

PLO #2: Research and Methods Competence

To assess this PLO, we developed a scoring rubric on research methods to evaluate the SOC 195 Senior Seminar Research Paper. This research paper is the capstone project for graduating seniors. Each paper was to be scored on a scale from Excellent (score=4) to Poor (score=1) in five areas: method choice, data collection instrument, sampling technique, ethical consideration and data collection process. Ten papers were purposively sampled from the 18 paper submissions to reflect the work of 3 under-achieving, 4 mid-level achieving, and 3 high-achieving students. Each faculty member reviewed four papers so that each paper had two evaluators.

1) What we learned

In general, it was observed that there was great variance between student papers that demonstrated excellent understanding and great thoughtfulness in conducting research, and other papers which contained significant holes and lacked basic research competence. Out of a possible 20 points, the average overall score was 13.08.

OVERALL DEPARTMENT AVERAGES

(4 – Excellent, 3- Good, 2- Acceptable, 1 – Poor, 0-Missing)

Method choice: 2.925

Data collection instrument: 2.475

Sampling technique: 2.2

Ethical consideration: 2.325 minus 3 N/A cases that were not counted

Data collection: 3.05

Overall score: 13.08 (out of a possible 20)

While students generally seemed to be most able to articulate their method choice rationale, their execution of the respective methods varied greatly in skill. Small sample sizes, convenience sampling methods, and weak explanations of coding schemes raised concerns about how much time and guidance students receive in developing independent research projects.

2) Changes we plan to make to improve student learning

The evaluation of student papers raised many questions about the adequacy of the existing SOC106/107 research sequence, and the degree to which upper-division courses successfully strengthen students' research skills and lead up to the competence level expected of seniors in SOC/AN195. Because the department is undergoing significant change in personnel, this review

has revealed the necessity of beginning discussions about these three key areas: SOC106/107, research expectations in upper-division courses, and SOC/AN195.

- The possibility of more rigorously scaffolding the research methods classes in relationship with the senior seminar class will be discussed in the upcoming year.
- Also, the content and structure of SOC/AN195 will be re-evaluated after gathering some data on how other departments or peer institutions structure their senior capstone experiences.
- Other Ideas for motivating students to raise the level of their research included requiring public presentations at the Westmont research symposium or encouraging participation in the Santa Clara Student conference.