as follows:

- This course serves as a culminating experience for your study in sociology. The introductory course introduced you to the discipline. Most of your subsequent courses examined particular topics within the sociological framework. By now you probably have taken (or are taking) the required methods, theory, and statistics courses. Most of these individual courses tend to be discrete in their examination of various topics and issues. This capstone experience serves to build on these more discrete learning experiences by coming back to the discipline itself. The purpose is to *synthesize* and *integrate* and *assess* what you have learned in sociology and to reflect on the role and contribution of the discipline. In one sense, you could think of it as an advanced introductory course since you will look at the discipline overall. But it is much more than an advanced introductory course since you will be expected to use and assess what you have learned in other sociology classes.

As can be seen in Table 2, we expect *proficiency* or *mastery* of all but one of the sociology major objectives. Of course, since Soc 497 is a capstone course with hopes of bringing together four years of learning, the broad objectives of the course thus seem attainable.

The course is organized around a series of readings and paper topics indirectly connected with these readings. In the first half of the course students are encouraged to reassess sociology as a discipline (and major), and to reflect on what they learned in their courses. The middle part of the course focuses on contemporary issues relevant to sociology and sociologists. In the final 3 weeks the course focuses on vocation, and students are encouraged to think about their lives and about the impact they intend to make in the world.

For the sake of parsimony, we have chosen to focus on 3 objectives, and 3 papers relevant to these objectives.

1. *Objective #3*: Be able to envision sociological problems as empirical problems, to formulate hypotheses, and to propose methods for testing these hypotheses.
Paper #1: What is sociology? As you answer this question consider these issues: What do we mean when we say that sociology is a science? Must sociology remain committed to empirical discovery? Must sociology remain committed to “value free” inquiry?

In writing this paper, students primarily relied on Peter Berger’s, *Invitation to Sociology*, a core text of the course. They were also expected to review past classes, as well as read and cite outside sources relevant to the question.

Almost without exception, the students reported that they had been asked the “What is sociology?” question numerous times, and they had often struggled to find an answer. They wrote that they appreciated the opportunity to write on the topic, and the paper had helped clarify in their own minds sociology as a subject matter, and why they had chosen to study sociology.

Concerning objective #3, all of the students effectively communicated an understanding of sociology as an empirical discipline. Two of the papers were somewhat superficial, relying exclusively on Berger’s *Invitation*. The remaining 8 papers, however, effectively introduced additional information relevant to the question. We concluded that the writing assignment, as well the readings relevant to the assignment, were appropriate for a senior capstone course.

2. *Objective #4*: Develop a “sociological imagination” (the ability understand the interplay between the individual and broader social structural forces) and to apply the sociological imagination to his/her own life.
Paper #2: Sociology has struggled to reconcile the seemingly contradictory tenants of free will and determinism. How do we resolve the paradox that society determines the actions of individuals, while at the same time humans have free will that allows them to choose from alternative lines of action? How can both be true? Where do you sit on the free-will versus determinism continuum? Do you believe human actions are free, or determined?

If we were going to identify a single core objective for the sociology major, this surely would be it. We hope to teach a perspective – a way of viewing the world. As can be seen in Table 2, we believe that students should have at least confronted this question in all of their core courses (and, in fact, all of their classes). Upon completion of Soc 497, our hope is that they can demonstrate mastery of objective #4.

We were not especially impressed with the quality of these papers. While approximately one-third of the papers were quite good, another one-third offered little more than a regurgitation of course readings, while another one-third chose to ignore course readings altogether. Responses to the self-evaluative part of the question (i.e., Where do you sit on the free-will versus determinism continuum?) were more encouraging. In general, the students seemed to comprehend the all-important sociological insight that, in our own lives, an understanding of the power of social constraints gives us power over those constraints.

It is true that the question of free will vs. determinism cuts to the core of the sociological imagination, and that it is important for students to confront the central sociological insight that humans are at the same time producers of society, and produced by society. What is less clear, however, is whether this question is the best way to assess objective #4. It may be that a broader question – one that focuses specifically on the sociological imagination – is in order. On the other hand, the professor indicates that each of the papers in this course focuses at least indirectly on the sociological imagination, so students are given numerous opportunities to demonstrate mastery of the objective.

3. Objective #10: Be prepared for a life of service and fight for positive social change and justice in line with the Christian mission of Pepperdine.
Paper #5: Professionally and personally, where do you see yourself in 20 years? Career? Family? A house and two cars in the suburbs? Do you want to make it rich? Do you want to change the world? Where are you going from here?

The final 3 weeks of Soc 497 focus on vocation. Student reading on the topic includes the widely read book *Tuesdays With Morrie*, by Mitch Albom. The final paper is designed to do little more than encourage students to reflect on their future. In reading the papers, however, we realized that these reflections spoke powerfully to the expressed ideals of Pepperdine generally, and to the sociology program specifically. True, the students hope to one day have a spouse, children, and comfortable home. More importantly, however, their papers focused on their passions for the disenfranchised of the world, and for the potential power of Christianity and sociological insights to transform lives and transform society. They spoke of the willingness to forgo worldly rewards in pursuit of these lofty goals. Their idealism was inspiring and refreshing. The papers speak to the kinds of students attracted to sociology, as well as the life changing impact sociology can have.

Overall, our conclusion is that Soc 497 generally accomplishes most of what it purports to accomplish in Table 2. One wonders, however, if the course could accomplish even more. We have two suggestions to offer. First, a review of the syllabus suggests that the academic content of the course should be enhanced. Perhaps one more important and intellectually challenging work could add substance to the course. Second, why is Objective #2 abandoned in the course? It is not uncommon for capstone courses to include a final paper or major thesis in which students actually do “analyze, synthesize, and apply empirical data.” If the course were moved to 4 units (currently it is a 3 unit class) there would likely be enough time to master this objective as well.

Analysis and Recommendations

We were generally happy with the assessment of Soc 391 and Soc 497. Soc 391 was designed with objective #1 in mind, and we are satisfied with the level of student learning in this course. As a capstone course, the objectives for Soc 497 are broad. The purpose of the course is to synthesize and integrate and assess what students have learned in sociology, and we are happy with the results. To be sure, in both courses there is room for improvement (see comments above), and we anticipate that these courses will continue to evolve to meet assessment goals.

The program review has resulted in several broader observations about the program and recommendations for changes in the program.

There is room for growth in the sociology major. Both in terms of number of majors and number of faculty, we were the smallest major relative to the six peer institutions that we evaluated. We have chosen to see our relative weakness, however, as an opportunity for growth. With the addition of a new faculty member, and a planned revision of our curriculum (discussed below), we are excited about the future of the sociology major at Seaver College.

The sociology major requirements and course offerings need to be revised. In the course of conducting our program review, we examined the curriculum of other sociology programs. It is our conclusion that our current curriculum, which dates back to the mid-1990s, needs to be revised. We anticipate implementing these revision during the '08-'09 academic year.

Exit surveys. Beginning next year we plan to implement quantitative measures of student learning.