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COMMENTARY

Bringing Students Into a Discipline: Reflections on a Travel Study

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This commentary describes a two-week domestic travel study course for undergraduate sociology students designed to introduce students to the practice of social research and to the larger discipline of sociology. We arranged activities, presentations, and experiences in Chicago and Washington, DC. In this article, we outline the relevant parts of our travel study program and highlight benefits of our travel study program for students and for our major program.

Keywords: curriculum, research, teaching methods, travel study

In 2008, as relatively new sociology faculty, we were frustrated by two recurring challenges. First, sociology students taking the required research methods course seemed uninterested in the content of the class and saw it as a hoop to jump through on the way to graduation. Consequently, this course had poor attendance, lackluster and uninspired student projects, and course evaluations that reflected a lack of student interest. Second, students often expressed interest in majoring in sociology but didn’t know what they could do with the degree upon graduation. These two frequent topics in advising and faculty meetings pushed us to find ways to invite our undergraduate students into the larger discipline of sociology, to help them understand the importance and excitement of social research, and to help them see the career possibilities within the discipline.

We felt that a travel study would be a unique and powerful way to get students excited about social research and the discipline of sociology. We designed a class that would bring our students to Chicago and Washington, DC to visit important social research centers, as well as explore other sociological topics (such as urban inequality and criminal justice). This course combined rigorous academic activities with a kind of “sociology appreciation” and a focus on real-life application of sociological concepts. The two-week course provided students with three upper-division elective credits (determined by number of faculty contact hours) in the sociology major or minor and cost $2362 per student, which included tuition, all travel expenses (to and from each city, and all travel within each city), all meals, lodging, and all admission/ticket fees. Students could use financial aid to pay for all or part of the course. We made significant efforts to make the trip as affordable as possible, including forgoing half of the typical salary paid to faculty for the course, arranging to stay in hostels rather than hotels, and finding free and low-cost activities for our students to participate in. All issues of payment and finances were handled through the university financial aid office. Students earned a letter grade for their participation in all course activities and completion of assignments during the travel study. For additional resources on planning travel studies and the benefits of such programs see Chernega and Osgood (2011).

We recruited students through presentations in sociology classes and with posters designed by the travel study office. To register for the travel study, students had to be majors or minors in sociology and to have completed the introductory sociology class. We escorted 25 students on the course in May 2009. The sociology program has many more women (71%) than men (29%). Our travel study reflected this imbalance and skewed somewhat more female with 23 female students and two male students. Twenty-three of the students were white (92%) while two were nonwhite, a racial breakdown that mirrors the largely white population of the university (88% white) and the sociology program (89%). We also had one student (4%) designated as “non-traditional” (a student returning to a degree program after time in the workforce), which was similar to the university rate (8%).
Activities and Assessments

Across the two cities, we highlighted the importance of social research by visiting the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL), the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the U.S. Census Bureau, the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) and the American Sociological Association (ASA). The focus of these research organizations ranged from small, community-based research to international analysis and dissemination. At the ASA, students saw how the research we had previously learned about fits into the larger discipline of sociology, and how a major in sociology is useful on a résumé. At each organization, students were able to meet and network with professional sociologists.

Throughout the trip, students responded to online reflection questions on university-issued laptops. Over the fourteen days of the trip, students completed ten activity-specific reflections, and then completed two final projects in the two weeks after our return. Students were expected to apply sociological concepts to what we had seen throughout the trip—through one project focusing specifically on social research and the other on what sociologists do. Prior to the course, students read sample research reports from the organizations we visited as well as an article about how to be a sociologically diligent and respectful observer (Meisel 2008).

Outcomes

We hoped students in this course would experience a renewed interest in research that they could pass along to their peers. This outcome did not lend itself to typical assessments such as testing or papers. However, we saw evidence (in course evaluations, student assignments, and student participation in research after the trip) that students were inspired by seeing research in action, felt like they had been incorporated into the discipline of sociology, and understood their instructors’ excitement about sociology.

Students were clearly motivated by seeing sociological research in action. After a presentation at CURL, one student asked, “How can I get a job here?” Students also indicated interest in the work done by researchers at NORC, and the Census Bureau, asking excellent questions at each session, sometimes lagging behind to continue talking to researchers about their work. During these interactions, students took the opportunity to become more involved with the discipline of sociology. In the post-trip evaluation, one student wrote:

I now have a better idea of how to get involved with these projects so that I can make a difference. I gained contacts and have a better understanding of what these various groups do for our society.

Another student wrote, “We learned how we can improve our world. We listened to many sociologists talk about the work they are doing and how their work gets submitted to policymakers in the hopes of making a difference.”

Students also indicated that they learned about sociology in a way that they couldn’t in the classroom. One student responded:

I was able to do many more hands-on activities. Professors can always tell you what life is like in another area of the country, but you don’t actually know what they are talking about until you experience it for yourself.

Another student, wrote, “I was able to be fully immersed in the cultures where in a classroom I would not be able to do so.”

Soon after the travel study, we saw increased interest in social research and the discipline of sociology among the students in our department. For example, the size of our academic sociology club increased (from five prior to the travel study to fifteen after the travel study) and student participation in the Midwest Sociological Society (MSS) and the Sociologists of Minnesota (SOM) also increased. In 2010, a record number of our students attended the MSS annual meetings (10 students) and SOM annual meetings (8 students), and students presented two posters for MSS. One of the posters (created by a travel study participant) won the first ever undergraduate poster competition award.

We have also seen increased interest in research in our classes. In 2010, the department created an intermediate social research class to supplement our introductory research course. This new class has filled to capacity for the first two years it was offered, even though it was not initially required for any major or minor program. The success of this course has been remarkable, given that it was difficult to get students to take the introductory research course prior to our travel study. The travel study also seems to have positively impacted student interest in research outside of the classroom: since the travel study, three participants have sought out additional research opportunities with faculty and one participant has completed an internship at a research organization that she visited during the travel study. We believe that the travel study contributed to this increased interest in social research among our students.

Designing and leading a two-week travel study course helped us connect our students to the discipline of sociology and created excitement about social research. The endeavor also helped us become more connected to our own students (an inevitable outcome of traveling together for two weeks), and was a fun way for students to achieve learning outcomes.

REFERENCES
