

“Broad global statement about program goals” =

Fifty years ago C. Wright Mills wrote that those who acquire the *sociological imagination* “come to feel as if suddenly awakened ... They acquire a new way of thinking.” This way of thinking “is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two.” The sociological imagination helps people to understand the relations between “personal troubles” and “public issues of social structure” and as such “the sociological imagination [is] our most needed quality of mind.”

The substantive goal of sociology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst is to help students and a larger public to acquire a twenty-first century sociological imagination, and to apply that imagination both to an analysis of personal lives and to broad historical transformations. Understanding the structures of a global society, the dangers of an economic crisis, or the complexities of jobs and families, a system of justice and systems of religion is not only an academic task for our faculty and students but also a practical task for our students in their years beyond graduation. In today’s world, a sociological imagination is central to understanding the diversity of race, gender, class, and sexuality. We cannot understand our own biographies, or larger historical and structural processes, without a rich and deep understanding of the ways these factors shape our lives, even if – perhaps especially if – these forces are largely invisible to us and to others.

Nor is it enough to grasp these factors one at a time, as if they operated in isolation. The “intersectionality” of race, gender, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality creates new realities, over and above the understanding we might get through an additive model that looked at the effects of race, plus the effects of gender, plus the effects of class, each considered individually.

The sociological imagination requires an engagement both with the ways social structures shape our actions, and with the role of individual choice, or agency. Individuals exercise choice as they develop, form and dissolve families, and progress through work careers. Agency operates as well in larger social movements and political structures, as well as in crime, law, and deviance.

The sociological imagination is not, as the name might imply, a question of imagination in the abstract. That imagination must be grounded in evidence, evidence which may take a range of forms from examples and stories to systematic assessments and quantitative analyses. Facts must be given meaning and significance by becoming parts of larger arguments. These ideas must be analyzed rigorously, written clearly, and communicated effectively.

Articulated student learning objectives:

- write clearly and communicate effectively
- understand social construction, social structures and processes
- show awareness of the diversity of both the United States and a global society
- demonstrate awareness of the connections between personal biography and the larger social structure
- evaluate both qualitative and quantitative evidence
- form arguments and connect evidence to arguments