In an effort to introduce and encourage excitement in social research among undergraduate sociology students, this series of activities is designed to promote student engagement in social research. Originally, this series of activities was included as part of a two-week sociology travel study course. During the course, we took twenty-five sociology undergraduate students to Chicago and Washington, DC for two weeks. We had three primary focuses: (1) introduce students to the discipline of sociology by seeing the work of applied sociologists in the field, (2) excite students about the possibilities of social research, and (3) initiate a discussion about inequalities in an urban setting. To address the second goal specifically, we arranged four trips to a variety of social research organizations – ranging from a community-based urban research center to an international data analysis and dissemination organization. While arranging trips to these organizations to meet with staff is ideal for student learning, we acknowledge that this is likely not possible for most students. So, in our discussion below, we include websites for these organizations so that faculty may consider variations of these activities to fit their own goals.

**Our Goals**

In our own travel study course, we believed that if we could introduce students to sociologists working in “the field” who weren’t (only) professors, we could show them the value of a sociology degree. If we could show our students the real, exciting research that sociologists
are working on (including both national and local research), we could spark their interest in research methods as a topic and, if we introduced them to people in the discipline, we could help them establish face-to-face connections that would start to integrate them into the discipline of sociology. Prior to our departure, all of our students had completed an introductory social research course and an introductory statistics course.

**Our Experiences**

During our two weeks, we visited four research organizations, two in Chicago and two in Washington, DC. We arranged with each organization a presentation by appropriate staff and prepared our students to introduce them to the organization’s websites and/or publications. We also arranged our visits in order of the degree of dissemination – from community to national to international. This order also allowed us to be able to present students with a series of experiences that together told the story of social research from small, community-based research to international analysis and dissemination.

Our first visit was to the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) of Loyola University-Chicago (http://www.luc.edu/curl/) in Chicago. CURL seeks to promote equality and to improve people’s lives in communities throughout the Chicago metropolitan region. CURL is designed to collaborate with the community that leads directly to service of the community. To achieve this, integrated teams of academics and activities work with community leaders and residents. To encourage this service, comprehensive research findings serve as a foundation for effective action at all levels for a wide range of urban issues. While visiting CURL, students were introduced the idea of community-based research, to the current projects being undertaken,
and to the opportunities available both at CURL and at other community-based research organizations.

Our second stop was to the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago (http://www.norc.uchicago.edu) in Chicago. NORC’s mission is to conduct high quality social science research in the public interest. NORC may be best known among sociologists as the organization that administers the General Social Survey (GSS). NORC also administers large surveys such as the National Longitudinal Study of No Child Left Behind, the Survey of Earned Doctorates, the National Children’s Survey, and the National Immunization Survey. While here, students toured the telephone center and met with the PI of the GSS and other leaders at NORC. Students were introduced to social survey methods, including sampling, response rates, and random-digit-dialing.

In Washington, DC, we visited with our third organization, the U.S. Census Bureau (http://www.census.gov/). The U.S. Census Bureau’s mission is to serve as the leading source of quality data about the nation’s people and economy. The U.S. Census Bureau collects and disseminates national population and demographic data, in each the decennial census and in many other demographic and economic surveys. Census data are used on a governmental level to determine reapportionment and locally to dictate planning and funding allocation. During this presentation, students learned to use American FactFinder, DataFerrett, and the TIGER mapping tools. In addition, students learned about the process of developing questions and data collection methods.

Our final organization visit was to the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) (http://prb.org/) in Washington, DC. PRB works to inform people around the world about issues related to population, health, and the environment, empower people to use information to
encourage action, and to advance the well-being of current and future generations. At this presentation, students were given details about how PRB collects data, prepares data for publication, and disseminates data around the world. Students were also shown how to use the Data Finder feature on the PRB website.

At the conclusion of the travel study course, students completed two final projects, both designed as culminating projects. The first project was required students to create a trip resume. This document was to be formatted like a traditional resume, but should include only experiences, skills and activities completed during the travel study course. The second project asked students to write a research proposal. We first reminded students of the research approaches that were introduced at our visits to the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL), the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the U.S. Census, and the Population Reference Bureau (PRB). Then, we asked students to develop a research question related to an area of urban life or social inequality and then how each of the visited organizations would assist a researcher in completing research to answer the proposed research question. Students proposed questions ranging from neighborhood health care to crime prevention to education opportunities. One student, for example, asked “What are the social impacts of placing an organic garden in a low-income urban neighborhood?” He noted that CURL could assist him by collecting literature on the topic and collecting qualitative data from residents in the low-income urban neighborhood. NORC, he said, could collect large-scale quantitative data using their phone banks and statistical expertise. The U.S. Census Bureau could help the researcher define the population and identify geographic areas and by providing comparison data. Finally, he noted, the PRB could be useful in analyzing and disseminating the data.
Our Process

Prior to our trip, we worked with organizations to make arrangements for our visit. After selecting our cities, we reviewed the possible organizations in those cities, using personal contacts and web searches. While our two cities (Chicago, IL and Washington, DC) are large social science hubs, we believe that similar visits could be established in smaller metropolitan areas as well. For example, St. Paul, MN has the Wilder Foundation, a non-profit health and human services organization (http://www.wilder.org/). Nashville, TN has the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, a national research center on intellectual and developmental disabilities (http://kc.vanderbilt.edu/). The RAND Corporation, dedicated to improving policy and decision making through research and analysis, is located in Santa Monica, CA (http://www.rand.org/). The Institute for Social Research is connected to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and is the world’s largest academic social science survey and research organization (http://www.isr.umich.edu/). We suggest that those considering such activities take advantage of personal contacts first, working though networks of colleagues and even the American Sociological Association, or other professional organizations. Then, use web searches to find additional locations and organizations. Often large Universities have research centers associated with them and may be a good place to start.

Once a list has been made of potential visits, a simple search of the website will produce contact information for a making a connection. We found that calling or emailing the mail phone number or email address was sufficient for this step. We were quickly transferred to the appropriate contact person. With each of our organizations, our primary contact went out of their way to make our visit extraordinary. Each organization was not only willing to meet with students, but offered unique opportunities for them to see the work being done. For example, at
NORC in Chicago, students met with the Principle Investigator for the General Social Survey, a tool frequently used both in social research textbooks and in classes.

To assure that our visits to these organizations were both accessible and useful for students, we worked closely with our contacts to design a visit that was informative and interesting for students. Since one of our goals was to increase interest in both sociology and social research, we did not want a dry methodology lecture or a common tour of an office building. Our organizations offered our students meet and greets with top researchers, including small group discussions about current projects and techniques (CURL, Chicago), tours of a state-of-the-art call center (NORC, Chicago), access to a variety of free publications (PRB, DC), and trainings that are typically available to government workers (Census, DC). Students responded well to hands-on experiences and tools that they could use once we returned home.

In preparation for these visits, we met with students in advance of our initial departure, encouraged them to visit the organization’s websites and spoke about their larger mission and activities. Once the visit got closer, we met with students to discuss the specific activities scheduled and encouraged students to develop questions for the presenters. Certainly, we could have asked the presenters to provide advance readings or materials to prepare our students.

**Alternative Options**

We believe that this project can not only be completed by physical visits to these organizations, but also by students who research these organizations online. For example, the Census offers several public use presentations in their online library on a variety of topics. NORC has detailed descriptions of their projects available online, as well as details groups would use to decide if hiring NORC was appropriate – students, perhaps, could design a project
and research how NORC could assist them with data collection or analysis. Or, online activities could simply include asking students to find reports and publications prepared by research centers and compare their design, methods, data, analysis, and dissemination. We believe that encouraging students to get excited about social research is an important component to a well-rounded sociology program.