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Standardization and Alignment of Student Learning Outcomes for Sociology Courses in Maryland Public Colleges

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ABSTRACT

In Spring 2020, the Chancellor of the University System of Maryland (USM) and the President of the Maryland Association of Community Colleges (MACC) asked the provosts of MACC and USM institutions to address the course transfer process between the 2-year and 4-year schools and created the MD Provosts Transfer Council (PTC) which was made up of Provosts or Vice Presidents from several MD public colleges. The leadership requested a course outcomes-based transfer process that would allow students to seamlessly transfer credits and courses from their home institutions to receiving transfer institutions. The process started with the development of affinity groups for the top MD academic transfer programs and the highest-enrolled general education courses, which included sociology. The MD Sociology Affinity Group started in Fall 2020.

In September 2020, the PTC leadership provided guidance on student learning outcomes or objectives (SLOs) including limiting SLOs (with fewer better than more), SLO language reflecting course level (e.g. 100, 200, etc.), colleges being able to add more SLOs as needed, and faculty having the opportunity to provide input on the standardized SLOs before finalizing them (Charge letter, 2020). The PTC asked each affinity group to identify co-chairs and the 3 most common courses to be evaluated for course outcome alignment by each affinity group. By March 2021, the PTC expected

each affinity group to identify the aligned course outcomes for the entry level courses. For sociology, this meant the Introduction to Sociology course. By May 2021, the PTC expected course outcome alignment for the second and third entry level courses in each program.

In May 2021, the Transfer With Success Act (TWSA) was signed into law. This law required the MD Higher Education Commission (MHEC) to develop policies in 2 areas: the process of transfer acceptance or denial, and how course equivalencies were identified. In terms of acceptance or denial, for MD public higher education institutions that receive requests for course transfer from students which are denied, to notify the sending institution and the student of the course transfer denial within a reasonable period. In the case of denial, the sending and receiving institutions should conduct a review of the course transfer denial. Lastly, each MD public higher education institution must submit an annual report to MHEC of any course denials and the reasons for those denials.

The formalization of the process of determining equivalencies was the more difficult and controversial element and is what will be focused on in the remainder of this paper. In essence, transfer equivalencies were to be determined based solely on SLOs, ignoring the level (100, 200, etc.) of the transferring course. In addition, the priority was for courses to transfer as the equivalent course (i.e., Social Problems as Social Problems, regardless of level), and not as program elective credits.

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Featured Tale

Standardization and Alignment of Student Learning Outcomes for Sociology Courses in Maryland Public Colleges

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In Spring 2020, the Chancellor of the University System of Maryland (USM) and the President of the Maryland Association of Community Colleges (MACC) asked the provosts of MACC and USM institutions to address the course transfer process between the 2-year and 4-year schools and created the MD Provosts Transfer Council (PTC) which was made up of Provosts or Vice Presidents from several MD public colleges. The leadership requested a course outcomes-based transfer process that would allow students to seamlessly transfer credits and courses from their home institutions to receiving transfer institutions. The process started with the development of affinity groups for the top MD academic transfer programs and the highest-enrolled general education courses, which included sociology. The MD Sociology Affinity Group started in Fall 2020.

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Student Learning Outcomes Alignment Process

In Fall 2020, prior to the passing of the TWSA, The MD Sociology Affinity Group was formally launched with representatives from sociology departments from most of the 2- and 4-year public colleges in MD. There are 16 public 2-year schools and 12 public 4-year schools in Maryland.

In the 2020-2021 academic year, this affinity group met several times and identified the 2 most common courses: Introduction to Sociology and Social Problems. Regarding course outcome alignment for the Introduction to Sociology course, the group decided that no outcome alignment was needed since MD 4-year schools accepted all Introduction to Sociology course transfer requests (R. Salm, personal communication, May 20, 2021). The group noted that aligning course outcomes would require significant work for course accreditation with no major benefits. At that time the group also decided that no SLOs would be aligned for other sociology courses, since there was no problem with sociology course transfers between MD public colleges that the affinity group could see.

The group noted a problem with using only SLO alignment (ignoring 100-, 200-, 300-, and 400-level course distinctions), since it ignored scaffolding of student knowledge, skills, and abilities as seen in Bloom's Learning Taxonomy. The Sociology Affinity Group believed that registrars at 4-year schools often denied 100- and 200-level course transfer requests from 2-year schools for courses that were offered as 300- or 400-level courses at 4-year schools, transferring these instead as lower-level elective courses (R. Salm, personal communication, May 20, 2021).

In these initial meetings, 2 major issues stood out. First, the Sociology Affinity Group felt that there was a lack of data on the problem of course transfers being denied, which the group had little control over. The group had anecdotal data of a few courses being denied, but no significant data showing widespread denial of course transfers. This lack of data justifying that a problem existed was juxtaposed with the requests being made for course SLO alignment, considering the significant impacts of alignment on academic freedom and the time needed for curriculum revisions. The second major issue was that the 2 largest MD public 4-year schools were not participating in the group, leaving a major information gap. It was unknown if these 4-year colleges had more course transfer denials or would impose limits on course SLO alignment when and if they did join the Sociology Affinity Group. These concerns by the group would continue from the Spring of 2021 through Fall of 2022.

In September 2021, the Sociology Affinity Group was asked by the PTC to continue its work on course alignment (C. Railey, personal communication, September 4, 2021). At this early stage of the process, the affinity group discussed many issues during the 2021-2022 academic year. First, the impetus for this alignment work was the state law on course transfer, which created concern that if the Sociology Affinity Group did not align sociology course SLOs, the MD legislature might do

it, with more problematic outcomes. Secondly, the problem of aligning SLOs across 100, 200, 300 and 400 course levels was concerning for the group. The group believed that students taking 100-level courses often did not have the knowledge or skills expected in a 300- or 400-level course, so ignoring course levels and standardizing SLOs across levels was problematic. Bloom's Taxonomy was referred to often on this point. Third, there were problems with course transfers in some cases. For example, if the receiving institution did not offer the course it could not be accepted as a program course, only as an elective, and some courses were worth fewer credits than courses offered by the receiving college.

Fourth, sociology programs differ across 4-year colleges for various reasons, leading to unique or specialized sociology programs. This makes comparing and standardizing sociology courses across colleges more difficult. Fifth, in some of the larger sociology departments, especially at 4-year colleges, there was no standardization of SLOs for specific courses such as Introduction to Sociology within the department. Individual professors had different SLOs and protested standardization due to academic freedom arguments. Lastly, the lack of data on sociology course transfers being denied was a major concern for the group: it was making a significant effort for what was seen as a non-existent problem. Communication from the PTC contact person highlighted that some or many community college students were having their course transfer requests denied or only accepted as electives, which costs students time and money, and increases the probability that the student may not graduate (C. Railey, personal communication, December 1, 2021).

The 2022-2023 academic year was significant for the Sociology Affinity Group due to new MHEC guidance on the TWSA and the production of standardized SLOs by the group. In the Fall of 2022, the PTC once again charged the affinity groups with course alignment for program courses (C. Railey, personal communication, May 3, 2022). The PTC specifically asked for course alignment for those courses taught by 2-year colleges and transferred to 4-year schools. The PTC sought to align course offerings by 2-year schools with the first 2 years of course work at 4-year schools, which would also enhance program transfer agreements (C. Railey, personal communication, May 3, 2022).

MHEC guidance on the TWSA clarified some issues for the Sociology Affinity Group but was still vague in other areas. It clarified policies related to course transfer and the purpose of the TWSA, which is: "Maximizing the transfer of courses and credits. The primary purpose of the Transfer With Success Act and these regulations was to promote the timely completion of degrees by transfer students and, subsequently, to limit any additional financial burden that transfer students may experience." (Maryland Higher Education Commission, p. 7). It also defined a learning objective as: "a description of the knowledge, skills, competencies, or expertise that a student is expected to obtain, exhibit, or meet upon the successful completion of a specific course or program." (Maryland Higher Education Commission, p. 10). The guidance also distinguishes between courses and credits, transferability of courses, and applicability of transferred courses to degree program and graduation requirements (Maryland Higher Education Commission, p. 10).

MHEC guidance identified 5 steps in the transfer process: 1) Student submits a request for review by receiving institution; 2) Institution evaluates transferability; 3) Transfer Evaluation Report created and disbursed; 4) Review of denials by sending institution; and 5) Final determination (Maryland Higher Education Commission, p. 14). Details for each step were provided in the guidance document. The MHEC

guidance document notes 4 mechanisms for evaluating course or credit transfers. These include: several types of transfer agreements; if the course is a general education course; if there is no established course equivalency, is there a similar course at the receiving institution as determined by relevant faculty; and do prior learning policies apply to the transfer request (Maryland Higher Education Commission, p. 15).

A second guidance document in Fall 2022 became the foundation for course alignment for all faculty affinity groups by making SLOs the basis for alignment. A presentation shared with affinity groups by USM senior administrators Joann Boughman and Darlene Smith determined that student learning outcomes would be the basis for decisions on course equivalencies (R. Salm, personal communication, September 29, 2022). It stated that only SLOs could be used to determine course equivalencies, and that no other method such as textbook, assessment, or course level was relevant. It also noted that there was a lack of standardization both within faculty departments and across schools. Without any more clarification, the guidance simply states that courses should have 70% of their SLOs aligned.

Some clarity on the 70% SLO criteria was provided by a third document arising from a MACC Summit on November 4, 2022, titled Bridging the Gap. It stated: "if at least 70 percent of the learning objectives of the 2 courses are the same, the course is transferable." Other personal communication from USM and MACC leadership reinforced the need for the Sociology Affinity Group to work toward aligning SLOs for the key sociology courses being transferred between MD 2-year and 4-year colleges using the 70% rule.

In Fall 2022, The Sociology Affinity Group started the actual process of sociology course SLO alignment. In these meetings there was extensive discussion about the need for course alignment, the lack of data on the problem of course transfers, and the challenges and workload required for course alignment. The group generally felt that doing the extensive work needed for course SLO alignment was not justified due to the lack of data on problems with sociology course transfer. Finally, in November 2022, the Sociology Affinity Group decided to tackle the issue of course alignment.

Universal Sociology Student Learning Objectives (SLOs)

The course SLO alignment process involved several steps. First, the group identified the sociology courses taught most often by the MD 2-year public colleges. This involved creating a list of which courses were offered by all these schools and determining how many 2-year schools offered each course. This work determined that Introduction to Sociology and Social Problems were taught most often, with the next most common courses being Marriage and Family, Race and Ethnicity, Gender and Sexuality, Social Inequality, Sociology of Sport, Globalization, Health and Illness, Criminology, and Social Work. Additional sociology courses were taught at only 1 college. The group then decided to create SLOs for the 8 most common sociology courses taught at MD 2-year schools and, it was assumed, being transferred to MD 4-year schools. These 8 courses include: Introduction to Sociology, Social Problems, Marriage and Family, Race and Ethnicity, Gender and Sexuality, Social Inequality, Sociology of Sport, and Globalization and Global Societies.

The Sociology Affinity Group then broke into 8 sub-groups, each of which developed 3 or 4 SLOs for a specific course in that list. The affinity group decided to recommend 3 SLOs for each course, since that would allow each college to add 1 or 2 more SLOs and still meet the 70% rule

determined by MHEC. The Sociology Affinity Group also recommended to the subgroups that they develop relatively general SLOs that would be acceptable by all sociology departments. After each sub-group developed their proposals, the larger affinity group reviewed and modified some recommendations and developed a draft list of SLOs for the 8 courses. Sociology departments from all MD schools participating in the affinity group then reviewed the draft list of SLOs leading to the final list below being approved in February 2023.

Introduction to Sociology

1. Analyze social phenomena using data, sociological concepts, theories, and theoretical perspectives to study human behavior.
2. Identify methods for sociological research along with their benefits and drawbacks.
3. Explore the significance of culture and its impact on socialization, behavior, social institutions, and social structures.
4. Explain how systems of social inequality, including racism, sexism, and classism affect the human experience.

Social Problems

1. Examine social problems using the sociological perspective by considering larger social forces.
2. Explain systems of power and how they intersect to create social problems.
3. Identify feasible solutions to social problems.

Social Inequality - Diversity/Race/Class/Gender

1. Apply the key concepts and theories sociologists use to analyze social inequality and group relations.
2. Examine the intersectional nature of marginalization and its connection to racism, sexism, and other similar "-isms."
3. Analyze the life experiences of different marginalized groups and their contribution to U.S. society.

Society and Gender

1. Apply basic sociological theories and principles to issues relating to sex, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity.
2. Analyze and critique the concepts and sociocultural contexts of sex and gender and their intersections with other systems of privilege and oppression (including racial and ethnic identity, social class and caste, and so on).
3. Examine contemporary issues as they relate to sexism, homophobia, and transphobia from a social justice perspective.

Sociology of Family

1. Explain historical and contemporary roles and functions of family structures using sociological concepts.
2. Examine how gender, class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and other factors affect family roles and structures.
3. Analyze the impact of social, cultural, economic, and political changes on the family.

Sociology of Sport

1. Describe the sociological perspective and apply it to sport.
2. Apply sociological theories of social stratification to analyze forms of inequality – race, class, and gender – that are present in sport.
3. Evaluate the extent to which social institutions such as media, polity, and the economy shape contemporary sport as a social institution.

Globalization or Global Studies

1. Examine income, wealth, technological, and cultural differences between low, middle, and high-income countries globally.
2. Explain causes and consequences of global inequality and possible solutions.
3. Examine globalization and its consequences.

Recommendations

The Sociology Affinity Group has successfully identified and agreed upon SLOs for the 8 most commonly transferred sociology courses. This process, while valuable for fostering discussions between 2- and 4-year representatives, took longer than necessary. Below are our recommendations to expedite similar processes in the future.

First, access to data on transfer efficacy is crucial in determining what steps to take. In our case, there was no systematically collected data available to use to identify the scope and intensity of the transfer problem. As noted above, one of the key challenges in our process was in determining how to best address any transfer problems, since it was unclear what, if any, courses or institutions were presenting a challenge.

Second, collaboration and involvement of all stakeholders is key to success. The absence of representatives from 2 of the most prominent 4-year schools left major gaps in knowledge during the early part of the group's work. Even as we publish this report, some MD public colleges have still not participated in the process. Full participation from the beginning would have enabled the group to better assess the situation and come up with a plan more quickly.

Third, having access to information from state-level bodies early in the process is important for efficiency. MHEC and PTC provided guidance late in our process, and more timely information would have helped us move more quickly. Similarly, receiving more detailed guidance earlier about how course equivalency decisions are made (e.g., the 70% rule) would have saved time and avoided confusion.

Fourth, the group suggests a review and possible revision of the guidance that course level is irrelevant to equivalency decisions. Ignoring course level can create mismatches between student preparation and course expectations, potentially undermining student success.

Finally, while the Sociology Affinity Group has completed the SLO alignment process for now, ongoing review and revision of SLOs will be necessary to reflect changes in the field, pedagogy, and transfer patterns. The process should be flexible enough to allow for course content and outcomes to evolve while still ensuring smooth transfer for students.

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