

June 2018

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Recommended Citation

Ruehs, Emily; Pessagno, Regina; Lovis, Rachel; Scarborough, William; De Anda Muniz, Michael; Cuddy, Maximilian; Holzman, Jesse; and Kass, Dennis (2018) "A Relevant Pedagogy: Outcomes from a High School Sociology Research Practicum," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol10/iss2/2>

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A Relevant Pedagogy: Outcomes from a High School Sociology Research Practicum

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INTRODUCTION

The field of sociology is beginning to branch out beyond the ivory tower of college campuses and universities. Sociologists are now found across a wide array of non-academic industries and public-sector posts, and sociology is increasingly being taught in high school. Over the past several years, there have been massive efforts by the American Sociological Association to promote sociology in high schools and engage high school teachers (Andriot 2007). Not only has the ASA begun promoting membership to high school teachers, but it also hosts a number of valuable resources to support the teaching of high school sociology. This includes an extensive document establishing standards and benchmarks for sociology (ASA 2015) as well as a repository of valuable lesson plans that are designed for high school classrooms (see <http://www.asanet.org/teaching-learning/trails>).

Despite the massive efforts taking place within the discipline's national organization, there are few well-known examples of how to design a high school sociology course. Furthermore, the ASA's approach to promoting high school sociology has been a "top-down" approach where guidance and resources are offered for use in high schools across the country. While this is a valuable model for our national organization, it offers little insight for how universities may work more laterally to support sociology in neighboring high schools. In this article, we discuss a unique high school sociology program undertaken at a predominantly Latinx Chicago high school (henceforth referred to as Western High¹) in collaboration with the Department of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Several sociology graduate students at UIC volunteered to mentor honors sociology high school students as they performed independent research projects that addressed social problems salient in their everyday lives. This program provides a valuable model of one type of university-high school collaboration while also highlighting the benefits of sociological research for high school students. Additionally, the program's focus on Latinx students is especially important due to these students' underrepresentation in four-year universities and their low rates of college completion (Fry and Taylor 2013; Lee Jr. et al. 2011).

We begin this article by reviewing previous literature on high school sociology. While sociology has been present in high schools for decades, it remains under-utilized and follows curricula that are often irrelevant to students' lives. In order for sociology to be successfully used in high school, it should be relevant for students. Therefore, in the next section we describe the social context and challenges facing sociology students at Western High. Then, we describe the organization of the high school sociology program and the model of collaboration between Western High and UIC. To assess project outcomes, we performed

¹ "Western High" and students have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

interviews with alumni of the program. Through these interviews, we found that students benefited from the program in multiple ways. First, the focus on community issues inspired students to critically engage with social issues and helped them develop a sense of efficacy to make positive change. Second, students reported that they felt their writing and time management skills improved substantially through their participation in the project. As a result, students felt more confident entering college.

HIGH SCHOOL SOCIOLOGY – FROM STANDARDIZED TO STUDENT-CENTERED

In sociology, high schools have served more often as a field site than a location for teaching. Furthermore, the limited attention devoted to the teaching of high school sociology has focused primarily on the experiences, qualifications, and training of high school sociology teachers (DeCesare 2002, 2005b; Greene 2007; Lashbrook 2001; Riennerth et al. 1998).

Sociology has been in the high school classroom since the early 1900s, with the numbers of schools offering sociology classes slowly growing over the decades. However, while an estimated three fourths of American high schools offered sociology in the early 1980s, this number has dropped to only one third in the past decade (DeCesare 2008). Despite changing availability, the focus of high school sociology has remained consistent: these courses emphasize social problems and ethical citizenship (DeCesare 2005a). Yet, the teachers in these high school classrooms still lack formalized sociological training (Lashbrook 2001; DeCesare 2005b; Green 2007), and sociology curricula may struggle to receive state support (Greene 2007). Perhaps as a result of these problems, sociology teachers often fail to recommend that students major in sociology (Lashbrook 2001), and sociology still is misunderstood by the public in general (DeCesare 2002). In response, multiple scholars have suggested that professional associations as well as universities place more emphasis on supporting high school teachers (DeCesare 2002; Lashbrook 2001; Riennerth et al 1998)

While this literature focuses on high school teachers, we know little about how sociology relates to the students themselves. This is a noteworthy omission, especially as research demonstrates that youth are themselves adept sociologists who maneuver complex dynamics on a daily basis (Thorne 1993). This is particularly true in high school, where complicated social cliques force students to be keenly aware of power as they behave within a social structure of consequential norms (Bettie 2003; Jones 2010; Pascoe 2007). High school is also a time of major transition for many students. Juniors and seniors are confronted with many new decisions as graduation approaches. These students must balance their personal preferences for the future with expectations from their family, friends, and teachers.

Many students also become aware at this time of how opportunities are not distributed equally across students, as race, class, and gender distinctions become apparent among students with varying trajectories.

In Chicago, where our project took place, high school students see first-hand the inequality that exists not only within their high school, but from neighborhood to neighborhood. Indeed, Chicago has served as the “social laboratory” for sociologists since the beginning of the discipline in the U.S., and continues to be treated similarly by high school students who make sense of the city’s complex social dynamics. In our approach to high school sociology, we drew from youths’ preexisting knowledge about their environment by engaging them in sociological research that examined problems they observed and/or experienced on a regular basis. The first step, then, started with understanding the unique conditions of students at Western High in order to design a sociology curriculum that is both relevant and beneficial.

BACKGROUND: WESTERN HIGH

Western High is a predominately Latinx high school in the Chicago Public School District. Enrollment is approximately 1,600 students, of which 96 percent come from low-income families. The school performs well above most Chicago Public Schools. In fact, the college acceptance rate is nearly 100 percent for students from Western High. Despite this impressive number, only 63 percent of students go on to university after high school graduation. Of those students, only 53.3 percent remain in college until obtaining their bachelor’s degree.

Unfortunately, the low college enrollment and college persistence for Western High graduates are common among Latinx youth across the U.S. Latinxs in the U.S. obtain college degrees at half the rate of the national average. In 2009, less than 20 percent of Latinxs aged 25 to 34 completed an associate’s degree or higher, compared with a national average of over 40 percent (Lee Jr. et al. 2011). Nonetheless, Latinx college enrollment is currently at an all-time high (Fry and Taylor 2013), and a large number of these students are the first in their family to attend university (Saenz et al. 2007). While these first-generation Latinx college students are helping to equalize educational disparities, they also face significant challenges in integrating socially and academically within university campuses (Cabrera and Padilla 2004; Collier and Morgan 2008; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Tinto 1993), resulting in higher levels attrition (Engle and Tinto 2008).

While the students at Western High face challenges common to Latinxs across the country, their experiences are shaped by other factors that are unique to Chicago. As a city that was a major center during the manufacturing boom, de-industrialization has resulted in tremendous job loss that is most deeply felt in communities of color that were most likely to rely on employment in factories

(Wilson 1996). Along with dramatic economic transitions, the city remains characterized by patterns of stark racial segregation where wealth is concentrated in the white neighborhoods north of downtown, while the west and south sides are composed of working class and poor families that are predominantly either Latinx or African American. While segregation is a powerful force maintaining racial inequality in the city (Massey and Denton 1998), it also has allowed for ethnic groups to maintain valuable aspects of their culture. In many predominantly Latinx neighborhoods, such as the one where Western High is located, Spanish is the most common language and families from Mexico and other countries in Central and South America continue the traditions that are valued in their home country. In their daily lives, Chicago high school students cross economic, racial, and cultural boundaries on a regular basis. Therefore, they learn much about social phenomena before even stepping foot in a sociology class.

Considering the unique experiences of students at Western High, we designed a sociology project that utilized their preexisting knowledge while also making use of sociological concepts, tools, and methods. An awareness of the challenges these students face in college entry and completion also motivated us to create a curriculum that would prepare students for the academic work they will encounter in college as well as develop their ability to perform in the university environment where relationships with professors are very different than their relationships with high school educators. We created what Greenwood (2013) calls a “publicly responsive sociology curricula,” in which educators consider how sociology can better serve our discipline, our students, and their communities.

THE HONORS SOCIOLOGY PROGRAM AT WESTERN HIGH

Our project began in August 2013 with an e-mail from high school educator Dennis Kass to the head of UIC’s Department of Sociology (Barbara Risman, at the time) requesting assistance with an honors sociology course. In his e-mail, Dennis Kass described the innovative project that he had developed to address Western High’s low college enrollment and persistence rates and asked whether any graduate students at UIC would be interested in volunteering as mentors throughout the semester. Dr. Risman forwarded Kass’s e-mail to graduate students in order to solicit volunteers. In that initial year, five graduate students volunteered to serve as mentors. The high school students organized themselves into groups of two or three students based on their research interests, previous experience working together, or friendships. Every student group had a graduate student mentor. Each graduate student mentored one or two research groups whose methods or topics matched the mentor’s knowledge and skills.

Following Western High’s two-part mission of preparing students for college and developing active and engaged citizens capable of improving their

communities, Kass designed an Honors Sociology course that emphasized the use of original research as an educational tool. This sociological research practicum was oriented toward three primary goals:

- 1) *Inspire an active sociological imagination within students through researching identified community problems.*
- 2) *Provide high school students with excellent preparation for postsecondary education.*
- 3) *Foster a relationship between UIC and Western High School through engaging in a collaborative and pragmatic project that directly addresses community identified priorities and social issues in Chicago.*

The relationships between graduate mentors and high school students were relatively unstructured yet professional. Kass did not outline specific expectations or guidelines for graduate mentors and was sensitive to the fact that graduate students' schedules tend to be quite busy at certain points throughout the semester. Overall, graduate student mentors were expected to be available to students (either digitally or in-person) and provide close guidance in research design, analysis, and writing. The graduate students who volunteered were all committed to the goals of this program. Therefore, they often went above and beyond the basic expectations of their position, such as staying up until three in the morning collectively editing papers with their high school students via Google Documents.

At the beginning of the semester, graduate students made weekly visits to Western High in order to meet with students face-to-face. Once students began collecting data, the frequency of in-person visits varied. Some graduate mentors continued weekly in-person meetings, while others maintained contact more sporadically, both digitally and in-person, depending on the needs of the student groups and the availability of the graduate student volunteers.

During in-person meetings or digital communications, the students explained the challenges that they were facing and mentors provided guidance in how to address those challenges. In-person meetings between mentors and students were much like those between an undergraduate student who is working on their senior thesis and a faculty advisor. Digital communication was often facilitated through e-mail, Google Drive, and Google Documents. Students used Google Drive and Google Documents to develop their research instruments, such as surveys or interview schedules, organize their literature review sources, store data, and write and revise drafts of the final paper. Additionally, mentors were able to provide detailed feedback through these free Google services.

Graduate students were not compensated in any way for their involvement in the program. As volunteers, our participation was intrinsically motivated by a desire to support high school sociology, a joy of working with young students, and

an interest in becoming involved with the local community. The program also required few resources from UIC's Department of Sociology. Baraba Risman, the department head at that time, helped to solicit volunteers and, at one point, revised a grant application we had written to support students' travel to the 2014 ASA annual conference in San Francisco. The sociology department also offered space for students to practice their presentations in front of faculty and graduate students. In general, Dennis Kass managed the program and coordinated with graduate student volunteers.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

With only four months to complete their independent research projects, students selected their own topics based on pressing social issues in their school and/or communities, often conferring with Kass to develop a specific research question. Then, with the help of Kass and their graduate student mentor, students began reviewing relevant literature to learn about previous research on their topic and develop an understanding of appropriate methods to answer their research questions. After the graduate student mentor and Kass approved a research plan, students began collecting data in the field.

Students used quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct research on various topics ranging from sexual harassment of undocumented factory workers to gender stereotypes among high school athletes. To maintain ethical standards, Kass designed an internal IRB process for the students to complete prior to the collection of data. Students were trained in participant rights, confidentiality issues, and the principles of do-no-harm. Following their training, students completed and turned in IRB applications to Kass that were modeled after a typical university IRB application. Kass reviewed all IRB documents and gave approval once he felt standards had been met. Studies that included research with human subjects (e.g., studies using surveys and interviews) had informed consent procedures that required signed consent from each participant prior to participation. While the project did not include a formal IRB process associated with a university review board, the in-class process was a substitute that exposed students to the ethical considerations of research and the processes involved in ensuring ethical standards are met.

As with most original research, students encountered a number of challenges upon entering the field. For instance, students often had to modify their initial plans for data collection, settling for fewer respondents when recruitment proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Students were ambitious, sometimes overambitious, regarding the amount of data they could collect in about four weeks of data collection. In consultation with their mentors and teacher, many groups found that they intended to interview or survey more participants than time or

resources allowed. It was also common for students to shorten their surveys and interview guides after initial pilot interviews took longer than expected. Additionally, some students had to change their entire research focus altogether after failing to receive access to research sites or after failing to recruit participants. Despite these challenges, all of the student research groups were able to collect original data. While projects varied in scope, many of the qualitative studies included 7 to 20 in-person interviews while quantitative survey studies surveyed 125 to 360 students.

After data collection, students worked closely with Kass and their graduate mentor to code and analyze data. Groups with qualitative data were trained to transcribe interviews and code transcripts for themes. Those with survey data used summary statistics analyses. Groups using more complex statistical analysis, such as multiple regression, did so under the close assistance of a graduate mentor.

Sections of the paper, such as the literature review and methods, were due throughout the semester to ensure students completed a final product in a short period of time. These papers, which ranged from 15 to 30 pages, followed the format of a publishable research article -- positioning the study within existing bodies of literature, highlighting methods, outlining results, and discussing the importance of their findings. At the end of the semester, students submitted their papers to a local graduate student conference and the American Sociological Association's (ASA) annual conference. Students who were accepted to present raised their own funds to attend the conferences that were out of state. During the project's first year, we received additional funding from the 2014 Carla B. Howery Teaching Enhancement Fund, the ASA, and Chicago Public Schools.

At the time of writing, the honors sociology course has taken place four consecutive times (2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016). Following the completion of the third year (2015) of the course, we decided to undertake a rigorous review of the program to examine whether our goals were being met, determine the extent to which the program impacted students' academic and non-academic lives, and identify ways that we can improve the program.

PROJECT EVALUATION

We interviewed former program students in order to assess the outcomes of their participation in the honors sociology program. To recruit interview participants, we created a screener survey that informed potential respondents about the purpose of our research and collected some preliminary information-- such as post-secondary enrollment status. Students indicated in the survey if they were willing to be interviewed about their experiences. In total, we interviewed nine former students. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. We loosely followed an interview protocol that was structured around three basic themes: antecedents to course enrollment,

experiences with the course itself, and the relevance of the course in students' lives after high school. All interviews were transcribed and inductively coded for common themes.

All of the interview participants were Latinx, consistent with the majority-Latinx population at Western High. Six participants were women and three were men. Five of those we interviewed were attending a four-year university and four of them attended a two-year college. The students attending two-year colleges did so primarily due to financial reasons, often related to immigration status. All four students who were attending a two-year college told us that they intend on transferring to a four-year university in the future. There were a wide variety of college majors represented in our sample. Somewhat surprisingly, however, none of the students decided to pursue a major in sociology (although there was one student with a minor in women's studies and another minoring in criminal justice). In the analysis that follows, we highlight a number of salient themes that emerged from the interviews.

ANALYSIS

Motivation for Course Enrollment

The honors sociology class is offered as an elective for interested junior and senior students. Many students opt to take the class after learning about the benefits of the research project from other students. Others learned about the potential benefits of the class through direct conversations with the teacher, who presented the class as a challenging opportunity to prepare for college. The promise of college-readiness preparation — such as improved writing skills and an impressive resume — proved to be a common motivating factor that drove participants to sign up for the class.

In addition to college readiness, honors sociology was framed as a class that demands higher-performance expectations compared to other high school courses. The expectation to conduct advanced sociological research provided the students with a uniquely challenging experience that many found motivating. For example, after talking with the teacher about the class, Javier stated: "So right then and there I knew it was going to be a challenge, so I was like I'm all for it. You know, I really wanted to do it." Participants felt that the academic expectations in other classes were low, and they appreciated the chance to engage in schoolwork that challenged them to improve academically while exploring their own intellectual voice.

The Benefits of Research in the Social Sciences

An additional factor contributing to students' excitement for the course was that they could research topics that were deeply meaningful to them. Hironimus-Wendt and Wallace (2009) contend that C. Wright Mills' "sociological

imagination” is meant to facilitate social engagement, and, thus, must be deliberately taught as such in sociology classes. Our students absolutely saw the connection between sociological research and social engagement. Many of them wanted to use their research to raise awareness and create change. Olivia said of her project topic, “So we were like, ok ,this is something that we need to bring to light. For people to actually find out and see what is happening.”

Additionally, Hoop (2009) insists that students’ lived experiences are important “texts” from which to teach and develop sociological imaginations and critical thinking. Our participants were encouraged to explore research projects that directly related to their own experiences living in a low-income, predominantly Latinx urban neighborhood. For example, one group observed that many of their peers and family members who came from households with a single mother varied in their academic performance. They chose to examine why some students in this scenario defy stereotypes and become academically resilient. Javier, a member of this group, elaborated:

“Personally, the reason I wanted to do [this subject] was because I have a lot of friends who are in that situation and I have family members who are in that situation. Some friends aren’t doing so well, you know. They either dropped out of high school, started working immediately... I don’t see them going very far in life. And then there’s these other people you wouldn’t expect. You’re like, whoa, they’re so motivated, so determined, they have dedicated everything that they’re doing and they invest so much time into it... that’s what really intrigued me.”

In another group, Tomas and his partners chose to research the rates of college students who drop out of four-year institutions and transfer to two-year colleges. The group observed this phenomenon happening frequently within their community, which piqued an interest to understand why. In particular, they examined how the feeling of belongingness is greater when people are surrounded by others of the same ethnicity or nationality. They found belongingness to be a key factor influencing whether some Latinx students drop out of college or university. In short, these research projects were directly relevant to the students’ experiences at the time, many of whom were in the process of deciding if and where to attend college upon graduating.

For other students, the research topics touched on other aspects of their lives. In some cases, the direct personal connection to a topic provided ready access to potential research participants and facilitated data collection. However, it also presented unique challenges to the student researchers. For example, Olivia and her group researched sexual harassment among undocumented factory workers. She explained:

“And for us it was kind of a challenge because one of my teammates, she actually worked in a factory. So, she was the one who was actually getting us the people and the women to actually participate. So, for us we didn’t want her to feel at danger. Like you know the manager or someone in the factory finding out and then like “Hey don’t do that!” and getting her in trouble.”

Indeed, similar to other students, this group chose to research a topic that directly related to their own life experiences. In this case, the students confronted ambiguities between their role as researchers and their direct experiences with the issues they chose, allowing them to reflect upon the ways in which academia, research, and daily life intersect.

As a result of students’ research focusing on real-life social problems that directly and often intimately related to their own experiences, the projects encouraged an applied use of the sociological imagination. Tomas, who participated in the project on college belongingness, felt that the topic actually gave him confidence by allowing him to understand his own insecurities and how they stem from stereotypes and social pressures. He explained that as he wrestled with feelings of inadequacy, he often thought about his project on why Mexican students may withdraw from college. He shared,

“I do feel that this project and other topics in sociology (race, ethnicity, gender, and stereotypes) made me aware of how to better deal with certain philosophies that other people may mention. [My university] consists of a variety of nationalities, so in my first semester I did not feel as uncomfortable as I would have in a room full of white students. However, I did have the sense that my peers would perform better than me and surpass me... Personally, I did not feel that race was an issue on my poor academic achievement in the first semester, but it may have been at a subconscious level.”

Furthermore, students often reflected positively on the lessons they learned in the honors sociology class, acknowledging the benefits they received after high school. Marco explained that “Being in that class gave me pretty much the knowledge that matters to go about my life every day.” When prompted to explain what ‘knowledge that matters’ meant, he continued:

“Just being aware of how the world works. And how everything you see is not... you know that saying where, like, there is more than meets the eye? That’s how it is... the way the government works, politics, all of that.

People, classes, gender... everything. That's something like, ever since I was in that class that's something I've never stopped thinking about."

The ability to engage with research questions that were directly relevant to their own experiences gave students a tangible way to understand and apply sociological analysis to their everyday lives. Particularly for students growing up in a low-income urban community, conducting research on familiar topics and experiences allowed them to use the sociological imagination to understand "knowledge that matters."

Hard Skills: Writing

The importance of teaching writing skills has become a popular research topic and proved to be salient in the honors sociology course (Burgess-Proctor et al. 2014; Hudd, Sardi, and Lopriore 2013; Kolb, Longest, and Jensen 2013). According to participants, improved writing was a concrete benefit of the program and a skill that students could bring with them into college. Students believed that the length and quality of the sociology paper was what gave them motivation to tackle the future demands of college writing. Yesenia shared,

"I think it has because doing that kind of writing, all of that extensive writing. When I have to do all these long essays, I'm like, if I can do a 20-page sociology paper, then I can do this! It just kind of encouraged me. If I can do that, I can definitely do this three-page paper. Stuff like that. It is a good encouragement."

Beyond the length of the project, the fact that the papers would be submitted to an academic conference meant that students were held to college-level writing standards. Some noted that Kass's high expectations for writing, which included constant feedback and constructive criticism when he reviewed their papers, helped cultivate their ability to write papers at the college level. Much of what the students learned pertained to how to write clearly and concisely, which was often demonstrated by their teacher through line-by-line editing. Although participants described the writing process as challenging, stressful and difficult, most appeared to appreciate the benefits of their sharpened writing skills. For example, Tomas explained:

"Just writing out, just in general the entire paper was an overall challenge. Me and my other teammates were not very good at conducting research papers. So we had help from [the instructor]...[He] wanted it to be 'perfect.'"

Marco also noted that he learned to write better because of the instructor's expectations:

“The fact that he would look over it a bunch of times and tell us what was wrong and how we had to do things. I never really had that with any other teacher. Like they would just look at it and correct it, and then give it back to me. ...I think that's the way they do it in college too.”

Overall, it is clear from the students' comments that writing an article-length research paper was beneficial as they transitioned to college. Although some of this benefit was unique to the specific teaching style of their honors sociology instructor, the requirement of a sociology research paper further encouraged a higher standard of writing. The length of the project gave students confidence in their ability to write college essays. Furthermore, students improved their writing quality to meet the academic standards of conferences where they submitted papers. The constant feedback and high standards that they were held to improved their writing skills over the course of the semester and better prepared them to write at the college level.

Soft Skills: Gaining Confidence

One of the most rewarding findings from these interviews was that many students felt they gained confidence through completing the research project. This confidence has proven helpful as students navigate college life.

Latinx students have historically had to contend with low expectations from high school teachers and counselors. (Rodríguez 2012; Vela-Gude et al. 2009). Consistent with prior research, in several interviews students explained that most of their high school experience did not build academic confidence. Olivia explained that she had always had a low bar set for her throughout high school.

“Coming from a low-income school what you get is low expectations right off the bat. They're like, ‘ok, you're going to high school but you might not go to college. So we just want to get you through.’”

Teachers' low expectations impacted Olivia's perceptions of her own abilities, which impeded her other academic pursuits. She explained later in the interview that she and her classmates felt inferior when participating in an unrelated academic competition with other high school students around the country.

“We would diminish ourselves because we were from a low-income Hispanic community... One of the stereotypes we ourselves put to ourselves was ‘oh, we're stupid’ or ‘we're dumb’ or ‘we're not getting the same

resources.’ Because at that conference we had a lot of bourgeoisie kids from high, New York top private schools. We were like, ‘oh we don’t know enough.’”

The students often brought similar insecurities with them when presenting at the sociological conferences for this program. Yesenia explained that her age and her status as a high school student caused her to feel intimidated when presenting at her first academic conference.

“It was really stressful just because you were in front of people who were professionals and had a lot of experience in these kind of things. And then here you are a little high schooler who can’t even buy cigarettes or anything and you’re presenting in front of these people who are twice your age and you’re acting like you’re a college student who knows everything, but you’re just a senior in high school!”

Yet, while the initial idea of presenting in professional settings was intimidating, the experience itself proved to be empowering for many of the students. Several students commented on the benefits they gained from presenting at the conference and drew from their experiences as proof that they were able to perform at a college level.

“Even though it was a little intimidating at first, it was overall it was a really nice experience. I mean, being able to share our project with successful students, PhD’s, professors... It was really rewarding after those three months of trying to hurry to get everything together. I think we did a pretty good job. We were the only high school seniors so it was rewarding right when we were sitting at that table” (Javier).

Yesenia echoed Javier’s feelings of pride in having a place at the table. She explained that the environment itself provided evidence of her academic success.

“I felt so fancy going there! It was in a really good, a really nice hotel and everything, and I saw all of these people in snazzy outfits and everything, and I was like, “Wow! Look where I am!” From a girl who was raised in [underserved community] in a house with 22 people... so coming from there and then being in this kind of conference and being able to do all of these things, it makes you feel really proud. Like, wow. Even despite where I’ve come from, I’ve still managed to do all of this!”

Experiencing academic confidence was not fleeting, but long-term. Olivia, who had discussed feeling inferior to students from prestigious schools, claimed that the experience transformed her confidence in her abilities:

“So I think coming from being that girl who was so nervous to present because I was dumb--because now I’m in college, I don’t really mind giving presentations or doing anything [that I thought would make me nervous]. But I’ve taught the whole class. I’ve done different things. So [the research project] just prepared me for that. It just put my confidence in a place that I didn’t think it could be at.”

We believe that this project provided students with a unique experience that helped them cultivate confidence. Conducting independent sociological research showed students that they had the skills necessary to succeed in college. Presenting that work to their mentors at UIC and at a national conference further empowered student by showcasing their talent to audiences beyond their high school peers.

Soft Skills: Independent Work

Beyond confidence, students felt the research project prepared them to undertake independent college work that required time management and self-direction. Unlike most high school classes where educators ensure progress through regular graded assignments, the approach taken by [High School Teacher] and the graduate mentors was more advisory in supporting students independent work as they progressed towards the final research paper. While this “hands-off” approach was frustrating at times to students, it also helped train them to take initiative. Students suggested that, in comparison to most high school classes which did not prepare them to be self-motivated, the less-structured working relationship with a mentor helped to promote self-determination, a necessary skill for college. Yesenia explained:

“High school projects kind of give you all these requirements like a guide and everything. [With the research project] you kind of didn’t have a guide. You kind of—this was all basically our ideas. We were more independent on the way we did our project and everything. [Our teacher] would just give suggestions, but ultimately we ran the show, and I feel that was really different. In high school they kind of give you criteria of what to do; here we had total freedom of what to do and think and what to write. It was really different. It was interesting, too, being able to have your own voice and not just the voice that they kind of tell you to do... you actually have your own voice and then make a difference on something.”

Yesenia developed greater confidence in her own intellectual voice by having conducted self-driven work. The project empowered her to think beyond what was usually taught. Javier echoed the positive sentiments about self-driven work, admitting that the level of independence was initially difficult but ultimately a manageable task.

“Just being independent when it comes to my work [helped me a lot in college] because [my teacher], he pretty much made us do everything on our own. Besides us going up to him asking a few questions on how to help us, he pretty much said okay—he explained at the beginning, ‘This is what you’re gonna do, now go out and do it.’ It was really tough at first. It was, like, what? ... Can you give a little more, can you explain a little more? And he was like, ‘No, that’s pretty much it, now go and think of a project that you want to do, find your people to interview, write your paper, and then turn it in.’”

For Javier, conducting independent research clearly deviated from the normal, rigidly scheduled high school projects. In short, the freedom to decide when and how to conduct research was initially overwhelming but proved manageable and rewarding in the end.

In addition to learning how to take independent initiative, students also learned skills for time management. Javier shared,

“Even though at first I was a little bitter because [our teacher] made us do this entire project in three months, I appreciate it because from that I really learned what it meant to do all this work on my own without having somebody, you know, feed me information... it taught me how to pretty much be punctual just because I know before that there would be papers.”

Javier went on to explain that having a firm due date for the ASA conference submission was much different than papers in high school, which could often be turned in past the stated due date. Although Javier echoed many students’ concerns about balancing the project with other responsibilities, most students felt that better time management was a useful skill that they could bring to college.

While many students felt that they gained an increased ability to work independently, which helped prepare them for college, miscommunication regarding students’ ability to conduct independent work contributed to tension in the student-mentor relationship. With little formalized understanding of the mentors’ roles, students often reported feeling disappointed that their mentors were so hands-off. Several students expressed wanting more time with their mentors and more direct guidance—something that most of the mentors seldom provided.

Tomas commented about his mentor: “She used to come about one day per week and she would help us edit the paper... But I feel it would be more necessary that she would perhaps reach out to more.” For this student, the mentor relationship was helpful but did not align with his expectations about the degree of help he would have liked. Tomas believed that the mentor’s role should include active participation in the research project. This was never a clear requirement of mentors and, indeed, most mentors felt their role to be purely advisory, providing feedback and advice but allowing students to conduct the actual research independently.

Other students seemed more understanding of this advisory role but were still disappointed by mentors’ lack of initiative in asking if the groups needed help. Many students found that they needed to be the ones to reach out for assistance. Nevertheless, they also appreciated when mentors initiated an offer of support. Javier reported about his mentor:

“I would have liked her to be more active with us. Like, ‘hey, how are you doing?’ But at the same time, it was an understanding that it had to be from us. We had to go up to her and be like, ‘hey, this is what we need.’”

As several students explained, differing expectations about who should take initiative resulted in students’ discomfort in contacting their graduate student mentors. One student felt uncomfortable with her mentor, since there was no structured development of the mentor relationship. This unfamiliar social situation caused the student to feel reluctant in reaching out for help. Olivia explained:

“You still gotta hold our hands sometimes because we don’t know what we’re doing... I think for the [graduate student mentors], just being more available, I think, even if it’s just through e-mail. But I also think it’s not really up to the mentors, but the high school students because they’re so reluctant to actually speak up and be like, ‘I need help.’ ... So I think it’s also working for the students to be like “you need help.” Ask for that help. Don’t wait for people to come to you.”

Olivia and others like her acknowledge that a beneficial mentor-student relationship needs a degree of reciprocity, but the students still felt disappointed by the lack of strong, trusting relationships with their mentors. Several students suggested that getting to know the mentor better at the beginning of the project would have been beneficial in this regard. This is an important lesson to consider for future projects that incorporate similar mentor relationships. While the hands-off mentor role can be beneficial in teaching high school students to take initiative and ask for help, it can also prove frustrating both for the student and the mentor. More up front

communication regarding what is expected from both parties would provide solid footing for the mentor relationship to develop in more mutually beneficial ways.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As noted above, the honors sociology program at Western High School was started with three primary goals:

- 1) *Inspire an active sociological imagination within students through researching identified community problems.*
- 2) *Provide high school students with excellent preparation for postsecondary education.*
- 3) *Foster a relationship between the University of Illinois Chicago and a local high school through engaging in a collaborative and pragmatic project that directly addresses community identified priorities and social issues in Chicago.*

After conducting and analyzing the interviews with graduates, we feel confident that the goals of the program are being met.

First, students reported that conducting research on a social problem salient to their everyday life allowed them to view their social world and the challenges they face in a new light. Students were able to attribute race, class and gender related challenges in their lives to social inequalities rather than personal deficiencies. Evidently, tailoring the class in a way that appealed to the unique experiences of Latinx students in an urban high school successfully fostered the teaching of sociology in a way that was relevant to students' everyday lives and allowed them to apply course lessons to future challenges they encountered.

Second, students involved in the program reported increased confidence in their writing skills and ability to engage in independent work after taking the course. These skills made them feel prepared heading into college, where professors generally expect students to write papers and conduct work with limited oversight, compared to the heavy assistance received in high school.

Finally, the program fostered a relationship between the UIC and Western High by establishing a mentorship program between graduate students and high school students. Dennis Kass, the high school educator, provided a critical role in this relationship by facilitating the mentorship process as he designed and conducted the course. While there were benefits to these relationships, our interviews revealed ways in which the mentor-student relationship can better serve high school students in such a program. For example, a number of students felt that they would have benefited from more involvement on the part of their graduate student mentor. Others explained that they were uncomfortable reaching out for

assistance because formal expectations on the role of their mentor were never outlined. Moving forward, this is one area of the program that requires some revision. Clearly stated expectations and guidelines for both students and mentors may help ensure that high school students in the program benefit as much as possible from the involvement of graduate students.

While we have outlined the goals for this specific project at Western High, we do not wish to suggest that these goals are appropriate for all high school sociology courses or research practicums. Instead, we believe that other high school programs should proceed with an understanding of the context-specific challenges facing their students and tailor their goals to address those challenges. This project was designed with an understanding of the challenges facing Latinx high school students in general and the students at this local high school in particular. With that in mind, the design of the project focused heavily on writing skills and independent work in order to prepare students for university-level study.

The best approach, we believe, is one which remains reflexive about the optimal pedagogical practices given the characteristics of the school's student body². In this vein, we suggest that departments in the social sciences that want to create a similar program keep the following questions in mind:

- Is the program initiated by the high school or university? Our program was initiated by the high school, and the mentors assisted in guiding students through the process that was already established in the classroom. If universities wish to create similar partnerships, they must consider the resources and capacity of the high school to support such an initiative.
- Given the local contexts that shape students' educational strengths and weaknesses, what are the specific needs of the high school students? How can the program be structured to meet these primary goals?
- Is there appropriate support and resources in the high school to give students the necessary support? How can resources from other educational institutions be harnessed to support the research collaboration?
- Is the high school teacher well-versed in social science research to be able to structure effective student learning of the research process? If not, how can college educators provide supplemental knowledge to aid in building the curriculum and assisting in daily instruction?

² While this article is primarily focused on high school sociology, we believe that instructors of undergraduate research methods courses can also benefit from being reflexive about the characteristics and social context of their student body. Additionally, undergraduate instructors could also benefit from making the responsibilities and expectations of students and instructors explicit and clear. Lastly, undergraduate research methods students would also greatly benefit academically, professionally, and personally from being required to submit and possibly present their work at academic conferences.

- What is the timeline? How can the program be structured such that high school students have the optimal time necessary to meet external deadlines?
- What should be the roles of the university mentors and the high school instructor? The initiators of the program should create clear guidelines regarding the desired roles of the students, high school teachers, and college mentors, and clearly communicate those goals to each of the participants.
- In what other ways can the university support independent high school research? What additional resources can the university provide, for example, financial support, external funding, and forums to practice public speaking?

We are confident that interested institutions – both high schools and universities alike – can put these suggestions to use in establishing unique partnerships that bring applied social sciences to the high school classroom.

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