Sociology Turns Up Assessment

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The question of how to measure learning -- and if it can or should be measured at all -- continues to stir debate. But despite skeptics' grumblings, sociology departments are increasingly using assessment methods to evaluate students' experiences, according to a new study by the American Sociological Association.

The survey, administered in 2008, drew responses from 549 departments or programs that offer a minimum of a bachelor's degree in sociology. Overall, the number of departments that perform some types of assessment of student learning rose by about 10 percent between 2001, the last year the study was conducted, and 2007. Most sociology departments continued to use student surveys, senior theses or projects, and exit interviews, in that order, according to the report.

Other assessment methods saw major increases. Twenty-nine percent of sociology departments reported using externally created exams in 2006-7, up from 19 percent in 2000-1. (In contrast, exams that departments themselves created to measure what their students had learned dropped in usage by about 9 percent.) External exams include the Major Field Test in Sociology, which was offered at nearly 150 institutions between August 2008 and June 2008, according to the Educational Testing Service.

"It's more and more generally considered a norm of higher education that you need to assess the outcomes of the students who go through colleges or universities," said Roberta Spalter-Roth, a co-author of the study and director of the American Sociological Association’s research and development department. "On other hand, there appears to certainly be a group -- I'm not positive how substantial -- who think that assessment is an invasion into their professional autonomy, who feel that increasingly teachers have less control over what's happening in the university, who think it's a parody of social science research."

In spite of such criticism, departments reported a 12 percent increase in "other" assessment methods different from those asked about in the surveys. That figure probably includes capstone courses, in which sociology students work on a research project and try to synthesize all they have learned, Spalter-Roth said.

Meanwhile, nearly three-quarters of sociology departments reported either undergoing major curriculum revisions in the last five years or intending to do so within the next two years. These changes include using methods and statistics in every class rather than in separate classes, as well as saving specialized courses for the end of the major program, Spalter-Roth said. The survey did not gather information about the reasons behind these revisions.
The association's report raises interesting questions about how sociology departments are trying to measure their own quality, but stops short of painting a complete picture, said James Sherohman, a sociology professor and university assessment director at St. Cloud State University. He said he would like to learn more about the quality of student work and see how sociology's results stack up against those of other disciplines.

"It's a little disappointing not to see more change from 2001 to 2007, but on the other hand, you can see there's a lot of assessment going on," he said, adding, "I see this as more of something to provoke discussion and possibly some action in the discipline if we see this as a problem or not."

— Stephanie Lee