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The Victory of Assessment?

What's Happening in Your Department? The AY 2011-2012 Department Survey

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OVERVIEW

According to a common narrative, the institutionalization of assessments of student learning started in the early 1980s with "increasingly vocal public dissatisfaction with the quality of higher education" and with increased calls for institutional accountability. (Weiss et al. 2002:p.64). These authors argue that public dissatisfaction resulted in a higher priority given to the systematic assessment of student learning by the six regional accrediting agencies for colleges and universities. In addition, state legislatures mandated public institutions of higher learning to systematically assess their programs, with some states creating specific performance standards. Finally, the U.S. Department of Education reinforced these demands by requiring the regional accrediting agencies to assess student learning outcomes as a condition of recognition (Ewell 2001 as cited in Spalter-Roth and Scelza 2009).

Although the institutionalization of mandated assessment may have started with a response to public outcry, its implementation appeared to be the result of a top-down movement of administrators rather than a bottom-up movement of faculty members. The new mandate fit well with the growing corporate model for governing higher education (Chin, Senter, and Spalter-Roth 2011). In sociology, many departments needed to be dragged "kicking and screaming" to implement these mandates (Clark and Fillinson 2011), as many believed that faculty were being deprofessionalized and that their control over student evaluation was being weakened. Along with fears of a weakened role in evaluating students in their classes, faculty members often resented the fact that no additional resources were provided for this department-wide activity. All of the open-ended comments that concerned assessment from the American Sociological Association's (ASA) AY 2011/2012 Department Survey—*What's Happening in Your Department?*—reflected this concern. Department chairs observed:

Continuing to be productive in an environment in which the pressure to do "everything else" -- from assessment to program review -- is relentless.

Balancing the increasing demands on faculty to do more and more college service and departmental assessment.

We have more administrative burdens placed on us every day, many related to assessment.

Other chairs focused on the difficulty in providing high-quality instruction to students and supporting faculty research and professional development while responding to the increasing demands for assessment that come from colleges that are facing pressure from Boards of Trustees, state legislatures, and regional accrediting bodies.

Not all sociology faculty members opposed systematic assessment—in Carla Howery's oft-repeated words, "It's the right thing to do" because faculty members can link departmental learning goals to measures of student attainment in order to provide information for curriculum change (Berheide 2001; McKinney, Howery, Strand, and Kain 2004). A frequent argument was that sociology departments can co-opt these mandates and, by taking initiative, gain more control over the process because sociologists are "well-situated to play a major role" in institution-wide assessment efforts as a result of their disciplinary training and methodological skills (Chin et. al 2011:p.120). Further, these authors appealed to the growing scholarship of teaching and learning movement and argued that the two are "inextricably" linked and would lead to improved pedagogy. Finally, these authors noted, assessment can be seen as an example of applied sociology, another growing trend in the discipline. Students could be groomed to take part in these efforts so that they can learn to do evaluations, a marketable skill for program graduates. However, few supporters of systematic student learning assessment believe that this activity can be accomplished without resources, and that departments cannot

be expected to fund systematic assessments out of existing budgets (Senter 2001). The quotations cited above suggest that departments do not gain additional resources for assessment, but must add this task to their current heavy workload so that it competes with teaching and research.

This research brief focuses on changes in the percent of academic sociology departments conducting assessment of student learning, the kinds of assessment that they perform, and their views of the utility of these assessment methods. These data are from the American Sociological Association's (ASA) AY 2011/2012 department survey with comparisons to two previous department surveys (AY 2000/2001 and AY 2006/2007). We found that almost 100% of responding departments engage in assessment activities, although there was a gap between their use and the perception of their usefulness.

SURVEY DESIGN AND METHODS

Locating the Universe and Survey Design

*W*hat's Happening in Your Department? is an ASA study based on a survey of the universe of chairs of stand-alone academic sociology departments and joint departments or divisions that awarded at least one Bachelor's degree in sociology during the 2010-2011 academic year. The master list of academic departments was developed using the National Center for Educational Statistics 2010-2011 *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Completions Survey*. To maintain quality control and to ensure that all relevant departments were included in the master database, the IPEDS data were cross-checked with ASA's internal database of academic sociology departments, and non-matching records

were examined to determine whether they were to be included in the survey database. Sociology departments whose points of contact were missing or incomplete were searched for online to obtain the email and mailing address of the appropriate individual(s). This resulted in a total of 1,037 valid records.[1] During the survey administration, it was determined that 12 departments were invalid because they either no longer were stand-alone departments or were improperly recorded as such in the IPEDS database, or were duplicated in the original master list. This resulted in an adjusted master list of 1,025 records.

The survey instrument was designed in early 2012 by the ASA Department of Research on the Discipline and Profession in collaboration with the Center for Survey Research (CSR) at Indiana University. Many of the survey questions were comparable to the 2002 and 2007 ASA Department Surveys, along with new questions on use of new technology, new courses, and changes in department resources. These new questions were responses to concerns expressed by academic department chairs' attending events for them at regional and national sociology meetings. The resulting survey consisted of six sections and 30 primary questions with skip patterns and sub-questions where appropriate. The six sections included questions about changes in department resources, assessment of student learning and career preparation, department structure for undergraduate degrees, subfields offered for undergraduate degrees, graduate programs, and faculty characteristics. Qualitative responses were permitted where applicable or necessary. The online survey was set up so that more than one member of the department could respond to the section about which he/she knew the most.

To ensure quality control and to obtain critical feedback for finalizing the instrument, the

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[1] In several instances during administration of the survey, contacts who were identified in our database as department chairs replied to inform us that they no longer held their position as chair (e.g., due to recent retirement). For those persons, we either conducted a search for the new chair/appropriate contact and distributed an email invitation to that person, or the former chair provided us with information that allowed us to send a survey invitation to the appropriate contact.

survey—which was administered entirely on-line—was pilot tested by ASA senior staff with experience in academic sociology departments, and adjustments to the instrument were made accordingly.

Survey Administration and Response Rates

The survey was exclusively web based, and was administered by the CSR. To increase response rates, all department chair contacts in our master database were sent a hardcopy pre-notification letter signed by ASA Executive Officer Sally T. Hillsman on June 5, 2012, alerting them that they would be receiving an email invitation to participate in the survey. The survey was launched on June 28, 2012 through an email invitation also sent on behalf of Sally Hillsman. Email recipients were provided with a unique survey login identification number to access the online survey. All email invitations and follow-up reminders included an opt-out link for those who did not wish to receive further communications about the survey, and potential respondents were notified that participation was voluntary. Six follow-up email reminders were sent to non-respondents during the course of the survey (including one on behalf of then ASA President Erik Olin Wright), in addition to a postcard reminder that was sent to them early in September 2012. The survey was closed on December 28, 2012.

Altogether, 645 valid responses out of a potential 1,025 were received, for a final response rate of approximately 63%—a 3% increase compared to the 2007 survey. The majority of responding departments consisted of masters degree-granting institutions—based on 2010 institutional classifications ("Carnegie Codes") from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching— at 42.3%, followed by baccalaureate-only institutions at 28.2%, research institutions at 23.7%, and doctoral institutions at 5.7%. The largest increase

in responses was among Research Institutions (23.7% in 2012 compared to 17.3% in 2007). The largest decrease was among Doctoral institutions (5.7% in 2012 compared to 10.2% in 2007). Although unlikely, the small changes in Carnegie institutional classifications over the five-year period might explain the differences in the number of responses by Research and Doctoral institutions. We did not weight these data because the response rate by type of institution (as categorized by Carnegie Codes) generally corresponded with the percentage of each type of institution in the universe.[2]

FINDINGS
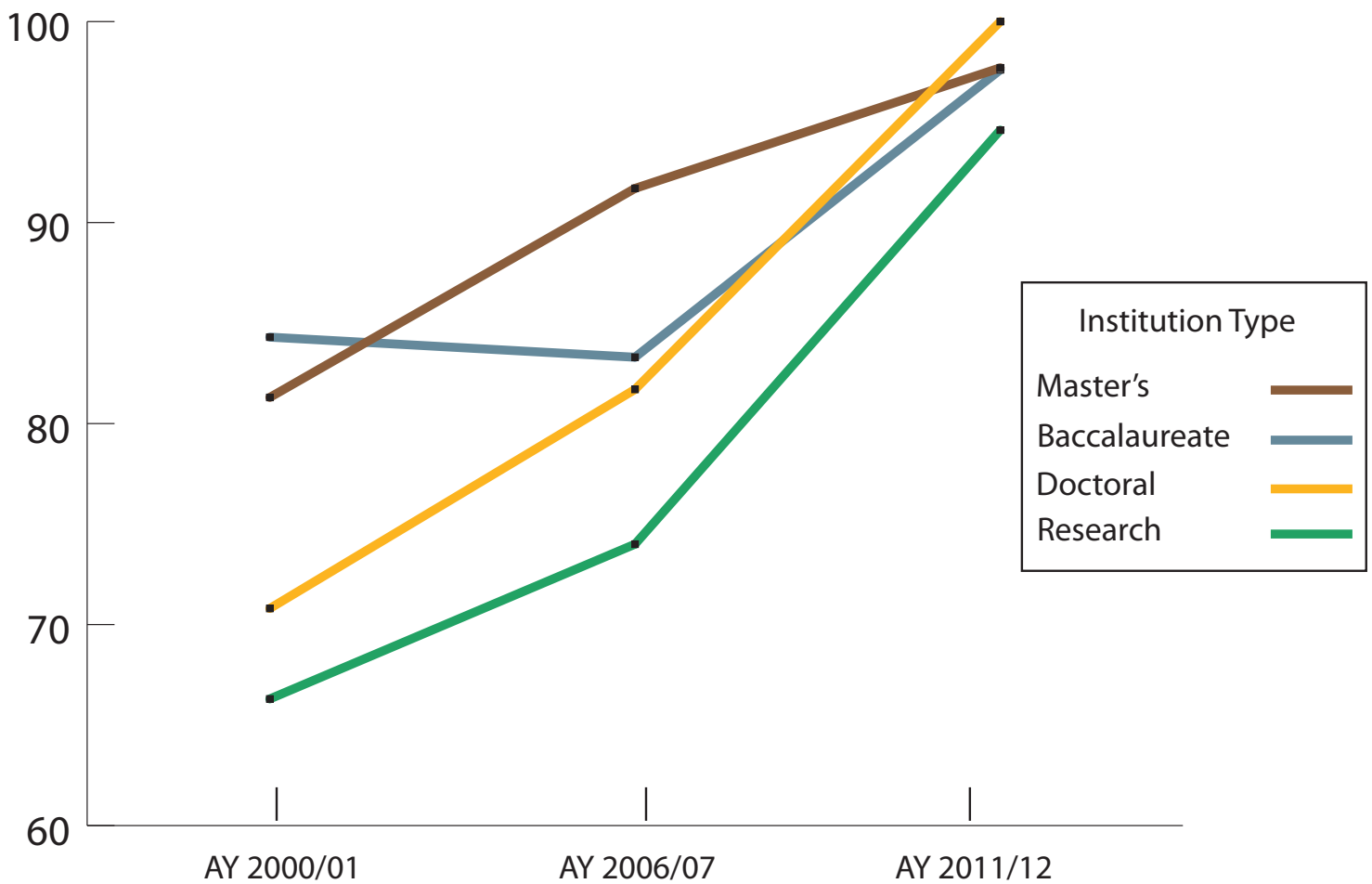

Almost 100% of Departments Did Assessments

The percent of departments using assessments of student learning has grown steadily over the past decade. By AY 2011/2012, close to 100% of reporting departments responded that they used at least one method of assessment, for an average percent increase of 22.0% since AY 2000/2001. The strongest growth in the use of assessment methods was at Research 1 institutions, which had the lowest average usage rate in AY 2000/2001, with an increase of 28.3% (see Figure 1). On average, all departments used more than one strategy for assessing student learning with research and doctoral granting institutions using a median of two strategies while masters and baccalaureate schools use a median of three strategies (see Figure 2). This increase in assessment could be the result of outside pressure from state legislatures, university administrators, accrediting bodies, or professional societies. The result could be departments using what Clark and Fillinson (2011) refer to as "minimalist strategies" that may resemble individual grading rather than seeking measures that reflected department goals. In contrast, other departments may have tried to turn a mandate into what they thought

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[2]There was a small under-representation of Research institutions of about 5%.

would be a useful exercise for curricular change by having department meetings that decided on goals and how they might be made operational. The result could be before and after department surveys, tracking students after graduation, and helping them to develop portfolios that faculty members evaluated to assess whether students mastered skills and concepts (McKinney and Busher 2012; McKinney and Nasari, 2011; Trapegnier 2004). Alternatively, some departments used student surveys to evaluate whether new learning techniques, such as active and collaborative learning, improved student mastery of the discipline' methods and theory (McDuff 2012; Strangfeld 2013; Teixeira-Poit et al. 2011).

Figure 1. Percent of Sociology Departments Reporting Use of at Least One Assessment Tool for Sociology Undergraduates, by Institution Type: AY 2000/01, AY 2006/07, and AY 2011/12.
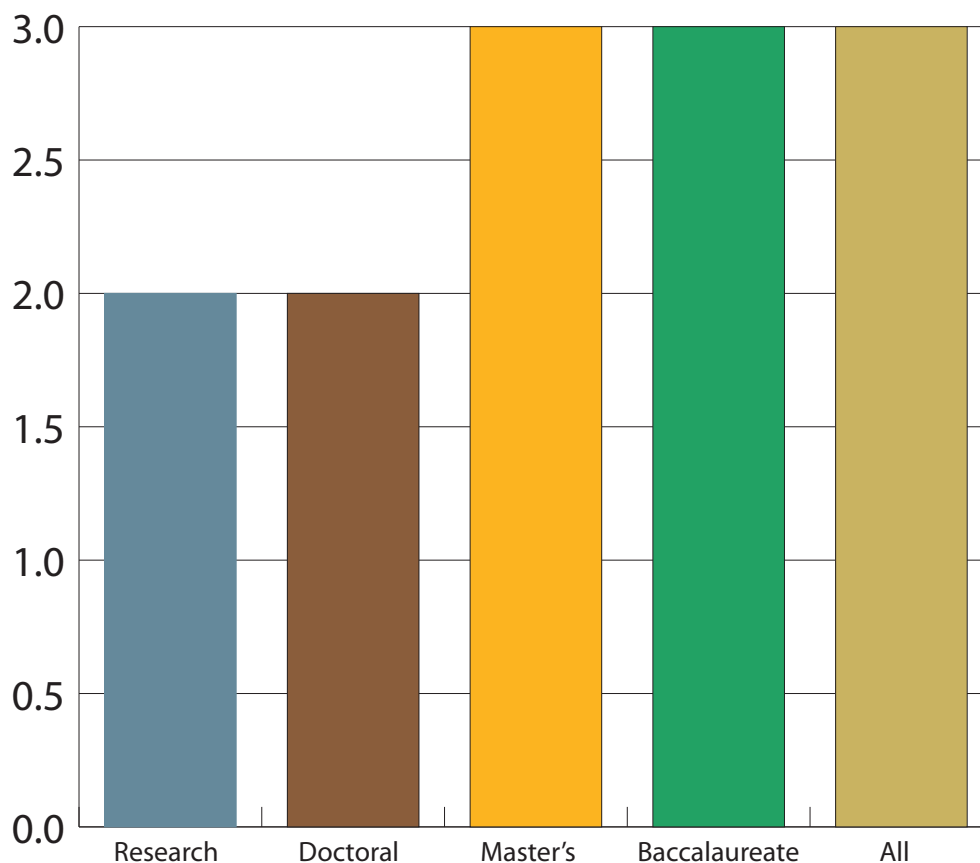

Source: Academic Year 2011-2012 Department Survey, American Sociological Association.

Note: Academic institution types are determined according to classification data provided by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; data available at http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/resources.

Data for 2000/01 and 2006/07 are weighetd; data for 2011/12 were not weighted because the response rate by type of institution (as categorized by Carnegie Codes) generally corresponded with the percentage of each type of institution in the universe of U.S. sociology departments as of AY 2011/12; out of a total 645 potential responding departments for 2011/12, 574 out of 591 reported having used at least one assessment tool (54 departments did not respond to this question).

Figure 2. Median Number of Assessment Tools Used Among Departments that Used at Least One Tool, by Institution Type: AY 2011/12.

Source: Academic Year 2011-2012 Department Survey, American Sociological Association.

Note: Academic institution types are determined according to classification data provided by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; data available at http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/resources; out of a total 645 potential responding departments for 2011/12, 574 out of 591 reported having used at least one assessment tool (54 departments did not respond to this question).

Departments Employ a Variety of Assessment Techniques Over Time

We provided departments with a list of assessment methods, based on the literature. Methods that did not fit into these categories were described in the "other" category that grew between AY 2000/2001 and AY 2011/2012 (see Table 1). Recall, however, that the average department uses at least two assessment techniques.

INCREASES. By AY 2011/2012, senior theses and projects were the most widely-used method of assessment, with 63.9% of departments listing it. This method grew by 30.1% over the decade. It may have resembled a more traditional version of senior theses, but the difference might be that these projects were evaluated by a group of department members with an eye to whether they reflect department goals or standards. Student surveys remained the second-largest assessment category, with somewhat more than half of departments having used this technique in all three study years. Some of these student surveys used

Table 1. Comparison of Types of Assessment Tools Used for Sociology Undergraduates: AY 2000/01, AY 2006/07, and AY 2011/12 (Percent Reporting "Yes").

Type of Assessment	2000/01 (N=816)	2006/07 (N=816)	2011/12 (N=645)
Senior thesis or project	49.1	47.7	63.9
Student survey	53.6	58.3	55.4
Alumni survey*	--	--	41.4
Exit interview	39.1	39.4	31.6
Standardized (external) exam	18.4	28.9	25.2
Portfolio	19.8	22.4	18.0
Department exam	26.3	17.5	17.0
Employer survey	8.4	6.4	6.7
Other**	5.9	17.9	22.0

Source: Academic Year 2011-2012 Department Survey, American Sociological Association.

Note: Data for 2000/01 and 2006/07 are weighetd; data for 2011/12 were not weighted because the response rate by type of institution (as categorized by Carnegie Codes) generally corresponded with the percentage of each type of institution in the universe of U.S. sociology departments as of AY 2011/12.

*This question was not asked separately on the 2000/01 and 2006/07 surveys; it was incorporated into the "other" response for the 2000/01 survey questionnaire and not asked on the 2006/07 survey.

**Breakdown of "other" by percent, for 2011/12: Course-embedded assessment (26.4); assessment rubric (21.8); capstone course/project (10.4); analysis of written work (other than senior thesis or project; 5.7); other/other unspecified (35.6).

the questionnaire from the ASA's *Bachelor's and Beyond* survey as the core (Spalter-Roth, Senter, Stone, and Wood 2010).

Alumni surveys became the third-largest assessment method, perhaps because it was made a separate response category in AY 2011/2012, with 41.4% of all responding departments reporting that they used this assessment strategy. This method has the benefit of tracking former majors so that the department can learn what skills and concepts were most useful in their post-graduation careers and can call on them to describe their career trajectories to current sociology majors. Two examples of such surveys can be found in the Appendix of *Launching Majors into Satisfying Careers* (Spalter-Roth, Senter, and Van Vooren 2010). These surveys asked a wide variety of questions from the competencies that

alumni learned as part of the sociology major that helped them on the job or in graduate school, their satisfaction with the major, whether their jobs incorporate the skills and concepts that they learned, and what else they would have liked to learn.

Although fewer than one-third of departments responded that they used standardized exams, which can result in national norming, for assessment purposes, there was a 37.0% increase in this method over the decade (see Table 2), although there was a decline between AY 2005/2006 and AY 2011/2012. Perhaps these findings suggest the mixed record of state and federal governments to have successfully imposed them.

Table 2. Percent Change in Assessment Tools Used for Sociology Undergraduates, by Institution Type: AY 2000/2001 and AY 2011/2012 (Percent Reporting "Yes").

Type of Assessment	2000/01 (N=816)	2011/12 (N=645)	Percent Change
Standardized (external) exam	18.4	25.2	37.0
Senior thesis or project	49.1	63.9	30.1
Student survey	53.6	55.4	3.4
Portfolio	19.8	18.0	-0.9
Exit interview	39.1	31.6	-19.2
Employer survey	8.4	6.7	-20.2
Department exam	26.3	17.0	-35.4
Alumni survey*	--	41.4	--

Source: Academic Year 2011-2012 Department Survey, American Sociological Association.

Note: Data for 2000/01 are weighetd; data for 2011/12 were not weighted because the response rate by type of institution (as categorized by Carnegie Codes) generally corresponded with the percentage of each type of institution in the universe of U.S. sociology departments as of AY 2011/12.

*This question was not asked separately on the 2000/01 survey; it was incorporated into the "other" response for the 2000/01 survey questionnaire.

DECREASES. There was a 35.4% decrease in the use of departmental exams between AY 2000/2001 and AY 2011/2012, perhaps because departments developed other assessment methods that were considered more useful. There were also declines in employer surveys of 20.2% (perhaps due to the difficulty of conducting them) and a 19.2% decrease in exit interviews. Perhaps this latter method did not meet administrative standards for assessment, or was also too time consuming.

Most of the other assessment methods that were listed remained relatively stable over time.

OTHER. An increasing percent of departments listed "other" means of assessment. Two methods stood out when we examined the open-ended responses. These were course-based assessments and capstone courses. Course-based assessment can include "embedded" assignments often in methods, theory, and data collection. These assignments might be evaluated using "common rubrics" and they might include pre- and post-tests to measure student learning. This type of assessment could be used to measure individual student progress or the common rubrics can be used to determine whether majors met department standards. Another method for assessing whether or not students met department goals and standards was through the capstone course. An important purpose of this method is to help identify what needs to be changed (Berheide 2001). Based on a variety of department syllabi, capstone courses were often described as "culminating experiences for undergraduate study in sociology" that help students synthesize, review, and assess what they have learned as majors. They were usually conducted as seminars in which students did final course projects. Some of these courses provided information on future careers, whereas others allowed majors to choose among a variety of seminars on specific topics.

Variations by Type of School

There were some statistically significant differences in assessment methods among sociol-

ogy departments at each type of institution of higher education (see Table 3). In general, sociology departments at research universities were less likely to use any given method of assessment than the other types of institutions. But they were significantly less likely to use a senior thesis or project. About half of departments at research institutions used this method compared to about three-quarters of baccalaureate-only departments. Likewise, departments at research institutions were the least likely to use alumni surveys as an assessment technique (25.4% compared to 50.6% of baccalaureate-only schools). Finally, those at research institutions were the least likely to have used portfolios to assess student learning and whether the results met department goals or standards (although portfolios were not one of the top-five assessment methods in sociology departments at any type of institution). Only 7.4% of departments at research institutions used this method. Master's institutions were the most likely to use student portfolios for the purpose of assessment, with 25% so doing.

The Disconnect Between Methods and Utility

To our surprise, there was a mismatch between the percent of departments that employed a particular assessment method and the percent that found this method very useful. The largest gap was between departments that had students create portfolios and the percent that found this method to be very useful. Only 18% of reporting departments had students create portfolios, but 47.5% of those who used this method found this method to be very useful (see Figure 3). The finding suggests that this qualitative method appeared to be more useful than standardized tests, which may have used multiple-choice questions (Courts and McInerney 1993). In contrast, more than half of departments used student surveys as an assessment method, yet only about one-quarter of users found this method to be very useful. These differences are puzzling. If departments find portfolios to be a very useful form of assessment, why did not word of its utility spread so

Table 3. Comparison of Types of Assessment Tools Used for Sociology Undergraduates, by Institution Type: AY 2011/2012 (Percent Reporting "Yes").

Type of Assessment	Research	Doctoral	Master's	Baccalaureate	All	*Chi-Square*
Senior thesis or project	51.1	65.7	62.5	76.2	63.9	21.55*
Student survey	57.6	57.1	56.5	51.5	55.4	2.71
Alumni survey	25.4	38.2	44.3	50.6	41.4	23.44**
Exit interview	33.1	20.6	31.1	33.1	31.6	3.10
Standardized (external) exam	16.7	23.5	29.6	25.9	25.2	10.47
Portfolio	7.4	11.8	25.0	17.4	18.0	22.95*
Department exam	18.7	2.9	16.5	19.0	17.0	6.89
Employer survey	4.4	11.8	7.5	6.1	6.7	5.70
Other	27.3	36.4	22.2	14.9	22.0	5.17

Source: Academic Year 2011-2012 Department Survey, American Sociological Association.

Note: Academic institution types are determined according to classification data provided by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; data available at http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/resources.

*p <.001; **p <.01; Pearson Chi-Square test used.

Figure 3. Comparison of Types of Assessment Tools Used for Sociology Undergraduates and Usefulness of Those Tools: AY 2011/2012 (Percent).
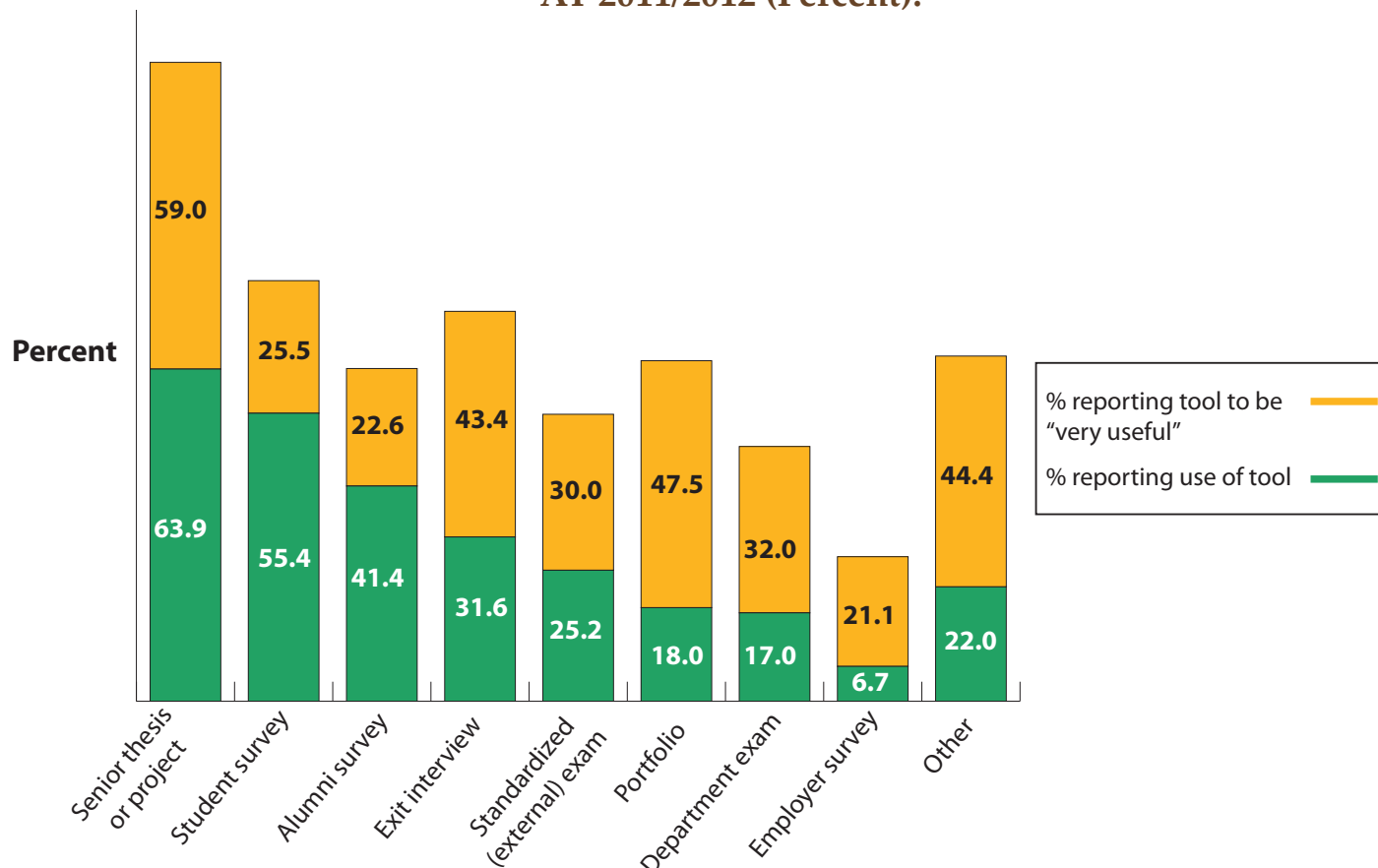
Source: Academic Year 2011-2012 Department Survey, American Sociological Association.

that more department used this method? Likewise, if student surveys—one of top methods of assessment—is 30% less likely to be considered very useful (55.4% use it but only 25.5% found it useful), why did so many reporting departments use this technique? Alumni surveys were thought to be less useful and department exams were considered to be more useful than the percent of departments using these methods suggested. Therefore we might expect a decrease in the percent of reporting departments using portfolios, despite the growth in its popularity, and we might expect an increase in the percent of departments using department exams, although this method declined over the decade. These changes would be more likely to occur if there were more inter-departmental communication about the preferability of some methods compared to others, assuming that departments have some freedom in choosing which methods they could use.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Over the past decade we have heard many complaints about conducting assessments. For example, these complaints include deprofessionalizing of faculty, corporatization of higher education and growing power of university administrators, and top-down assignment of extra activities with no additional resources.

Despite these protests, by AY 2011/2012 almost 100% of departments were conducting student assessments, most using at least two assessment methods, even though they might have been "kicking and screaming" all the way. In contrast, other departments may see assessment methods as a useful way to learn whether they are meeting their goals and make changes if this is not the case. Assessment of student learning was a universal activity for sociology departments that responded to the AY 2011/2012 Department Survey. However, we still found that responding departments at research universities were the least likely to use any particular method. Comparing methods over time, we found increases and decreases with senior theses or projects being the most widely-used method, followed by student surveys in AY 2011/2012. Alumni surveys appeared to be a growing method of assessment. Capstone courses were another prominent assessment method for departments to determine whether students were meeting department goals and standards. An important purpose of this method was to help identify what needs to be changed (Berheide 2001).

The data presented in this brief cannot tell us whether the reason for the growth of assessment in sociology departments was the result of pressure from above, faculty perceptions of the usefulness of these activities, or both. Additional research would be necessary to make these distinctions.

The survey produced one puzzling finding concerning the use of assessment methods. We found that there was a mismatch or disconnect between the percent of departments using a particular method and the percent of these departments that agreed that the method was very useful. In some cases, the utility of the method outstripped its use, and in some cases the reverse was true. Perhaps this gap will encourage departments to re-examine the methods that they are using. More communications among departments would be necessary to learn whether these gaps could be lessened. We look forward to discussions with chairs and faculty members to see whether we can better understand this gap, and what departments are doing to close it.

Appendix Table 1. Utility of Types of Assessment Tools Used for Sociology Undergraduates, Overall and by Academic Institution Type: AY 2011/12 (Percent Reporting "Very Useful").

Type of Assessment	All	Research	Doctoral	Master's	Baccalaureate
Senior thesis or project	59.0	54.9	63.6	49.7	72.2
Portfolio	47.5	30.0	50.0	45.9	57.7
Exit interview	43.4	45.5	50.0	43.6	40.7
Department exam	32.0	30.8	--	27.5	40.0
Standardized (external) exam	30.0	22.7	37.5	30.0	32.5
Student survey	25.5	22.7	35.0	28.5	21.0
Alumni survey	22.6	24.2	23.1	20.5	24.7
Employer survey	21.1	50.0	--	17.6	20.0
Other	44.4	18.8	75.0	41.7	80.0

Source: Academic Year 2011-2012 Department Survey, American Sociological Association.
Notes: Academic institution types are determined according to classification data provided by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; data available at http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/resources.

Data for 2011/12 were not weighted because the response rate by type of institution (as categorized by Carnegie Codes) generally corresponded with the percentage of each type of institution in the universe of U.S. sociology departments as of AY 2011/12; out of a total 645 potential responding departments for 2011/12, 574 out of 591 reported having used at least one assessment tool (54 departments did not respond to this question).

Appendix Table 2. Comparison of Utility of Types of Assessment Tools Used, Overall and by Academic Institution Type: AY 2000/01 and AY 2011/12 (Percent Reporting "Very Useful").

Type of Assessment	2000/01 (N=816)	2011/12 (N=645)
Senior thesis or project	59.6	59.0
Portfolio	19.7	47.5
Exit interview	36.6	43.4
Department exam	13.0	32.0
Standardized (external) exam	25.0	30.0
Student survey	29.5	25.5
Alumni survey*	--	22.6
Employer survey	24.0	21.1
Other	40.0	44.4

Source: Academic Year 2011-2012 Department Survey, American Sociological Association.

Note: Data for 2000/01 are weighetd; data for 2011/12 were not weighted because the response rate by type of institution (as categorized by Carnegie Codes) generally corresponded with the percentage of each type of institution in the universe of U.S. sociology departments as of AY 2011/12.

*This question was not asked separately on the 2000/01 survey; it was incorporated into the "other" response for the 2000/01 survey questionnaire.

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