## Going Global: Creating the Sociological Literacy Framework from International Assessment Practitioners

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U.S. higher education faculty and administrators would benefit greatly from investigating other countries for models of curricular standards and assessment. I learned this lesson while I was reviewing the relevant literature on sociology learning outcomes and assessment for the Measuring College Learning (MCL) Project ([highered.ssrc.org](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=http-3A__highered.ssrc.org&d=DQQFAg&c=HUrdOLg_tCr0UMeDjWLBOM9lLDRpsndbROGxEKQRFzk&r=YU4ivCcxqlb2t9abUhZz6M8w7aD2BzNoIS74AkgUdSw&m=6XXlAkYhG7C8OyIyOupF294M3B0RJQg209cmyREkO70&s=zSPaiq7Ue-YbdMmAbrFIwE5qeXLaXBFLnBJ_Qt1_-EY&e=)). After I had fully covered the U.S. literature on teaching introduction to sociology courses and requirements for the sociology major, I turned to the European literature to see what was written about the sociology curriculum. At first it was difficult to find comprehensive guidelines for sociology. I initially found some university-specific sociology undergraduate guidelines from the University of Salamanca, Trinity University, and the University of Rome. I also found some general undergraduate benchmarks, such as the Norwegian Qualifications Framework (NQF) from Norway, but it was not specific to sociology.

Then I hit gold—some of the best curricular work in sociology at the undergraduate level is in the United Kingdom and Australia. Practitioners in the United States could learn from studying these global curricular models and emulating their strengths.

The first document I came across, the United Kingdom’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education’s (QAA) 2007 subject benchmark statement for sociology, is succinct at only 7.5 pages, but it is highly comprehensive. Written for the QAA by the British Sociological Association, it stipulates a guiding set of learning outcomes for the bachelor’s degree in sociology for U.K. undergraduate programs. The threshold standards are seen as descriptors of typical achievement or the minimally acceptable standard that students must achieve to qualify for an honors degree in sociology. Anyone seeking a bachelor’s degree in sociology in the U.K. should (in theory) achieve these same learning outcomes, no matter what program or school they attended.

Despite its brevity, this benchmark statement covers the basic tenets of the discipline as well as the history of sociology and how it relates to other social sciences. It describes subject-specific knowledge and skills that sociology majors should learn. It also addresses how the content of this discipline is linked to teaching, learning, and assessment. Additionally, the document includes benchmark standards for undergraduate sociology students. These benchmarks serve to assess the individual performances of students in relation to specific learning outcomes, and to provide a framework to compare sociology programs across the United Kingdom. The benchmark statements also impart to employers the content and skills covered by particular degrees. The United States should consider having similar concise disciplinary statements that are updated regularly as guidelines for undergraduate curriculum development and review.

The second document, the Australian Sociological Association’s (TASA) “Sociology: Threshold Learning Outcomes,” was published more recently in 2012, and it reflects a quality assurance effort to ensure disciplines in higher education meet specific standards. Using discipline experts from across Australia, TASA developed *threshold learning outcomes*, which essentially are the minimum standards and base level outcomes that any sociology major must meet before graduating. Here is another national document that holds all sociology students—and programs of study—to the same bar.

Of particular interest here is how TASA organizes the sociology threshold learning outcomes into three primary domains: knowledge and understanding; skills; and engagement. This is a much more effective approach than long lists of content for undergraduates to learn.

Both the sociology curricular documents from the United Kingdom and from Australia provide efficient guidelines and best practices for undergraduate sociology programs. Moreover, both the Australian and United Kingdom sociology learning outcomes parallel nicely the work that has been done in the United States, but their approach is more accessible and less controversial. In both cases, a government agency authorized disciplinary associations to create standards for learning excellence relevant to their fields.  These benchmarks and thresholds offer general expectations and standards for the development of new programs or the revision of existing academic programs, but they are not mandated.

After reviewing the U.S. and global literature, my coauthor and I found sufficient overlap in various frameworks to enumerate a reasonable number of broad learning outcomes for the introductory sociology course and for the sociology major in the United States (Ferguson and Carbonaro 2016). We created the *Sociological Literacy Framework*, which describes a set of essential concepts and competencies for the sociology major. The goal (and our hope) is that this framework serves as a step in the direction of the exemplary models in the U.K. and Australia for the undergraduate study of sociology.

The framework has two broad categories that organize learning outcomes for sociology. The first category, labeled the *Sociological Perspective*, contains five essential concepts that are central to the discipline of sociology, started in introductory sociology courses and then explored in depth as the student proceeds through the major. In addition to having an understanding of these essential sociological concepts, students also need to develop and apply disciplinary competencies. The second category, the *Sociological Toolbox*, contains six essential competencies that sociology majors should master. (Table 1 in the Appendix offers a brief overview of the Sociological Literacy Framework.) Ideally, these concepts and competencies will help create consistency and accountability among programs of study, guide professors in designing their courses, ensure employers that students have met basic standards to graduate, and—most importantly—best prepare students for success in sociology.

After working on the Measuring College Learning Project, my perspective on using global resources on higher education has shifted substantially. All of us in higher education have something to gain by learning from each other across national boundaries and ultimately, doing so will help serve our students better.

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References:

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Appendix:  Table of Sociological Literacy Framework

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| Table 1: Brief Overview of the Sociological Literacy Framework | |
| The Sociological Perspective(Essential Concepts) | The Sociological Toolbox(Essential Competencies) |
| The Sociological Eye:Sociology as a distinctive discipline | Apply Sociological Theories to Understand Social Phenomena(Theory) |
| Social Structure:The impact of social structures on human action | Critically Evaluate Explanations of Human Behavior and Social Phenomena(Evaluation) |
| Socialization:The relationship between the self and society | Apply Scientific Principles to Understand the Social World(Sociology as a Science) |
| Stratification:The patterns and effects of social inequality | Evaluate the Quality of Social Scientific Methods and Data(Methodological Practice) |
| Social Change and Social Reproduction:How social phenomena replicate and change | Rigorously Analyze Social Scientific Data(Quantitative and Qualitative Data Literacy) |
|  | Use Sociological Knowledge to Inform Policy Debates and Promote Public Understanding(Public Skills and Citizenship) |