Sociology Department’s Plan for Meeting the Requirement for Spoken, Visual, and Written Communication

1. Departmental Goals and Objectives

The undergraduate program in Sociology is designed to provide students with a basic knowledge of sociology, which involves the discovery, integration, dissemination, and application of the principles that govern human relations and social life. The program aims to develop students’ ability to critically analyze social structures and processes; to apply sociological concepts, principles, theories, and methods to practical problems; and to give students an opportunity to obtain more specialized knowledge in an area of concentration (crime/deviance, social inequality, or workplace relations). In addition, students learn the basic techniques of quantitative and qualitative research methods and acquire the ability to critically evaluate research findings.

The Sociology Department believes that given the diverse career paths that sociology graduates follow, they need to acquire proficiency in written, spoken, and visual communication. Our alumni hold occupations in law enforcement, social work, human resources, law, and social research firms, as well as in academic sociology. In their occupations, alumni analyze data, write reports, and present information both orally and visually.

Written Communication. Our general goal is for our graduates to write clearly, logically, and analytically, using correct grammar, and to be able to write effectively for diverse audiences. More specifically, by the time that sociology majors graduate, we expect that they will have used writing in numerous ways that relate to the theory and practice of Sociology. Students will have completed formal writing assignments in which they develop their critical thinking skills in analyzing social structures and processes as these impinge on themselves and society; define and provide examples of sociological theory and compare the strengths and weaknesses of various sociological theories; write research reports in which they describe, analyze, and interpret data; and apply sociological concepts, principles, theories, and methods to practical problems. Students’ audiences will include their classmates, faculty members, and other audiences such as community groups.

Spoken Communication. A second important goal for undergraduate Sociology graduates is to develop effective oral communication skills, including both formal and informal oral communication. We want graduates to be able to give oral presentations on a variety of sociological topics to diverse audiences, both expert and non-expert. We also want graduates to be able to informally discuss similar topics. For example, our graduates may well be called upon to discuss professional issues in committee meetings with co-workers, clients, governmental officials, and others.

Visual Communication. A third important goal for undergraduate Sociology majors is to effectively present ideas visually. As part of their training in sociology, students need to gain a basic understanding of, and elementary skills in, social research methods and
data analysis. In Sociology, goals for visual communication chiefly involve developing students’ skills in understanding and visually representing research findings. Specifically, students are expected to use computer programs such as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and Excel to analyze and interpret data that they collect and to present the data in the form of tables, graphs, and charts. Students also are expected to use software such as PowerPoint to present accompanying text.

2. Plan for Developing and Implementing Curriculum to Meet Objectives

The curriculum committee conducted an informal survey of what kinds of assignments our faculty members require of students. This survey indicated that students have numerous opportunities to develop skills in written and spoken communication, and limited opportunities to develop visual skills in visual communication. For example, our Internship, which nearly all our majors take, furthers students’ written and spoken communication skills. (Other majors choose the option of doing independent research, in which they write an extensive research report, typically based on data that they gather.)

In order to ensure that all students develop these communication skills, we will rely most heavily on three required courses:

SOC 3104: Sociological Theory,
SOC 3204: Social Research Methods, and
SOC 4194: Senior Seminar.

Sociology majors vary as to when they take the required 3000-level courses. We note, however, that although SOC 3104: Sociological Theory, and SOC 3204: Social Research Methods are at the 3000 level, students are encouraged to, and usually do, take them by the time they have taken 72 hours. Students must have senior standing to take the Senior Seminar.

Written Communication. Writing is a significant component of all three courses that all Sociology majors must take. SOC 3104, Sociological Theory, is currently designated a Writing Intensive course. Under the new requirement, students will continue to have the same opportunities for writing, getting feedback on their writing, and revising. Specifically, in this course, students have several formal writing assignments and peer review each others’ writing.

In SOC 3204, Social Research Methods (a 4-hour course), students write reports on a research project that they have conducted from start to finish. In addition, they complete numerous other writing assignments. This course helps satisfy our goal for students to write research reports in which they describe, analyze, and interpret data.

In SOC 4194, the Senior Seminar, students will complete several writing assignments. This course will require students to integrate and apply prior coursework, including reviewing theory and research methods. Students also will be asked to apply sociological knowledge toward a needs assessment in a work setting, complete a social
policy analysis, and write a critique of a sociological study. These assignments will ask
students to write for both expert and non-expert audiences.

**Spoken Communication.** Our required courses for sociology majors--Sociological Theory, Social Research Methods, and the Senior Seminar--also help develop students’ skills in spoken communication. In all these courses, students are required to make oral presentations. In these courses and in many other courses in our department, small group discussions and full-class discussions provide our students with multiple opportunities to develop informal oral communication skills.

In addition, students are strongly encouraged to take COMM 2004, Public Speaking, to satisfy one of their requirements for a transferable skill. Because this course is in such high demand, we cannot require students to take it. Nevertheless, a large majority of Sociology majors do take this course.

**Visual Communication.** We will rely primarily on Social Research Methods and the Senior Seminar to develop students’ skills in visual communication. As described above, students will complete assignments in which they use computer programs such as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and Excel to analyze and interpret data. Students will present the data in the form of tables, graphs, and charts in their written reports and in their oral presentations in class. Students also will use software such as PowerPoint to present accompanying text.

**Phasing.** Sociological Theory and Social Research Methods are already taught every semester, and as currently taught, they fulfill most of our departmental goals for spoken and written communication. We foresee making two changes in the existing curriculum to implement the new requirement. First, to achieve our goals in visual communication, we will modify Social Research Methods to systematically incorporate assignments that cultivate students’ skills in that area. Second, we will phase in SOC 4194, the Senior Seminar. This course will be taught every semester beginning in fall, 2005. No new in-major courses are needed to achieve departmental goals in the three areas of communication, and no courses are needed outside the major.

3. **Plan for Assessing Outcomes**

The Sociology Department will assess students’ effectiveness in written, spoken, and visual communication by three means. First, the department will use data collected on students in SOC 4194, the Senior Seminar. In this course, students will compile a portfolio that will contain examples of formal writing and presentations of data in the form of tables, graphs, and charts, with accompanying text. As in our previous assessment, a committee of faculty members will review and evaluate students’ work. In addition, students will make oral presentations to the faculty that faculty members will evaluate.

Second, in connection with the Senior Seminar, students will complete a survey that asks students how well they have achieved success in developing their skills in spoken,
visual, and written communication. The survey also will ask questions about students’ achievements concerning the specific substantive objectives listed in our departmental assessment. The department will supplement the data from these surveys with exit interviews with graduating seniors.

Third, the Sociology Department will supplement these assessments of students’ effectiveness in spoken, visual, and written communication by using data on Sociology alumni from the Virginia Tech Survey of Degree Candidates. In that survey, students are asked how well they have achieved success in developing their “ability to write well,” their “ability to speak well and give oral presentations,” and their “skill in using computers.” In the future, we hope that these surveys also will ask student about their ability to communicate visually, given the new requirement.
Figure 1. Sociology Department’s Plan for Meeting the Requirement for Spoken, Visual, and Written Communication: The Role of Required Courses

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time location in student’s program:</td>
<td>Usually during the Sophomore year</td>
<td>Usually during the Junior year</td>
<td>During the Senior year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written communication skills?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoken communication skills?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual communication skills?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: See text for discussion of what written, spoken, and visual communication skills we regard as most important for Sociology graduates.
Figure 2. Sociology Department’s Plan for Meeting the Requirement for Spoken, Visual, and Written Communication: The Role of Elective Sociology Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written communication skills?</th>
<th>Crime and Deviance Concentration Courses(^1)</th>
<th>Internship(^2)</th>
<th>Other Sociology Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoken communication skills?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual communication skills?</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

1. Crime and Deviance is an optional concentration that a large majority of Sociology students complete. To complete this concentration, students are required to take at least four of the following courses: Social Problems (SOC 2004), Deviant Behavior (SOC 2404), Criminology (SOC 3414), Juvenile Delinquency (SOC 3424), Sociology of Law (SOC 4404), and Sociology of Mental Illness (SOC 4714). In addition, they are required to take at least two courses from a list of about 17 courses offered in other departments that our Crime and Deviance Committee has selected as relevant to this concentration.

2. Nearly all Sociology majors do an Internship.