

# Engaging Students in Survey Research Projects across Research Methods and Statistics Courses

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## Abstract

One innovative way to help students make sense of survey research has been to create a multifaceted, collaborative assignment that promotes critical thinking, comparative analysis, self-reflection, and statistical literacy. We use a short questionnaire adapted from the Higher Education Research Institute's Cooperative Institutional Research Program's Freshman Survey. In our Research Methods course, students begin by administering the brief questionnaire to a small, nonrandom sample of students at our university. They analyze the data descriptively and compare their "results" to the national trends as part of their required course homework. These data are then quantitatively analyzed throughout all homework exercises the next semester during their statistics course. This collaborative effort bridges methods, statistics, and capstone courses, helping students connect the courses and develop a deeper understanding, awareness and appreciation of the utility of preestablished instruments for collecting primary data and for assessing the meaning of secondary data.

## Keywords

survey research, research methods, social statistics, quantitative methods, active learning

A wealth of research exists summarizing the importance of student engagement in the discipline of sociology. This engagement has increasingly included approaches that utilize "learning by doing" (Takata and Leiting 1987), experiential learning (Markham 1991), and collaborative learning groups (Delucchi 2006). A movement to incorporate more diverse approaches to teaching marketable skills assumes that students who employ classroom skills to their everyday lives are both more likely to retain those skills and to be more successful in the job market.

Scholars have argued that experiential learning approaches may be particularly useful for the teaching of sociological methods and statistics (Atkinson and Hunt 2008). Given the levels of student anxiety that often accompany enrollment in social statistics courses and methods courses that focus on quantitative

methods, some have proposed that students will better learn these methods in courses that focus on substantive issues. While Bridges et al. (1998) present a within-subjects "experiment" as evidence that incorporating quantitative research methods into substantive topic-based courses may improve mastery, their sample and analyses were limited to a single academic term.

The American Sociological Association (ASA) itself has argued for a broader incorporation of research methods training into each department's

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curriculum. The ASA Integrating Data Analysis project sought to expand the use of research and research methods at all levels of student learning, with a focus on encouraging students to personally engage in the collection and analysis of data (Howery and Rodriguez 2006). An important part of this project was the systematic development, at the department level, of institutionalized practices that create norms for undergraduate methods instruction both within a research methods/statistics sequence and across the curriculum. One practice for achieving this is known as *inquiry-guided learning* (Atkinson and Hunt 2008).

Within inquiry-guided learning, instructors model scholarly practices for students, who then engage in these practices and report on their experiences (Scarboro 2004). While this may seem to simply echo earlier learning-by-doing approaches, Atkinson and Hunt (2008) propose that inquiry-guided learning allows students to critically examine the learning experience and engage in active problem solving beyond a simple application of what they have been taught. Both basic recall and higher-order thinking are reinforced with each assignment (Atkinson, Wills, and McClure 2005).

## SEQUENCING OF SELECT CORE SOCIOLOGY CLASSES

Here we propose that engaging students in an ongoing data collection effort that spans semesters and requires application of multiple skills achieves many of the goals of the Integrating Data Analysis project. First, by sequencing research methods prior to statistics, our department's core curriculum provides students with basic understandings of problems and solutions sociologists have identified in the collection of empirical data. Assignments show students how different forms of observation expand the breadth and depth of sociological knowledge. This is consistent with research showing the effectiveness of incorporating survey research into courses to promote active learning (Longmore, Dunn, and Jarboe 1996). For example, Glass (2015) showed that allowing students to use mobile technology to conduct survey research enhanced student engagement and led students to see their work as meaningful. Strangfeld (2013) also found that students felt they made more important contributions to their statistics classroom when they were engaged in each stage of data gathering. However, unlike in courses where assignments are limited to a single semester, the data students gather in our research methods course carry over as part of a larger data collection effort. Students

enrolling in our statistics course therefore understand the context in which the data they analyze have been collected and are already familiar with what the data mean. Our curriculum builds an infrastructure that allows us to address the relationship between methods and analysis and to prepare students with meaningful practice using sociological methods. By modeling research for students, we focus students on conceptual understandings (Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003) rather than rote memorization.

## Our Departmental Model

This research was conducted at a midwestern regional university with approximately 8,500 students. The student body was 68 percent white as of fall 2015, with African American students making up 17 percent and the remainder of the student body made up of Latino, Native American, Asian, international, and non-identified students. Our department consists of 15 faculty, two of whom have taught research methods and one of whom teaches the statistics course. Approximately 250 sociology majors are enrolled, and all are required to take a sequence of core courses, including research methods and statistics. We offer two sections of a three-credit research methods course every semester and two sections of a four credit statistics course with a lab component every semester. We enroll about 120 students in these two classes each academic year.

We suspected several years ago that students in these core courses struggle with content carried over from one class to the next. In an attempt to resolve this content "silo" effect within our research methods and statistics courses, we implemented a course sequence and now require all students to successfully complete research methods prior to completing statistics. We have also developed strategic ways to create one overarching applied research experience across both courses with the hope of enhancing content carryover and knowledge retention in these courses.

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH METHODS AND STATISTICS

We began by revamping the research methods experience. Previously, students in the research methods class were exposed to the research process and required to write an independent research proposal on a topic of their choosing. They would

choose the methodology, evaluate all ethical considerations, and develop an instrument for data collection but were not initially required to actually collect any data. Sometimes these projects were completed individually, and other times these were completed in groups. In hindsight, we feel that this type of assignment lacked any real-world application or tangible research experience. We discussed and attempted other variations of this type of assignment with no greater success. When later iterations of the course required students to develop the proposal and collect data, we experienced consistent problems with the quality of information, small sample sizes, and other methodological issues that commonly prevented meaningful analysis. Data collection and analysis was also incredibly difficult to accomplish in one semester.

### *Research Methods Design*

In 2013, we created a short questionnaire, adapted from the 2011 Higher Education Research Institute's Cooperative Institutional Research Program's Freshman Survey, most recently used in 2015 (Eagan et al. 2015; Pryor et al. 2011). With student input, we selected a small cluster of meaningful demographic and academic questions that were of relevance to the students and that could be analyzed in several ways. Students completed training in the course to ensure proper protections of human subjects and ethical research guidelines, and the course was certified through the university's institutional review board.

Once training was completed, the students began the class survey research project by administering the brief questionnaire to a select, small, nonrandom sample of student colleagues at our university. In subsequent semesters, the research participants were screened and not permitted to complete the questionnaire if they had participated a previous semester. Each student was responsible for collecting 10 to 12 completed questionnaires. They were then required to code and enter their data into a spreadsheet provided to them and to use a standardized, preestablished coding scheme. At this point in the project, we were able to have engaging class discussions about the selection of questions, reliability and validity, coding for answers beyond what we anticipated, the creation of dummy variables, and how we might have asked questions more effectively. Students do not appear uncomfortable critiquing the questionnaire, possibly because they do not create the questions. This has proven to be a very useful class activity, one that the students consistently enjoy.

The final step of the project was for the students to produce a two- to three-page written analysis that synthesizes their work. They were required to discuss relevant dependent variables, independent variables, and a testable hypothesis (variable based and directional) that they identified at the outset of the project, discuss what they expected to find, and discuss their sampling technique and alternatives. They also completed a basic univariate and bivariate analysis consisting of cross-tabulations to measure association, compared their findings to the national trends in the official Freshman Survey, discussed methodological critiques, and offered personal reflections on the project.

The next class project was a qualitative follow-up to the survey research assignment. Our reasoning for a qualitative follow-up using the same instrument was to show students the limits of the interpretability of quantitative data for answering certain questions. By doing so, we aim to help students avoid overgeneralization in research reports completed in the subsequent statistics course. The students individually were to select five of the original 10 "social issues" questions from the Freshman Survey and create open-ended interview questions. They chose five of the following:

What are your views regarding . . .

1. the legalization of abortion?
2. the legalization of marijuana?
3. racial discrimination being a problem in America?
4. same-sex couples having the right to legal marital status?
5. federal military spending being increased?
6. undocumented immigrants having access to public education?
7. students from disadvantaged social backgrounds and preferential treatment in college admissions?
8. a national health care plan to cover everyone's medical costs?
9. global warming being a federal priority?
10. the chief benefit(s) of a college education?

They selected four individual participants, which could be the same participants as the survey research project, to be interviewed. They completed in class training on proper interviewing techniques and how to effectively take field notes during the interviews. Once the interviews were completed, they completed a basic coding of the qualitative information from their field notes. Next, they discussed what they expected to find, identified common

themes or story lines, compared the qualitative findings to their survey research findings and to the national survey trends in the Freshman Survey, discussed methodological critiques, and offered personal reflections on the research process. The second project allowed the class to collectively and critically compare two different methodological options available to the researcher. The students have consistently reported that they can “see” the difference and often end up favoring one method over another, even over the short duration of their experiences. This, too, has proven to be a very useful class activity.

At the completion of the semester, the professor merged and cleaned all the student data into one large data file. These data (approximately 500 to 700 cases each semester) are then quantitatively analyzed the next semester during their statistics course. At the present time, we have successfully completed six rounds of data collection. Our data set consists of 621 cases in spring 2013, 599 cases in fall 2013, 517 cases in spring 2014, 745 cases in fall 2014, 499 cases in spring 2015, and 504 cases in fall 2015 for a total of 3,485 cases over six semesters.

Students were given detailed instructions regarding the structure of their answers to the quantitative survey methods assignment. A grading rubric was included as well as an example assignment to help students structure their answers. This rubric included additional guidelines to promote high-quality work. Of the 52 students who completed the assignment, 45 (86 percent) were exceptional (a grade of A) or above average (a grade of B). The average grade on the survey assignment grade in academic year 2015–2016 was 90 percent. These grades include students who completed the assignment and suggest that students who were engaged with the course did very well on the assignment.

### *Statistics Design*

In social statistics course, from the first class meeting through the final exam, the survey data that were collected, entered, and aggregated during the student’s previous semester in research methods play a central role in the course objectives. The professor teaching and planning this statistics course, using SPSS as the main data analysis program, cleans the data (e.g., removes errant entries), uploads it into SPSS, and combines it with the previously collected survey data.

Because statistics is often taken as a requirement, not an elective, and due to historically understood elevated levels of anxiety among students

(Blalock 1987; Garfield and Ben-Zvi 2007), having familiar themes coming through the database in a small but meaningful way anchors students to their previous work. The statistics course requirement has two components: three hours per week of classroom lecture and two hours per week of applied work time using SPSS in a computer lab. The lecture remains more formal where key concepts, theories, and formulas are presented and discussed, whereas the lab time is focused on student applications of lecture materials. During the first week of the semester in the first lab meeting, students are reintroduced to the survey they previously administered, are asked to explore the database while learning how to use SPSS, are tasked with generating basic descriptive statistics, and then discuss these data in a formal manner.

Prior to this collaborative project, the statistics course was taught using relevant, albeit detached, data for both lecture and lab sessions. For example, the ASA’s Bachelor’s and Beyond Survey student data set (ASA Research and Development Department 2010) provided some relevant examples of the trajectory of a sociology student for use in basic and advanced methods. This set was supplemented with standard exercises and examples found within the course text (Healey 2012). While adequate, these data and exercises suffered from being detached from the students themselves and their own experiences in their sociology curriculum.

Under this collaboration, the data collected by the students are structured purposefully in the weekly assignments to utilize the breadth of the questions across all three levels of measurement: nominal, ordinal, and interval ratio. Moreover, as each classroom topic builds on previous material, each lab assignment builds on previous applications. For example, in the second week of the course, students are asked to generate simple frequency distributions for six variables, two at each level of measurement. The purpose of doing this is for students to understand how to read such output but also to see how the respondents to the survey—several of whom the students themselves encountered during data collection—in the aggregate are distributed across the various response categories. In the following two lab assignments, these same data are then employed to calculate important descriptive statistics, such as percentage change from one semester to the next, the ratio of one category to another, and measures of central tendency.

As the semester progresses toward inferential topics, such as the standard deviation, *Z*-scores, sampling distributions, and hypothesis testing, the

potential analyses with which each of the survey's variables can be utilized become progressively familiar and clear. For examples, students use the same interval-ratio variables—grade point average, number of study hours, age—to compare confidence intervals for differently sized random samples, one-sample and independent-sample hypothesis testing, and ANOVAs. The independent variables for these exercises incorporate the range of nominal and ordinal variables available in the data. For instance, using the dependent variable of the respondent's reported number of hours studying for classes, one-sample hypothesis tests compare the mean hours of female students with the overall number of hours in the population of the data set, independent-sample hypothesis tests look at differences in the mean study hours based on whether the respondent identifies as racially white or as a student of color, and ANOVAs look at differences in mean study hours based on the students' class ranking (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate student).

Finally, these data are incorporated into the penultimate course requirement, a full data analysis paper, which begins with a descriptive univariate analysis of both an independent and a dependent variable. This is followed by the student writing about proper and improper inferential tests based on the level of measurement of their data, the description of both the null and research hypothesis of their test, and finally how they used SPSS to test the relationship between their variables and a discussion of their conclusion and results. Over the academic year for which this project has been fully implemented, 94 students completed both the Methods and Statistics course thus using data that they both collected and analyzed. Of these 94 students, 79 (84 percent) of the final papers were determined to be exceptional (a grade of an A) or above average (a grade of a B).

Prior to this integrative assignment and the use of their own data, the final analysis assignment used secondary data sets from the such sources as the Bachelor's and Beyond Survey student data set (ASA Research and Development Department 2010), a student textbook supplement of the 2008 General Social Survey (Healey 2012), and series collected through the Population Reference Bureau's (2012) *World Population Data Sheet*.

## RETROSPECTIVE ACCOUNTS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The capstone course asks students to put the skills they have learned in research methods and

statistics to practical use. Therefore, we approached students in this course during the spring 2016 semester to assess their perceptions regarding the sequence of courses in the department. We also asked similar questions of students enrolled in the statistics course during the same semester. Those in the capstone course had already completed the research methods/statistics sequence and were able to provide insight into the usefulness of the sequence for the major as a whole. Those in statistics were able to answer questions regarding their recent experiences in research methods and offer insight about ways in which the courses complement each other. Our assessment instrument and research design was approved by our university's institutional review board. We explained to students that their participation was voluntary and all information collected was completely anonymous.

Six questions were given to the students in the capstone course. Questions were open-ended and administered on a sheet of paper during class time. The questions posed to students were as follows:

1. In research methods you were asked to collect quantitative data using a survey. How useful was this assignment for preparing you for the statistics course?
2. Out of all of the skills taught in research methods, which skills do you feel were most valuable to you as a sociology major?
3. In statistics you were asked to complete several assignments using the quantitative data collected in research methods. How useful were these assignments in preparing you for the current issues course?
4. Out of all of the skills taught in statistics, which skills do you feel were most valuable to you as a sociology major?
5. If you were to describe the value of research methods and statistics courses to a new student, how would you do that?
6. Do the research methods and statistics courses complement Each other? If so, how? If not, why not?

Thirty-five students returned questionnaires from the capstone course. Of these, 31 (88.5 percent) explicitly stated that the research methods course was useful for preparing them for statistics and 13 (42 percent) articulated specifically how. Among those who gave specific answers, some wrote about how the research methods course introduced them to the jargon or concepts they would need for statistics. For instance, one such student noted,

Research methods prepared me for some of the statistical lingo I encountered in the statistics course. I think some practice using SPSS prior to stats is a huge help to students. Actually collecting and analyzing data was also beneficial for me.

Other students focused on how the survey assignment allowed them to understand the meaning behind statistics they were generating in the statistics course. This is conveyed by one student saying that "it provided me with a strong contextual background on how surveys and resulting analyses work so that I didn't feel like I was crunching meaningless numbers. Very helpful."

Twenty-nine (83 percent) of these students also stated that the statistics course was helpful for preparing them for the capstone course, in which they are expected to critically evaluate research. One of the key uses of this course, according to capstone students, was that it provided them with the ability to judge the reliability and validity of statistics they encountered in newspapers and research articles. As stated by one student,

I honestly never questioned (before the course) stats that I would hear or read. I automatically assumed they were right. Now I have to look at different aspects in order to know if the statistic is truly valid information.

Additionally, several students noted the usefulness of learning research methods, statistics, and SPSS, not just for the capstone course but as a general skill they believed would make them better graduate candidates or more marketable to employers. This can be seen in the following student statement:

They are very valuable because most graduate courses require either or both classes as a requirement, also most employers have either or both as a requirement for the jobs.

Four questions were given to students enrolled in the statistics course, excluding two questions that were specific to the capstone course. Once again, the questions were open-ended and administered on a sheet of paper during class time. The questions posed to students were the following:

1. In research methods you were asked to collect quantitative data using a survey. How useful was this assignment for preparing you for the statistics course?

2. Out of all of the skills taught in statistics, which skills do you feel were most valuable to you as a sociology major?
3. If you were to describe the value of research methods and statistics courses to a new student, how would you do that?
4. Do the research methods and statistics courses complement each other? If so, how? If not, why not?

Forty-two students returned questionnaires from the statistics course. Seventeen (40.5 percent) students enrolled in the statistics course explicitly stated that the statistics course is applicable to everyday life. The remainder of students who articulated specific responses focused on the usefulness of both courses for interpreting statistics in school and helping them get through the major. While 39 (93 percent) students reported the research methods and statistics courses complemented each other, some students questioned how much this was the case, aside from the use of the survey assignment:

The two courses complement each other in the sense of using the data that was collected in research methods. But statistics does not rely on the terms learned from research methods. Statistics does build on the usage of the data sampling we began to do in research methods with the assignments following the data collection.

Students currently enrolled in the statistics course held similar views as the capstone students in noting the usefulness of learning research methods, statistics, and SPSS, not just for the capstone course but as a general skill they believed would make them better graduate candidates or more marketable to employers. Students from both classes noted they would tell a new student that the sequence would help them in school, on the job, and in everyday life. For instance, one student said, "I would describe it like it is, it makes you feel like an actual social scientist. The process makes you feel like this is what you do for a living and helps you understand what it could be in the future for you." Further, responses suggested students were investing in their major and perceiving it as improving their lives.

## CONCLUSION

We believe that the model we describe has real and noticeable benefits to our students. Although far

from perfect, it is a collaborative effort that creates a tangible link between our research methods, statistics, and capstone courses. Among other things, we assert that our model helps students connect the courses to one another and promotes understanding, awareness, and appreciation of methodological and statistical techniques and literacy, and increases their experience using these techniques in real-world applications. While anecdotal evidence suggests our students' anxiety regarding statistics is lessened by this sequence, this is not fully assessed. However, student reports and student achievement, which we do report, show students gain a competent understanding of the contexts in which the data they analyze have been collected and become familiar with what the data mean. Our curriculum builds an infrastructure that allows us to address the relationship between methods and analysis and prepare students with meaningful practice using sociological skills both in and out of the classroom. We believe this is clearly an improvement upon our previously designed core and is much more empowering for our students.

We encourage faculty to thoughtfully consider the structure of their curriculum and the placement of the core, making sure to consider and address issues of student disengagement and anxiety with many of these courses, namely, theory, research methods, and statistics. If across-course collaborative learning is possible and specific links can be developed and sustained across multiple courses, we feel strongly that it will improve student comprehension of core material, decrease anxiety and stress that they often experience, and enhance their understanding of the value of their degree beyond the classroom.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Reviewers of this manuscript were, in alphabetical order, David Blouin, Christopher Scheitle, and Esther Wilder.

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