Why a Sociology Major?

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A college education leaves the graduate better prepared for career and citizenship. Certainly we must believe that if we continue to value college enough to spend the time and money that goes into a four-year baccalaureate. But what precisely are the new attainments that the college curriculum makes possible for the student?

Consider sociology. There were 26,500 sociology baccalaureate degrees awarded in 2009 in U.S. universities, and certainly many times that number of students who were taking courses in sociology or pursuing a major or minor in the field. Forty three percent of those degrees were awarded to students of color -- up from 30 percent in 1995. (These data are reported on the website of the American Sociological Association.) So there are a lot of sociology graduates. But why is this a good thing? In what ways is it valuable for undergraduates to major in sociology? What does this discipline contribute to the undergraduate's knowledge and skills when it comes to preparation for a productive career and life as a citizen and leader in a rapidly changing world?

The most basic justification for a liberal education is the idea that these disciplines help students gain important qualities of mind that lay the foundations they will need for productive and innovative lives -- rigor, critical reasoning, creativity, communications skills, ethical capacities, respect for human diversity, and the like. Martha Nussbaum describes these ideals in Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education. So how does sociology fit into that idea? What are the qualities of mind that a sociology education cultivates?

One good way to address this question is to ask a sociology professor. What do sociology professors expect their graduates to have gained from the experience? I asked this question of Alford Young, chair of the department of sociology at the University of Michigan. Al is a talented and productive sociologist whose research concerns the experience of young African-American men. His recent book, The Minds of Marginalized Black Men: Making Sense of Mobility, Opportunity, and Future Life Chances, is an important contribution to the fields of cultural sociology and the sociology of race and poverty. (Here is a post on this innovative book.) And Al has thought long and hard about what he hopes that undergraduate sociology students will learn from the experience.
AI begins with the fact that sociology students learn some of the organized and rigorous methods that contemporary sociologists use to understand the contemporary social world. They learn about statistical reasoning, qualitative research, and sociological theory, and these skills provide them with a foundation for understanding the social world around them throughout their lives. But there is more to it than this. AI argues that the contemporary social world is one in which patterns of power and hierarchy are constantly changing, and it is very important for well educated young people to have the tools to piece together their own understandings of how these social forces work. Here is AI's summary:

Sociology is the discipline that gives the greatest attention to social difference -- social hierarchy, the relevance of social power in everyday life. Sociology allows for consideration of things that are not immediately visible in our ordinary lives, and often not neatly understandable. These things are relevant to how social life is structured and organized. We need to look beyond people's individual motivations or their psychological foundations and gain a better understanding of how people's social location with regard to gender or race influences their thinking and behavior. We often don't notice those factors and how they influence us and the opportunities we have. These matter very much in ordinary life. This comes down to several convincing points. First, sociology is a scientific discipline. It teaches students to use empirical data to understand current social realities. And sociologists use a variety of empirical research methods, from quantitative research to qualitative methods, to comparative and historical studies. Students who study sociology as undergraduates will certainly be exposed to the use of statistics as a method for representing and analyzing complex social phenomena; they will also be exposed to qualitative tools like interviews, focus groups, and participant-observer data. So a sociology education helps the student to think like a social scientist -- attentive to facts, probing with hypotheses, offering explanations, critical in offering and assessing arguments for conclusions.

Second, the content of sociology is particularly important in our rapidly changing social world. Sociology promises to provide data and theory that help to better understand the human and social realities we confront. Moreover, the discipline is defined around the key social issues we all need to understand better than we currently do, and our policy makers need to understand if they are to design policies that allow for social progress: for example, race, poverty, urbanization, inequalities, globalization, immigration, environmental change, gender, power, and class. We might say that an important part of the value of a sociology education is that it gives the student a better grasp of the dynamics of these key social processes.

So sociology is indeed a valuable part of a university education. It provides a foundation for better understanding and engaging with the globalizing world our young people will need to navigate and lead. It provides students with the intellectual tools needed to make sense of the shifting and conflictual social world we live in, and this in turn permits them to contribute to solutions for the most difficult social problems that we face.

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