

How the Department of Sociology Expresses the Mission of Augsburg College: A Summary

The Department of Sociology at Augsburg – Lars Christiansen, Nancy Fischer, Garry Hesser, Diane Pike, Tim Pippert, and James Vela-McConnell (Chair) – have each contributed to the summary offered below.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to summarize the ways in which the Department of Sociology expresses the mission of the college. We highlight how the Department of Sociology and its curriculum are firmly embedded within the Liberal Arts tradition, reflect the values of the Christian Church, reflect and emphasize intentional diversity, and connect with the larger urban context of the College. We highlight both the Department and the curriculum because the sociology student experience occurs in and beyond the classroom; the student experience is also shaped by the working culture of the faculty in the Department and the College more generally. In other words, the summary offered below is a report not just on the major, but also on activities beyond the classroom, the working dynamics among the faculty within the Department, and the working dynamics between sociology faculty and other faculty and staff outside of the Department. Finally, please note that as a summary, this report reflects a level of generality that conceals the many specific details, methods, ideas, etc. that could serve as examples. If the reader would like for us to expand on these themes and provide more specific examples, we would be happy to do so.

Liberal Arts Tradition

A main tenet of the sociological perspective is that the common good is better served when its citizens ask critical questions and demand to know: How is it that there is social order? Rooted in the ideas of the Enlightenment—beginning with Comte, Spencer, Marx and forward, sociology’s key contributions as a liberal arts discipline are anchored in understanding how social structures, social processes and social relationships can be understood in a disciplined search to advance our basic knowledge and to provide insights for societal well being. From the range of topics and critical thinking skills covered in our curriculum, to the foundational methods and theories, the sociology major is intentionally structured, knowledge- and skill-based, and as a curriculum models the type of liberating thinking we expect of students. Our contributions to general (liberating) education are primarily through our introductory course; here, we are intentional in the focus on shared, specific learning goals regarding the understanding of collective life and the use of tools for empirical analysis. As noted in the American Sociological Association document on Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major (McKinney et al. 2005),¹

(T)he best thing sociology can do for undergraduate students, whether majors or not, is to teach them to learn effectively so that they can keep up with rapid changes in society, particularly in knowledge, and live meaningful, engaged and productive lives. If we can achieve this goal and their on going learning is based on a template of understanding the importance of social structure and culture—the sociological perspective—then we will have succeeded in providing an education worth having and in producing citizens and workers who will be of continuing value to their communities and employers.

¹ The reader may download this document at the following link:
http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/Lib_Learning_FINAL.pdf

The members of the Department of Sociology work collaboratively and collectively to keep this goal as the driving mission of our work in the liberal arts tradition and to achieve that goal for students to the best of our ability.

Faith and Values of the Christian Church

The core values of freedom of thought and interpretation are manifest in a department that respects its diversity of values and religious orientations, augmented by our egalitarian style of functioning as a department. All members of the Department are comfortable stressing the core values of service and vocation as it is presented in Augsburg 2004, and the Department was one of the first to operationalize the Keystone course and integrate its objectives into our Capstone course. Moreover, our membership embraces a wide spectrum of religious backgrounds and current expressions, reflecting what Perry referred to as “committed relativism” when it comes to strong value orientations, some more secular than religious, but all open to “being wrong” and seeking from each other alternative ideas and ways of seeing. The Department of Sociology has members who actively participate in the Lilly Vocation endeavors, including one colleague who participated in the current year-long faculty development group that went to Germany and another colleague who led an annual Lilly Urban Immersion trip to DC for the past four years. Finally, we should note that religion and values are themselves topics for sociological thought and analysis. For example, when sociologists discuss religion, we typically examine questions such as the social causes and consequences of religion. Addressing the topic at this level allows for the support the college’s ecumenical stance regarding the faith make-up of our campus community.

Intentional Diversity

The Department of Sociology is committed to supporting Augsburg College’s goal to be intentionally diverse. We offer a sociological curriculum that exposes every student we come in contact with to the diversity of our world. In fact, diversity is a defining theme in the study of society. As well as offering specific courses that tackle issues of diversity head-on, we are advancing the mission of the college by infusing the analysis and discussion of issues such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, and religion into our entire curriculum. Diversity is present whenever we discuss culture, the “social other,” social stratification and inequality, social relations of cooperation and domination, national and international development, and the like. Consequently, the field’s emphasis on diversity makes sociologists particularly aware of our immediate surroundings.

Diversity, however, is not simply defined by group-level characteristics. We also offer a diverse set of opportunities and experiences to our students. In relation to the diversity of our curriculum, we understand the education of our students should not be confined to the four walls of a classroom. Numerous sociology classes offer an experiential component which removes students from their classroom and campus. Moreover, we stress the importance of internships, research with faculty members, and participation in off-campus study through programs such as HECUA. And finally, our sociology club offers opportunities for additional experiences beyond the traditional classroom.

Our faculty are also committed to an intentionally diverse community. Given the intentionality of our hiring practices, we are diverse not just in terms of demographics, but also in the expertise we bring to our students. Our faculty members are committed to service and research activities that demonstrate to our campus the diversity of our discipline and the many ways in which we see ourselves as committed members of the Augsburg College community.

College in an Urban and Metropolitan Setting

The very discipline of sociology might not exist without the emergence of large industrial cities. When sociology was emerging in the 1800s, its first thinkers wanted to understand how the migration of rural people to cities was changing the social fabric of the world. Thus, the city and its built environment, its heterogeneous populations, its social structure, the social interaction that occurs upon its streets and within its buildings, remain central to the field of sociology.

The members of the Department of Sociology are fortunate to teach and conduct research in our urban location. There are numerous ways in which we utilize the city as a “classroom without walls.” For example, we have a number of courses where we take students on walking tours of the Cedar-Riverside and Seward neighborhoods. We also assign projects that invite our students to actively engage Minneapolis. For example, sociology students put together projects that include local photo essays, field research in urban settings, and organizational analyses of Metro area organizations. The Sociology Club (a student-run organization) often visits sociologically relevant places within the Twin Cities.

And of course the city comes into the walls of our classrooms as well. This can be taken literally when we have guest speakers from local government, corporations and non-profit organizations. Our courses often include service-learning projects where students learn to embody our campus mission of “education through service.” Our students work with community partners such as local cooperatives, non-profits, corporations, urban planners, and members of local government. Moreover, whether we’re talking about homelessness, affordable housing, ethnic diversity, consumerism and economic growth, or political participation and activism, the content in every one of our classes makes reference to the Twin Cities Metropolitan area.

Summative Statement

In summary, all members of the Department of Sociology affirm the unique mission of Augsburg and can articulate, in our own ways and collectively, the reasons that we are glad to be teaching here and working with the colleagues with whom we work. We are all fully committed to maintaining the liberal arts tradition of the College, upholding the faith and values of the Christian Church, emphasizing our intentional diversity, and taking advantage of our urban context.