

SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

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Using Sociology to Improve Campus Life and Gain Marketable Skills

I did not become a sociologist to live in an ivory tower. Rather, I envisioned busting down the castle gate and doing work that would have a positive impact. As a result of my orientation to sociology, I created a “Public Sociologies” course in which students learn skills relevant to their careers and lives—gathering and analyzing data to understand and address social issues on our campus and in the wider community. One issue my students have worked on is interpersonal violence on campus. Students can play an important role in preventing such violence through a variety of strategies. For example, they might personally intervene if they see a couple arguing, call a resource who can diffuse the situation (such as a resident assistant or campus safety officer), or simply state their discomfort when a friend talks about women in a sexist way.

A number of bystander intervention training programs now attempt to teach these skills. Our campus chose to use the Green Dot program, a violence prevention program that focuses on peers and culture. My students and I agreed that we would help our Women’s Center to evaluate the effectiveness of the Green Dot program. To do this, my students had to learn and then use research and evaluation skills.

My students designed the initial survey instrument and tested the survey with a diverse sample of their fellow students so that they could refine the measures. The following spring, my class fielded the baseline wave of the survey. They came up with a sampling strategy (using randomly selected course sections) and went through the approval process with our Institutional Review Board (IRB) to make sure that we protected our human subjects. The

students distributed the surveys and entered all of the data into a computer program. Finally, we did statistical analysis of the data and prepared a report for our Women’s Center and the Public Prevention and Education Committee of the New Jersey Governor’s Advisory Council Against Sexual Assault.

Students in the sociology major worked on this project for over 3 years, eventually gathering three waves of data from over 1,000 students about their experiences with interpersonal violence, as well as their intentions to intervene to prevent violence. An important finding was that 1 in 5 of our female students and 1 in 10 of our male students had experienced interpersonal violence. Even more striking, two thirds of our students knew someone who had experienced interpersonal violence. We were also able to provide evidence that students who had received Green Dot training were more likely to intervene as active bystanders than students who had not. Being able to show the prevalence of the issue and the effectiveness of our prevention strategy were important for securing institutional resources to expand the program.

Through this experience, “Public Sociologies” students were able to engage in an important evaluation project that helped them develop real-world research skills. A number of my students have gone on to work in jobs that require them to consume and produce research and to bridge theory and practice (e.g., social workers, police officers, and market researchers, to name a few). You can too!

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Kristin Kenneavy is an associate professor of sociology at Ramapo College of New Jersey, where she works closely with the Center for Student Involvement to promote community-based learning and scholarship and continues to research interpersonal violence prevention.