

**Summer Assessment Grant – Introduction to Sociology (SOC 153)**  
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**I. Introduction and Background**

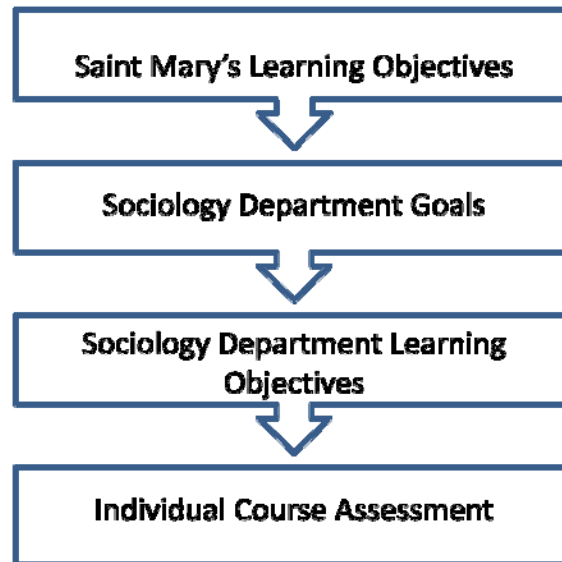
My original goal for the grant period was to develop a course-specific assessment plan for my SOC 153 (Introduction to Sociology) courses that ties directly to my department's new assessment plan and learning outcomes. This assessment plan also includes a means by which student learning for any given project in my SOC 153 course can be assessed by student comments and input on a form distributed electronically. These assessment tools will be evaluated during the Fall, 2009 semester and revised as necessary.

As background, prior to the Fall, 2008 semester I revised the syllabus previously used in similar introductory courses in order to integrate higher levels of applied learning, specifically focusing on the use of substantive projects where students could apply course concepts. My SOC 153 syllabus was revised again prior to the start of the Spring, 2009 semester to reflect comments and suggestions made by students during the Fall, 2008 semester and my own assessments of the prior semester. My SOC 153 courses, after the revisions, included five substantive projects that would allow students to apply factual concepts, terms, and theories to real-life situations. Also, during the 2009-2010 academic year the Department of Sociology worked towards improving assessment as a department by creating departmental goals and student learning objectives and determining how those goals and objectives tie directly to the College's overall learning objectives.

Although I used grading rubrics to grade student projects, my rubrics were tied more to the projects themselves rather than to my department's assessment goals. In addition, comments from students in course evaluations from the Spring, 2009 semester showed that the projects and assignments used in my SOC 153 course were both too broad to capture my department's learning goals and outcomes and too numerous to allow students to truly focus on these goals. Thus, my goal for the summer assessment grant became to revise my SOC 153 syllabus in order to reduce the number of projects completed in the class, to create direct, overt ties between the assignments and student learning goals, to create a mechanism with which to assess whether the assignments are meeting those goals, and to better tie projects and other assignments to my department's learning objectives and goals.

## II. Development of Course Goals and Learning Objectives

The diagram below, developed by Susan Alexander to develop the Department of Sociology's assessment plan, shows how our departmental goals are fed by the College's learning objectives and how the departmental goals feed into the development of assessment for any individual course.

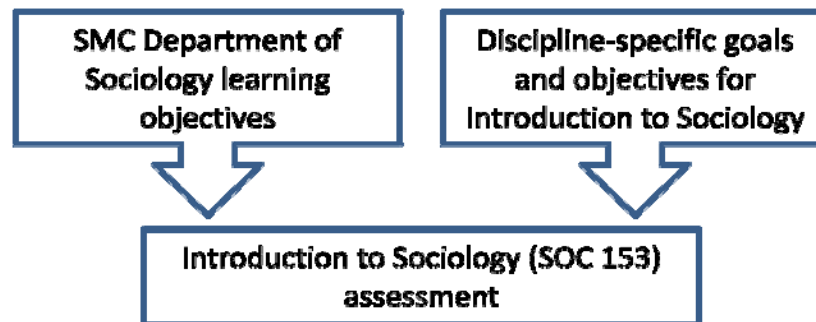


Through discussion over academic Spring, 2009 semester, our department chair has led the Department of Sociology to develop specific departmental goals that link back to the College's learning objectives. The goals for students are as follows:

1. The link, in C. Wright Mills' terms, between private troubles and public issues, or between the individual's experiences and larger social processes;
2. The impact of social structures on individuals and/or groups that includes both micro- and macro-level social processes;
3. The value of empirical evidence for understanding social phenomenon;
4. Students demonstrate the ability to effectively communicate the sociological perspectives.

These goals are further detailed by specific objectives for each goal. For the purposes of this grant, all of the learning objectives are not relevant and therefore are not discussed here; learning objectives relevant to the SOC 153 course are discussed later in this report.

In addition, assessment for any specific course is informed by the specific goals of that course as course goals are designed to provide students with specific knowledge and/or skills (ASA Task Force 2005, p. 13). Thus, the development of assessment for my SOC 153 course must take into consideration discipline-specific goals for an introductory course, as illustrated below.



Persell, Pfeiffer, and Syed (2007) interviewed leaders in the field of sociology to search for thematic ideas they believed students should understand after taking an introductory sociology course. Their findings can be categorized into nine learning goals and objectives for introductory sociology students:

1. The ability to think sociologically; specifically, the ability to connect macro-level events to micro-level events;
2. An understanding of the scientific nature of sociology;
3. An improvement in complex and critical thinking; specifically, the ability to use evidence to think about and evaluate questions regarding society;
4. An understanding of inequality in society;
5. A sense of the field of sociology and an understanding of sociology as a discipline;
6. An understanding of the concept of social construction;
7. The ability to compare sociology to other social science disciplines;
8. An ability to apply sociology to everyday life;
9. The importance of social institutions in society.

Taken together, most of the Persell *et al* goals can be directly correlated with my department's learning goals as follows:

<b>Persell <i>et al</i> Learning Goals</b>	<b>SMC Sociology Department Learning Goals</b>
Goals 1 and 8	Goal 1
Goals 2 and 3	Goal 3
Goals 4, 6, and 9	Goal 2

While the goals for an introductory sociology course correlate well with my department's goals, it is not feasible to assess all of these goals during any given semester; indeed, the ASA Task Force on Assessing the Undergraduate Sociology Major (2005) states that an effective means of assessment is to use continuous data gathering, collecting data on three learning objectives per year and varying those objectives each year (pp. 20-21). Thus, for the purposes of this grant, I have chosen three learning objectives that I will assess for the 2009-2010 academic year, anticipating that the following year new assessment mechanisms will be developed to assess other learning goals.

As mentioned above, my department articulated several learning objectives stemming from each of the departmental learning goals. From these learning objectives, I have chosen three that will be assessed during the 2009-2010 academic year in the SOC 153 course. The chart below shows the chosen learning objectives in relation to both my department's goals and the Persell *et al* learning goals.

<b>Persell <i>et al</i> Learning Goal</b>	<b>SMC Sociology Department Learning Goal</b>	<b>SMC Sociology Department Learning Objective</b>
Goal 1: The ability to think sociologically; specifically, the ability to connect macro-level events to micro-level events.  Goal 8: An ability to apply sociology to everyday life.	Goal 1: The link, in C. Wright Mills' terms, between private troubles and public issues, or between the individual's experiences and larger social processes	For students to evaluate current social conditions, whether at the local, national, or global level, including social inequalities such as poverty, racism, sexism, and/or homophobia.
Goal 4: An understanding of inequality in society.  Goal 6: An understanding of the concept of social construction.  Goal 9: The importance of social institutions in society.	Goal 2: The impact of social structures on individuals and/or groups that includes both micro- and macro-level social processes.	For students to recognize the effect that social group differences, such as gender, religion, values, culture, and privilege, can have on the ways that people interpret and act in the world.
Goal 2: An understanding of the scientific nature of sociology.	Goal 3: The value of empirical evidence for understanding social phenomenon.	For students to develop critical thinking skills based upon the scientific logic of objectivity,

Goal 3: An improvement in complex and critical thinking; specifically, the ability to use evidence to think about and evaluate questions regarding society.		including the ability to acquire and evaluate pertinent empirical information in order to develop an informed hypothesis or theory.
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After assessment mechanisms are developed, the selected learning objectives will be assessed in the SOC 153 courses during the 2009-2010 academic year.

### III. Development of Assessment Mechanisms

The ASA Task Force on Assessing the Undergraduate Sociology Major (2005) provides several models by which a major or specific course can be assessed. One of these models, the Nichols Model, has been used by my department in discussing assessment; thus, I will adapt that framework to course-specific assessment in assessing the SOC 153 course. The Nichols model (Nichols 1995) provides a framework for assessment that allows for five stages of assessment and the compilation of a reporting chart to provide feedback for program (or course) improvement (ASA Task Force 2005, pp. 20-21). The five stages of assessment includes 1) the identification of a learning goal; 2) the identification of a learning objective; 3) the identification of the assessment mechanism<sup>1</sup>; 4) the identification of the results of the assessment mechanism; and 5) the identification of a plan to improve the assessment mechanism.

Using the Nichols model and including the assessment mechanisms that will be used for the SOC 153 course, the following chart results:

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<sup>1</sup> The Nichols model is targeted for departmental assessment and therefore suggests that two assessment mechanisms be used to examine a selected departmental objective (ASA Task Force 2005, p. 22). As the Nichols model is being adapted here for course assessment rather than departmental assessment, one assessment mechanism is used to examine a course objective.

SMC Department Learning Goal	SMC Department Learning Objective	Assessment Mechanism	Assessment Results	Course Improvement
Goal 1: The link, in C. Wright Mills' terms, between private troubles and public issues, or between the individual's experiences and larger social processes	For students to evaluate current social conditions, whether at the local, national, or global level, including social inequalities such as poverty, racism, sexism, and/or homophobia.	Students will engage in the application of sociological concepts to everyday life by completing ten short essays (1/2 to 1 page) over the course of the semester. Each essay will include the application of at least one sociological concept to an everyday situation (rubric attached in Appendix A).		
Goal 2: The impact of social structures on individuals and/or groups that includes both micro- and macro-level social processes.	For students to recognize the effect that social group differences, such as gender, religion, values, culture, and privilege, can have on the ways that people interpret and act in the world.	Students will conduct a comparative analysis of differences in the social construction of race and gender between two films from different historical eras (rubric attached in Appendix A).		
Goal 3: The value of empirical evidence for understanding social phenomenon.	For students to develop critical thinking skills based upon the scientific logic of objectivity, including the ability to acquire and evaluate pertinent empirical information in order to develop an informed hypothesis or theory.	Students will collect data regarding the costs of different "green" activities and then develop hypotheses regarding the social effects of these costs in a written paper (rubric attached in Appendix A).		

At the end of each assignment, results of the assessment rubric (a summary of class performance) can be entered into the chart, along with a means for improving, changing, or revising the assignment as necessary to meet the learning objective. Also, as described below, student feedback via a new survey-based mechanism will be used to further assess student learning. The findings from these brief student surveys will be included in the “results” column above to determine correlations between student learning and departmental and course learning goals.

Development of this assessment methodology, combined with comments and suggestions from students in the SOC 153 course over the 2008-2009 academic year and Sociology Department meetings on assessment, has resulted in a substantive revision of my SOC 153 syllabus and assignments used in the course. These revisions include:

1. The revision of the course syllabus to adopt the Persell *et al* learning goals as course goals and objectives;
2. The reduction of the number of course projects from five to two;
3. The revision of project and assignment directions to include a clear statement of the specific learning objectives for that project;
4. The revision of grading rubrics (attached) to include direct assessment of whether the learning objectives were met; and
5. The development of a student feedback mechanism to assess student perception of learning outcomes of assignments.

Of these, the development of a student feedback mechanism is perhaps the most important. I may think that students are learning what I want them to learn, but I truly do not know what they are taking out of a course or specific assignment unless and until I ask them. Thus, the “Assessment Results” column in the chart above would include not only graded assessment of an assignment, but also the results of student feedback questionnaires.

To create a student feedback mechanism, I created a web-based survey on SurveyMonkey. A link to this survey will be emailed to students at the time the assignment is given. When students complete the project or assignment, they will also turn in a “survey complete” printout from SurveyMonkey indicating that they have completed the feedback survey.

The survey itself will ask students to choose the three most important things they believe they learned from the assignment. This will allow me to assess correlations between intended learning goals and objectives of a given assignment and actual outcomes of those assignments.

As the Persell *et al* learning goals are listed on the course syllabus for the SOC 153 course, I chose to use the same language in the post-assignment survey. This will not only provide students with a consistent statement of course goals, but will also serve to reinforce what they should expect to learn in the course. A copy of the survey page from SurveyMonkey is below (note that the survey posted on SurveyMonkey also includes a section where students can list additional comments about the assignment as well).

**Please choose the three most important things you believe you learned from this assignment:**

- The ability to connect macro-level events to micro-level events.
- An understanding of the scientific nature of sociology.
- The ability to use evidence to think about and evaluate questions regarding society.
- An understanding of inequality in society.
- A sense of the field of sociology and an understanding of sociology as a discipline.
- An understanding of the concept of social construction.
- The ability to compare sociology to other social science disciplines.
- An ability to apply sociology to everyday life.
- The importance of social institutions in society.

**IV. Conclusions**

Taken together, this grant has provided me with the opportunity to closely examine what I want my students to learn in the SOC 153 course and to devise a means by which assessment of these objectives can be tied to my department's learning goals and objectives as well as the College's learning objectives. With a newly revised syllabus and course plan, I look forward to collecting assessment data from the SOC 153 course over the 2009-2010 academic year and revising this assessment plan as necessary.



## **Appendix A**

Sample grading rubrics used to evaluate student learning in the classroom. These rubrics have been developed for specific projects used in the SOC 153 course and based on student comments during past sections of SOC 153 and course evaluations; it is expected that the rubrics are dynamic and will be revised as necessary, again dependent – at least partially – on student responses to these grading rubrics.

SOC 153  
Introduction to Sociology  
Fall, 2009

**Assignment:** Short papers

**Description:** Students will write 10 short essays applying sociological concepts to everyday life.

<b>Content</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Weak</b>	<b>Missing</b>
All 10 essays completed				
Application of sociological concepts as directed in question assigned				
<b>Mechanics</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Weak</b>	<b>Missing</b>
Spelling, punctuation, and grammatical style				
Appropriate textual references to charts, graphs, and citations				
Appropriate paragraph transitions				

**Comments:**

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**Assignment:** Comparative Film Analysis

**Description:** Comparison of the social construction of race and gender in two films (an original and a later remake of that film).

<b>Content</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Weak</b>	<b>Missing</b>
Appropriate coding sheets developed and attached				
Appropriate graphs (3) developed and attached				
Overall analysis of film 1				
Overall analysis of film 2				
Both movies discussed in comparison to each other				
All discussion questions answered				
<b>Mechanics</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Weak</b>	<b>Missing</b>
Cover page				
Staple or appropriate binding				
Spelling, punctuation, and grammatical style				
Appropriate textual references to charts, graphs, and citations				
Appropriate paragraph transitions				
Log book				

**Comments:**

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**Assignment:** "Green" Analysis

**Description:** Collection of data regarding the cost of "green" activities and hypothesizing potential effects of those costs.

<b>Content</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Weak</b>	<b>Missing</b>
Appropriate data gathered and attached				
Appropriate charts (one for each "green" activity) developed and attached				
Discussion of findings				
<b>Mechanics</b>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Weak</b>	<b>Missing</b>
Cover page				
Staple or appropriate binding				
Spelling, punctuation, and grammatical style				
Appropriate textual references to charts, graphs, and citations				
Appropriate paragraph transitions				
Log book				

**Comments:**