

Implementing a Careers and Professional Development Course for Sociology Students

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Abstract

Sociology students are interested in having meaningful careers that use their sociological knowledge and skills, and higher education institutions are under pressure to show that their graduates achieve career success. A one-credit-hour course focused on careers, professional development, and resources for sociology majors can increase students' confidence that multiple options exist for them in their postbaccalaureate lives. Sociology faculty can design a course that increases students' ability to locate and apply for relevant jobs and graduate programs and to practice skills that employers say that want to see in college graduates. Detailed examples of assignments, readings, and class activities are presented that can readily be tailored to the unique circumstances of different institutions and their students.

Keywords

careers, professional development, sociology students

This article makes the case that sociology programs should seriously consider a course in their curriculum focused on helping students explore the careers available to baccalaureate-trained sociologists and develop or practice professional skills that may not be addressed in other parts of the sociology curriculum. The article then describes a one-credit-hour course designed with these goals in mind and presents assessment data showing both that students need such a course and that it is successful in enhancing students' career readiness.

WHY COURSES ON CAREERS FOR SOCIOLOGY MAJORS ARE NEEDED

We know from the Bachelor's and Beyond studies that sociology students choose the major for a combination of conceptual and careerist reasons. Many enjoyed their first sociology course and want to learn sociology to understand themselves better and

to change society. In addition, they choose sociology majors because they want to secure jobs (Spalter-Roth et al. 2012). In combining an interest in learning with a desire for career success, sociology students do not differ from national samples of students entering college (Eagan et al. 2017). While higher education leads to many positive outcomes (e.g., higher political participation, better health, longer marriages), increasingly emphasis has been placed on career success as the preeminent outcome of a college degree (Marcus 2013; Princeton Review 2018; U.S. Department of Education 2019). The Census Bureau is working to create the Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO)

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database, collaborating with the University of Texas system, public institutions in Colorado, the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, and the University of Wisconsin–Madison, to provide data on earnings by institution, degree field, degree level, and graduation cohort for 1, 5, and 10 years after graduation (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2019b).

In these discussions about the college-to-career pipeline, sociology students may at first find themselves disadvantaged. Sociology students are, for example, less satisfied with the career advising that they receive from their sociology programs than with most other aspects of their programs, including the quality of teaching, their interaction with peers, and their overall views about their sociology experiences (Senter, Van Vooren, and Spalter-Roth 2013). Sociology as a field does not lead to one or two obvious career paths (unlike social work or secondary education), and efforts to search online job boards for “sociologist” with only baccalaureate-level training lead to few options (Hecht 2016). Sociology majors are advantaged in securing good jobs when they list their sociological knowledge and skills on their résumés and discuss them in interviews, although many majors do not take advantage of these opportunities (Spalter-Roth et al. 2010).

To address student preferences and “the changing landscape of higher education,” the American Sociological Association (ASA) in a recent publication recommends that departments provide students with “curricular and co-curricular structures that help students gain knowledge and apply skills that support them in their post-baccalaureate careers” (Pike et al. 2017:4). Departments are somewhat attentive to these concerns: a recent ASA study of department chairs found that 33 percent of departments do, in fact, have a required course or seminar in career preparation (ASA 2018). It is not clear, however, whether the courses in question are devoted primarily to career issues or whether courses, such as capstone courses, involve a unit on careers. In fact, although a search in *TRAILS* found some capstone courses that focus primarily on the transition from college to post-graduate life (Hope 2010; Wieting and Navarre-Jackson 2010), few other courses were explicitly careers courses (Byng 2010; Katz 2013). A search for “careers” in the titles of *Teaching Sociology* articles since 2000 found only one careers course, and this one included other topics to assist students in moving successfully from introductory sociology into more advanced courses in the major (Holtzman 2018).¹

In addition, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) argues that all college graduates need to have mastered eight career readiness competencies (NACE 2019). While there is strong overlap between the skills learned in sociology programs and these skills in demand by employers, it is more likely that sociology programs emphasize a competency, such as “critical thinking/problem solving” or “global/intercultural fluency,” than others, such as “career management” or “digital technology” (Ciabattari et al. 2018). The NACE Career Readiness Initiative suggests the importance of “career management” so that graduates can “identify and articulate one’s skills, strengths, knowledge, and experiences relevant to the position desired and career goals, and identify areas necessary for professional growth” (NACE 2019). According to NACE, a student completing college should be “able to navigate and explore job options, understands and can take the steps necessary to pursue opportunities, and understands how to self-advocate for opportunities in the workplace” (NACE 2019). Further, NACE’s emphasis on “digital technology” suggests that departments should ensure that graduates have mastered other professional skills, including the technological skills to “solve problems, complete tasks, and accomplish goals” (NACE 2019).

Hence, it is timely and useful to discuss ways of assisting sociology majors with the transition from satisfied college student to successful member of the labor force by creating and delivering short courses on careers and professional development for majors. Graduates who use their sociological knowledge and skills on the job are more likely to be hold career-type jobs and to be satisfied with the decision to have majored in sociology (Senter and Spalter-Roth 2016).

THE CONTEXT AND THE COURSE

Beginning in fall 2017, sociology majors and minors at Central Michigan University have been required to complete a one-credit-hour proseminar focused on “careers, professional development, and resources for sociology majors.” Completion of Introductory Sociology is a prerequisite for the course. Sociology itself is located in a multidisciplinary department (that includes anthropology and social work) of a regional public university enrolling approximately 15,000 undergraduate students, the vast majority of whom are between 18 and 24 years of age.

The course was taught for the first time in spring 2019, with 17 students enrolled. The students ranged from sophomores to seniors. Although all of the students were sociology majors or minors, slightly more than one-third of the students had declared their major or minor prior to fall 2017 and, consequently, enrolled in the course even though it was not a formal degree requirement. The four sociology minors in the course majored in related fields, including psychology, political science, and social work. The course met for a two-hour period one night per week for 8 of the 16 weeks of the semester.

COURSE OUTLINE AND ASSIGNMENTS

The text that follows will highlight the topics, classroom activities, readings, and assignments for each of the eight weeks of the course. Because I found it impossible to locate one or two current books that would provide background readings for the course, I assigned a variety of material that was available as print handouts, websites, or YouTube videos.

I tried to have a guest speaker and an active learning assignment for many of the sessions. Table 1 provides an overview of how the eight-week course was structured.

Given the divisions in many universities between the academic and student affairs units, faculty may not be aware of the range of nonacademic resources their institution provides to students. One way of locating such resources and the staff who are potential guest speakers for a careers course is to find the materials provided to first-year (or transfer) students. My experience is that staff members, whether associated with academic or nonacademic support units, are happy to have the opportunity to speak with students in a classroom setting.

Week 1: Why Sociology, the Skills Employers Seek, and the Skills That You Have

The course began by asking students to introduce themselves by discussing why they chose a sociology major or minor. This was intended as an ice-breaker, and students learned that many of their peers came to the field because they loved their first course, wanted to help people, or found the major after beginning others that they found less satisfying. I demonstrated for them that they were not all that different from national samples of

sociology majors, suggesting that they might enjoy the same success that majors find when they graduate with their sociology degrees.

I then discussed the literature on what employers seek in college graduates, highlighting the Career Readiness Initiative from NACE (2019) and the strong overlap between the skills learned in sociology programs and the skills in demand by employers (Ciabattari et al. 2018). I also introduced them to the Bachelor's and Beyond studies that show both that sociology majors do learn important skills that they use on their jobs and that the majors who use those skills are both more satisfied with their jobs and more likely to be on a career track (Senter, Spalter-Roth, and Van Vooren 2015). During the class, I showed one of the ASA's webinars, "Building a Career with a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology," which highlights alumni discussing how they use their major in their careers, and referred them to ASA publications for undergraduates on careers (ASA 2013, 2019).

For their first assignment, I asked students to write a statement about themselves—their past, present, and future. The intent of this assignment was to encourage them to think about their strengths and weaknesses and to explore the ways in which they want to live and work in the first years after receiving their bachelor's degree. The assignment was a minor variation from the one developed by Mobley, Steele, and Rowell (1999). The assignment showed me that students previously had very little assistance in thinking about their careers, that they defined their strengths using an understandable but nonprofessional vocabulary (e.g., "I love working with many different types of people" as opposed to "I have well-developed intercultural competence"), and that these traditional-age undergraduates could write with some coherence about what they wanted to do in 1 year and 3 years after graduation but could not be other than general when writing about their life 10 years on.

Week 2: Career Exploration and Development

The focus of the second week of the course was on the services offered to students by the Career Development Center on our campus, and a staff member from the office gave a presentation that provided an overview of services provided, including résumé critiques, mock interviews, and online examples of elevator speeches, cover letters, and job search sites. For this week, the class moved to a computer lab so that students could learn about job

Table 1. Course Topics, Classroom Activities, and Student Assignments by Week.

| Week | Topics | Classroom Activities | Student Assignments |
|------|---|--|--|
| 1 | Why study sociology? Skills employers seek Skills sociology promotes Careers using sociology | ASA webinar: "Building a Career with Bachelor's Degree in Sociology" | Write a statement about your experiences (past and present) and future goals, stressing your strengths and weaknesses. |
| 2 | Services available at CMU's Career Development Center Using LinkedIn and job search sites Writing résumés and cover letters Preparing for interviews | Presentation by Career Development Center staff Hands-on exploration of the <i>Occupational Outlook Handbook</i> , O*Net Online, LinkedIn, and Handshake | Register with Handshake. Create a LinkedIn account. Draft a résumé. Write a cover letter appropriate for an "actual" job of interest. Create an elevator speech. Answer interview questions. |
| 3 | Graduate school options Preparing for and applying to graduate school Options other than traditional jobs | Presentation by School of Graduate Studies staff Hands-on exploration of graduate programs in sociology and related fields at a local Research I university Exploration of funding options available to graduate students | Find three graduate programs of interest. List what you need to do to apply to the graduate program that interests you the most. Explore other options (e.g., the Peace Corps). Write a personal statement about why graduate school/the other option makes sense to enable you to pursue your long-term interests and why they should admit/accept you. |
| 4 | Informational and employment interviews Oral presentations | Presentation by Presentation Skills Center staff Discussion of need for presentation preparation and practice | Arrange to complete (and transcribe) an interview with someone who has a career or is in a graduate program that interests you. Schedule a mock job interview at the Career Development Center. |
| 5 | Making the most of college, including the following: Volunteering opportunities Leadership opportunities Registered student organizations Resources for sociology majors at CMU Other campus resources | Presentation by Volunteer Center staff Presentation by Leadership Institute staff Reflection on information that was new to students and on ways that students could better prepare for careers with involvement outside the classroom | Attend a job fair or meeting with Career Development Center staff. Reflect on the experience and how you might be better prepared in the future. Complete two charts highlighting how/when you have developed the NACE Career Readiness Competencies and the student learning objectives developed by CMU sociology faculty for students. |
| 6 | Finding information and data, including the following: Library resources to assist sociology students Computer searches to find secondary data of interest to sociologists | Presentation by social science faculty librarian Hands-on activity requiring students to use bibliography, newspaper, and serials databases to answer questions about the utility of sociology | Reflect on mock interview. Summarize the demographics of a county/city in which you would like to live three years after receiving your undergraduate degree. |
| 7 | Summarizing data and using digital technology, including the following: Basic computer skills for sociologists Creating tables/graphs | Completion of handout involving use of Word and Excel to create professional documents, tables, and graphs | Prepare final portfolio. Revise elevator speech. |
| 8 | Meet and greet and career information exchange | Student presentations of their elevator speeches and their PowerPoint presentations on their preferred careers | |

Note: ASA = American Sociological Association; CMU = Central Michigan University; NACE = National Association of Colleges and Employers.

options through the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019) and O*Net Online (U.S. Department of Labor 2019) and so that they could create Handshake and LinkedIn accounts.² The move to a computer lab is not necessary; students could accomplish the same tasks using their smartphones or laptops or could complete these activities outside of the class period.

For their assignment, students were asked to register with Handshake, create a LinkedIn profile, draft a résumé, write a cover letter appropriate for an “actual” job of interest that is posted “somewhere,” create a draft of an elevator speech, and answer three of a series of behavioral interview questions that (I gave them and) might be posed to job candidates in an actual job interview. The article “Preparing for a 21st Century Job Hunt with a BA in Sociology” (Hecht 2016) helped students learn how best to search job boards for positions of interest for baccalaureate-trained sociologists, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics provides guidance on résumés, applications, and cover letters (Crosby 2009).

Week 3: Non-Job Options after Completing Your Bachelor’s Degree

The emphasis for this week was on graduate school options, preparing and applying to graduate school, and options after graduation other than additional education or “traditional jobs.” A representative from our College of Graduate Studies made a presentation, stressing, in part, the ways in which the graduate school experience differs from the undergraduate experience both in terms of application procedures, funding, and deadlines and the need for focus and commitment to a specific field of study.

During class, I had students explore the website of a Research I university in our geographic region, locating information on graduate programs in sociology and related fields and exploring the benefits that accrue to graduate assistants. Students’ homework assignment was to go to the website of two universities anywhere in the United States and learn about three graduate programs that might be of interest. While they could find any type of program, I provided a list of common programs for sociology majors, including a master’s or PhD in sociology, a master’s in applied sociology, a master’s of science in administration (a large program at my institution), a law degree (JD), and master’s degrees in social work, public administration, and public health. Many students noted that they had never

heard of these degrees, let alone explored them previously. I also asked them to review other options, such as the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, City Year, Teach for America, Teaching English Abroad, or WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms). At home, they created a list of what is needed to apply to the program of greatest interest and indicated what they would still need to do to satisfy those requirements (e.g., save a high-quality sample of their written work). They also wrote a personal statement about why graduate school/the other option makes sense to enable them to pursue their long-term goals and why the program should admit or accept them. Websites from idealist.org and Peterson’s were assigned to help with this assignment (Idealist Grad Resources 2019; Peterson’s 2019).

In reading these assignments, it was clear that many students had little understanding of the nature of graduate education or the options for graduate education for sociology majors. I wanted them to see that they would need to find faculty or others who could write letters of reference for them and to learn that many universities require GRE exams. In hindsight, I realize that I missed the mark in preparing students to write graduate school entrance essays. It is reasonable that sociology majors, many of whom are first-generation college students, would have little understanding of the ways in which they must sell themselves to graduate schools, rather than focusing, as they did, on why graduate school would benefit them (e.g., “By completing this degree, I know that I will make more money”).³

Week 4: Interviews and Presentations

The most recent employer survey report sponsored by the American Association of Colleges and Universities notes that “only 40% of executives rate recent college graduates as well prepared in oral communication, the quality that they prioritize most highly (80%) among the 15 tested” (Hart Research Associates 2018:15). Bachelor’s and Beyond data suggest that sociology programs are less successful in preparing students in this skill (Senter et al. 2013) than in some others. With this in mind, the fourth week of the course was devoted to preparation for oral presentations and interviews. A guest speaker from our Presentation Skills Center stressed the need for students to prepare for any kind of oral presentation and to practice, practice, and practice. He stressed that being nervous about oral delivery is normal and can be overcome.

For their at-home assignment, students were asked to arrange both for an informational interview with someone in a career that they envision for themselves and for a mock job interview conducted by our career center. In addition to stressing the different kinds of interviews that exist, the purpose of this assignment was to force students to locate a person to interview and to schedule interviews in a timely manner. Again, the Bureau of Labor Statistics provides guidance on “getting the inside scoop on careers” through information interviewing (Crosby 2010) and “seizing the opportunity and the job” through employment interviewing (Crosby 2016).

An additional homework assignment, with an extended due date to provide students with event options, required attendance at a job or internship fair (on campus or elsewhere) or a face-to-face interview with a career services staff member. They then had to write a reflection piece discussing “what you learned that was useful by attending the event” and “how you could have been better prepared to get more out of the event.” Responses to the latter prompt were informative, ranging from “I should have brought a portfolio to hold my résumés and materials” to “I should have practiced my elevator speech more” to “I should have dressed more professionally.”

Week 5: Making the Most out of College

For the fifth week of the course, my goal was to help students understand the ways in which they could both grow professionally while undergraduates and engage in activities that quite simply would be résumé enhancing. Speakers from our Volunteer Center and from our Leadership Institute gave presentations. I supplemented this material by reviewing other resources that were available on campus for all students and for majors in our department (including scholarships, student organizations, internships, and options to attend regional professional meetings).

Students’ homework assignment asked them “to reflect further on the skills and knowledge that you have developed both through your courses and through experiences, including employment, outside of the classroom.” They were then asked “to briefly note how/where you learned the eight Career Readiness Competencies developed by NACE and how/where you learned the five Student Learning Objectives developed by [your] faculty for all sociology majors.” While I had not

originally planned on this kind of assignment, I found it was necessary because students’ earlier work suggested their difficulty in articulating the ways in which their classroom and out-of-class experiences translated into competencies needed by employers or desired by sociology faculty. This inability to discuss skill development was found in the Bachelor’s and Beyond studies (Spalter-Roth et al. 2010), as well. Ferrante’s (2009) *Careers in Sociology* includes a useful section on “building a résumé while pursuing a degree in sociology,” and ASA provides its own listing of “undergraduate student resources” (ASA 2019).

Week 6: Finding Information and Data

The sixth week of the class included a presentation by a librarian on using library resources effectively. The intent here was to help students develop the digital technology competencies appropriate for the major and viewed as important by employers. Students practiced their skills by using biographical resources to answer the question, “What was Michelle Obama’s undergraduate major?” (The answer: Sociology.) For an exercise in using newspaper databases, students were asked to find a 2017 *New York Times* article that provides the answer to the question, “What did Walter Mondale propose in 1967?” (The answer: A Council of Social Advisors.) To ensure that students could find sociological journal articles, students were asked, “Which three core competencies does sociology develop in students that help them with business careers according to Rachael A. Woldoff and Robert C. Litchfield (2006)?” (The answer: Structural consciousness, scientific thinking, and appreciation for diversity.) I then spent class time making sure that students were familiar with QuickFacts and American Fact Finder from the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2019a, 2019c), the online General Social Survey database (National Opinion Research Corporation 2019), and the Roper Center’s iPoll for survey data (Roper Center 2019).

Students’ assignment to complete at home consisted of reflecting on their required mock job interview. They discussed what they learned by completing the interview and highlighted both their strong and weak points. In addition, they were asked how they would “prepare to do a better interview the next time you have an opportunity to be interviewed for a job.” They also were asked to “think about the city in which you would like to live after you graduate from CMU with your bachelor’s degree.” Then, using Census data, they

created a table to compare this city to the United States as a whole in terms of variables such as median household income, percentage with bachelor's degree or higher, percentage of households with broadband Internet access, median gross rent, and median travel time to work in minutes. They then summarized the data they found and discussed anything that surprised them. The intent here was to encourage students to explore not only career options but to use secondary data to develop a more realistic understanding about places to live.

Week 7: Digital Technology

For this week, we met again in a computer lab with the goal of ensuring that students had mastered additional digital technology skills, including those associated with word processing and spreadsheets. Students were asked to use Word to create a document with specific margins, fonts, spacing, text sorting, page breaks, and page numbering. They were also asked to create a graph in Excel based on the grades that they received on their assignments.

In addition, because I thought that students were not completing all of the readings assigned, I had them complete a table from *Jobs, Careers, and Sociological Skills* (Senter et al. 2015) based on their own experiences. For example, do they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree that "to help me with my job, I use what I have learned about diversity"? They were also asked to create a table with "title, source, etc. that results from your search in idealist.org for jobs with two different search terms." The intent was for the table to look like the one in *Preparing for a 21st Century Job Hunt with a BA in Sociology* (Hecht 2016). While the explicit intent was to practice computer skills, the implicit intent was to stress again the skills students develop in sociology programs and use on the job and to recognize the importance of using skill-based search terms at job sites rather than searching for jobs as "sociologists."

Students' homework assignment was to finish their final portfolio, which consisted of a number of parts and constituted one-half of their final course grade. Some parts of the portfolio were revisions of work submitted earlier: a revised résumé, a revised elevator speech, a revised discussion about what they hope to be doing in three years, and of "what guidance, if any" they have had "about careers using sociology (that has been useful)." In addition, the portfolio included a summary of their informational interview (including a transcription of answers to questions asked; a discussion of what

was interesting, new, and/or surprising about the job/position of their informant; and a discussion of whether and why a job/position like this one continues to be of interest to them) and the job announcements for "three positions that (now) interest you and for which you will be qualified when you graduate." Students also prepared a PowerPoint presentation about their intended career and their preparation for it (including the characteristics of the career, their strengths and experiences inside and outside the classroom that prepares them well for this career, the ways in which they will prepare in the next year or so to be a strong candidate for this type of career/job, and the advice they would give to others to help them prepare for this kind of career).

Week 8: "Meet and Greet," "Career Information Exchange," and Wrap-Up

This final class meeting consisted of students presenting their (revised) elevator speeches along with their Power Point presentations of their (now) intended careers. The intent was for students to practice their oral communication skills and to learn from one another about a range of careers open to sociology majors. Students provided anonymous comments on strong and weak points about each elevator speech to help them focus on the presentations. Generally speaking, more practice was needed, as many students referred to their notes when speaking. The Power Point presentations were informative, with careers ranging from sociology professor to social worker to substance abuse counselor, mirroring the kinds of jobs sociology majors actually acquire with bachelor's degrees (Senter et al. 2015). In future years, I hope to open this final class period to students thinking about the major and to use the session as a kind of recruitment event for the program.

ASSESSMENT DATA

Two types of data are available to assess the extent to which the course was successful in increasing students' professional development and their understanding of the career options available to them. Of course, this analysis is limited by the relatively small number of students involved and by the fact that the course has to date been offered once. Quantitative data came from pre- and post-tests administered on the first and last day of class, respectively. Students were asked to rate their level of confidence on 11 dimensions, such as knowing

Table 2. Changes in Confidence on Items Related to Professional and Career Skills: Pre- and Posttest Means and Paired-Sample *t* Tests.

| How confident are you... | Pretest Mean | Posttest Mean | Paired-Sample <i>t</i> |
|--|--------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Knowing the kind of experiences that CMU and sociology offers to help you be successful on the job in the future | 4.44 | 6.06 | 5.97** |
| How to write a professional résumé | 4.44 | 6.31 | 5.96** |
| Your ability to search for jobs appropriate for graduates with an undergraduate degree in sociology | 4.00 | 5.91 | 4.91** |
| Knowing the type of job you would like to have within three years of graduating | 3.94 | 5.75 | 4.65** |
| Knowing how to apply to graduate schools | 3.75 | 5.38 | 4.10** |
| Using spreadsheet software, such as Excel | 5.00 | 5.94 | 3.76** |
| Your skills in using the Internet to search for data relevant to understanding social problems | 5.06 | 6.50 | 3.62** |
| Knowing the type of job you would like to have within 10 years of graduating | 3.56 | 5.56 | 3.55** |
| Using software to make professional presentations | 5.56 | 6.63 | 3.17** |
| Your skills in conducting an interview for a job | 5.00 | 5.75 | 2.67* |
| Your skills in searching for books/articles on sociological topics | 5.69 | 6.31 | 1.91 |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

how to write a professional résumé and knowing how to apply to graduate schools. Responses were recorded using a 7-point semantic differential scale, where 1 is *not at all* and 7 is *a great deal*. Table 2 presents the results of paired-sample *t* tests. Sixteen of 17 students answered questions on both the pre- and posttest; hence, the degrees of freedom are 15 for each. The table is organized so that the item with the largest *t*-statistic appears first and the one with the smallest, last.

Several conclusions are apparent from the table. First, the pretest means differ considerably, from a low of 3.56 for confidence in knowing “the type of job you would like to have within 10 years of graduating” to a high of 5.69 for confidence in skills in searching for books/articles on sociological topics. In percentages, at least one-third of students gave themselves the low confidence rating of 1, 2, or 3 at the beginning of the course for their ability to search for jobs appropriate for graduates with an undergraduate degree in sociology, knowing the type of job they would like to have within 3 years and 10 years of graduating, and knowing how to apply to graduate schools. Each of the means on

these items was 4.0 or below. These pretest data confirm the need for a course such as this one or for other means of helping students develop these skills.

Second, for fully 10 of the 11 dimensions, students reported highly statistically significant increases in confidence over time. For the 11th dimension, the change is almost statistically significant, using alpha equaling .05. Some of these changes are large, about 2 points on the 7-point scale.

Third, at the end of the course, all means were above 5.3, and five were above 6.0. More than 60 percent of students provided the high ratings of 6 or 7 (of 7) on all items other than knowing how to apply to graduate schools. Such findings support the view that students can develop these professional and career skills without consuming a great deal of time in their busy academic schedules and without a faculty member, such as myself, diverting considerable time and energy to develop the skills needed to teach such a course.

Qualitative data are also available from a portion of students’ final portfolio. In particular,

students were asked, "What guidance have you had about careers using sociology (that has been useful to you)?" While some students talked about specific skills that they learned in the careers course, such as "résumé help" or "information about graduate schools," most talked more generally about their enhanced understanding of the diverse ways in which sociology majors can find success in the labor market. What is striking in these comments is how little guidance students had had previously and, consequently, how valuable a course such as this one can be.

Honestly, before this class none. I knew that I really loved the field of sociology, but I had always questioned what I really would be able to do with my degree after graduating. This course has helped me realize that there are plenty of options out there for me. . . . The most important thing that I think I now know, is what I need to do, to get where I want to go.

This class has also encouraged me to look into different graduate programs and degrees in both terms of qualifications and possible job descriptions which has given me a much better outlook on what I want to do with my future. . . . I have learned that sociology can lead me in any direction that I choose.

It is easy for professors, who are more or less settled into their adult lives, to forget how difficult and frightening it can be for young people to make decisions about their future. For some students, the course helped them become more secure in their thinking about college and their postbaccalaureate lives.

This class was all about us and improving out skills to help us succeed in the future. I am a lot less worried about heading into the real world after I graduate after taking this class. I finally got to sit down and actually map out what I want to do with the rest of my life.

At one point, I thought maybe college wasn't for me because I could not find anything worth pursuing. I didn't know enough about any of the careers to decide which major would be best suited for me. I was lost and I felt like I was drowning in school with no sense of direction to the surface, let alone dry land. This class truly helped me break the surface and point me in the direction of solid ground.

I find such comments to be poignant, and they strengthen my resolve that this kind of course is needed for our undergraduate students, many of whom are the first in their families to graduate from college and many of whom graduate with substantial debt and, consequently, need to embark on a career immediately after graduation to pay back their creditors.

DISCUSSION

Sociology faculty might pose three types of objections to a course such as the one discussed here. Faculty might feel that students should develop the skills addressed in the course through other means—perhaps by exploring and developing skills on their own or by taking substantive courses focused on content areas such as business applications (for spreadsheet use) or library literacy (for book/journal/data searching). The questions posed are whether a course such as the one described is rigorous enough to deserve course credit and whether it should be taught in a sociology program. My answer is that faculty designing such a course can increase or decrease the rigor as is appropriate for their student body. While I had students prepare a PowerPoint presentation on their chosen career, other faculty might have students write a more extended research paper based on the career in question and its prospects in future labor markets. While I had students conduct a fairly informal informational interview with someone in a desirable career, other faculty might have students conduct multiple more-structured interviews and write more formal papers based on the qualitative data they (and perhaps other classmates) have gathered. I would argue that the skills involved in all such assignments—developing oral presentations, writing papers, conducting interviews, and engaging in qualitative data analysis—are appropriate for some amount of academic credit for undergraduate sociology students.

Second, sociology faculty might object to such a course because they believe that they themselves are not the ones who should teach it. Perhaps such courses, while offering academic credit, should be taught by faculty in human resources or information systems or by career professionals or counselors. The problem with this approach is these faculty and staff may not have a strong understanding of what sociology is and how the field can prepare students for meaningful postgraduate lives. Further, I found that I did, in fact, have the skills needed to

teach a careers course, even though I do not specialize in “work and occupations” within sociology and am certainly not trained (or interested in being trained) as a career counselor. In fact, the skills needed included being able to critique students’ written and oral work in a manner similar to what I usually do (based on factors such as organization, depth, grammar, and delivery). The literature to master is itself quite limited and did not seem to involve the kind of deep dive that one would undertake if teaching a three-credit-hour advanced course in a new area for the first time.

Third, sociology faculty might argue that the activities discussed earlier could be integrated into other existing sociology courses—perhaps a cornerstone course, such as the one described by Holtzman (2018), or a capstone course (Crone 2010; Green 2015; Keating, 2010; McKinney 2010). These are certainly possibilities, but I would strike two cautionary notes: first, career exploration should ideally begin prior to a student’s senior year, when capstone courses are typically taken, and second, career readiness discussions can easily get lost in other courses, given the press of meeting the multiple learning objectives in such courses (e.g., in-depth research papers).

Finally, recognizing the diversity of sociology programs and students, I would suggest that a short course or limited-credit-course, such as the one described, can be readily tailored to the specific needs of the students in question. Given that my course enrolled more upperclassmen than I expected, I should have reduced the time spent on using library databases, such as Sociological Abstracts; students reported already having mastered that kind of professional skill (and the pretest mean on this item was the highest of all 11). Instead, time could have been spent on connecting students with alumni from our program (through telephone calls or LinkedIn) or on providing students with a more thorough understanding of the range of nonprofit organizations that exist in our region. Other faculty might find it useful to devote more time talking about teaching sociology at the high school level (certification in sociology at the high school level is not a possibility in my state) or focusing on developing/reviewing specific skills, such as SPSS or the use of secondary data from government websites. While I invited guest speakers to my course and held some class periods in a computer lab, these features of the course are not necessary. Faculty could readily adjust their course

to the classroom environment that is available to them and could use videos or webinars (rather than presentations by guests) to enhance class periods. In-class exercises could be completed with print copies of materials, and students could work effectively in groups to, for example, discuss the ways in which they are using their sociological knowledge and skills on their existing jobs and the ways in which their experiences have already helped them develop the eight NACE competencies.

CONCLUSIONS

My intent throughout has been to encourage departments to consider developing a careers and professional development course for their sociology students. Sociology students and the institutions that enroll them are giving increased attention to career success, and sociology students lack the straightforward pathway and satisfying advising that allows for a seamless transition from undergraduate student to meaningful career using their sociological knowledge and skills. A one-credit-hour course for undergraduate sociology students can increase their confidence that sociology can lead to many career and graduate school options and can enhance their ability to make the choices that increase the likelihood that they will be successful in reaching their postbaccalaureate goals.

To try to motivate students to take a one-credit-hour course seriously, I stressed each week that (1) “this course is about you and your future”; (2) students should use the resources available to them, for they have paid for them with their tuition dollars; and (3) students should take themselves seriously and spend the time and effort to invest in themselves. This orientation seems to have paid off as seen in the assessment data and by the comment of one student who noted in the final course evaluation that “you seemed to really care about our future.” Shouldn’t we all care about our students’ future? After all, our students’ future is our own and our discipline’s, as well.

EDITOR’S NOTE

Reviewers for this manuscript were, in alphabetical order, Patrick Archer, Barbara Keating, and Catherine Mobley.

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NOTES

1. Hood College has offered a series of one-credit-hour skills workshops, including one on “career preparation.” See Hood College, 2016-17 Catalog, page 176. Humboldt State University provides a one-credit-unit professional development seminar for second- or third-year students. See <https://registrar.humboldt.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/catalog/course-descriptions/soc.pdf>.
2. Handshake is an online site similar to LinkedIn that on my campus allows students to access the services of our campus career center.
3. A 2016 survey of our majors found that 44 percent were first-generation college students.

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