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Models for Applied Sociology Programs at the B.A. Level

Carla B. Howery

Ideally, a department's curriculum is a statement of its collective instructional goals and can be said to represent a contract with its students. The diversity and dissension in the discipline of sociology is reflected in most departmental curricula. In 1971, Bates and Reid examined undergraduate curricula to draw inferences about the core of sociology as it was presented to students. They found that the "lack of consensus on requirements, the diversity, and, in many instances, the marginality of courses required convey the idea that it makes little difference what the student takes so long as he accumulates enough credit hours" (Bates and Reid, 1971:248). Course sequencing, another measure of systematic curriculum planning, is notably absent in sociology, in contrast to other fields.

This disarray is accelerated as some departments try hurriedly to add an applied curriculum. Mauksch (1981:3) warns against curriculum revisions motivated by "the search for a formula which will attract students, increase enrollments, and enable the sociology catalogue to compete with other offerings for the 1980s."

There are good reasons for arguing that the undergraduate level is the most strategic place for departments to start the development of applied curricula. First, the terminal B.A. student has always been "applied" in that he or she has not sought employment in academic sociology. The current attention to providing jobs after college has several positive ramifications: departments are thinking about ways to assist undergraduate students with job placement; existing curriculum and course requirements are being examined; and course sequencing

This article is a revised version of one entitled "Models and Examples of Some Applied Sociology Programs at the B.A. Level" which appears in C. Howery (ed.), *Teaching Applied Sociology: A Resource Book*. Washington, DC: Teaching Resources Center, American Sociological Association, 1983.

and groupings (tracks) are improved. One effect of developing an applied program will be the placement of students in internships and subsequently in jobs where their sociology skills will be made visible. Sociology may be better understood and more generally appreciated by the public and private sector employers, government officials, and the general public than it has been in the past. In the near future, the demonstrated utility of sociology may come primarily from our *undergraduate* majors, as they pursue their internships and postcollege roles.

Second, sociologists argue within academia for the discipline's importance to the liberal arts and its relevance to professional degree programs. We assert that nurses should take courses in marriage and the family and that a course in formal organizations is essential for business majors. Apparently, we believe that sociology *applies* to jobs for our majors and for students with other career aspirations. These connections need to be explicit in our course and curriculum goals.

A third reason for starting applied sociology at the undergraduate level is that curriculum revisions may be the easiest to implement. Many graduate-level courses are the exclusive domain of a particular professor, reflecting his or her research interests and closely linked to personal idiosyncrasies. Undergraduate courses are more often the collective property of a department, sometimes doled out haphazardly or with mild coercion to ensure that all offerings are covered. If undergraduate courses belong to the group rather than to individuals, they may be more easily modified. The blunt reality is that faculty jobs rest on enrollments in undergraduate courses.

Instructional Goals for an Undergraduate Curriculum

Olsen and DeMartini (1981:2) define applied sociology as "sociological knowledge and action oriented toward intentional social change to achieve desired goals." For the B.A., M.A., Ph.D., or post-doctoral student, then, this orientation uses the concepts and theories of sociology, appropriate methodology, and a sensitivity to the policy process to connect practical knowledge and social change (Dorn, 1982). The basic difference between each level of student training is the sophistication of the material.

For the B.A. student, this definition of applied sociology is operationalized in three general ways: a set of specific skills in which the student is deliberately trained; substantive concentration in sociology specialties that are built into the curriculum; and job-hunting advice and assistance. All these elements may be present to some degree in an existing sociology program. The process of making these features explicit and coordinated is one of the benefits of implementing an applied program. If a department can collectively agree upon its goals for training students in applied sociology, this intentionality of purpose may have

a positive spill over into the department's *entire* teaching mission. In short, a department should not focus on overhauling its program, but rather on making it clear, cohesive, and linked to learning goals.

Training in Job-Related Skills

Training students in specific skills can occur within any of the curricular arrangements for applied sociology. In most programs, five groups of skills seem to be emphasized. Although these same skills could be developed within a standard major, the applied emphasis is usually more skill-oriented. The categories of skills most prevalent in applied programs are:

1. Qualitative research skills, including evaluation research, impact or needs assessment, research design and instrument construction, and data analysis;
2. Problem solving skills, including qualitative indicators, problem framing, case-study analysis, and identification of relevant variables;
3. Counseling skills, or social intervention at the individual, group, or community levels, including training in clinical sociology, social casework and groupwork, and administration of social services.
4. Special substantive knowledge and skills concerning particular policies and trends in the areas of children and families, gerontology, urban and community work, medical and legal institutions, and the criminal justice system; and
5. Skills in oral and written communication, to include public speaking, translating of social science information to a lay audience, clear and concise writing, and interviewing.

Field Experience

Practical experience of one of three basic types seems to be an integral part of many applied programs:

1. *Internship*: an off-campus experience under the supervision of a field placement advisor on location. For the B.A. student, the supervision is usually not from a sociologist; the student usually carries out a project for the placement and learns about the setting.
2. *Practicum*: on or off-campus, students work *with* a practitioner, preferably at a job level similar to one they might assume on completion of their undergraduate degree.
3. *University consulting and research centers*: on campus, students assist faculty in conducting research in-house for the institution by contract from bidders, or as a service to the community. Faculty members can control the field experience of the student and better coordinate it with coursework.

Career Counseling Programs

Curricular change to applied sociology may not imply a change in courses and content as much as in assisting students in job-hunting strategies and career planning. Dorn (1983:16) suggests that one goal of an applied program is the establishment of a vehicle by which students are linked with the career placement center on campus and introduced to sociologists who have experience working in applied settings who can serve as role models." The sociology department itself may choose to offer a credit or non-credit course in job hunting. Other suggestions for assisting students in making connection between their skills and possible jobs include: guest presentations from applied sociologists (especially alumni) in classes throughout the curriculum; establishment of a sociology club for undergraduates, with some program time devoted to job-hunting topics; coordination with the placement service and career counseling staff for workshops that might particularly help liberal arts majors; sponsorship of undergraduate research conferences to give students practice in written and oral communication of their work; a departmental handbook on career opportunities for the various tracks and emphases offered by the department; and participation in career day events.

Conclusion

Applied sociology programs require carefully articulated learning goals. Changes in both the organization and content of the curriculum can be major or minor, as these goals dictate. The process of curriculum revision may well have payoffs for the entire curriculum as a collective product of a department's mission for its students. Students graduating in sociology may be better equipped to get jobs using their identifiable skills in theory and method and are thus important disseminators of information about our discipline.

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