Studying Social Class:
Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Learning

By Allen Mauney and Sarah Ryan

Program: Class in the United States

From fall 2009 to winter 2010, students in the program engaged in original quantitative and qualitative research to contribute to their understanding of social class and to provide the institution with data relevant to class issues in the Evergreen community. Students used classic and contemporary texts as models of social science work, formulated hypotheses, and used appropriate statistical methods to test their results. The program's quantitative outcomes were not dictated by the table of contents of a textbook, but emerged organically from the questions that students formulated.

I. Introduction and Overview

 "Truly amazing," said Nobel-winning economist Paul Krugman, when he looked at the staggering gains made by the richest .01% of population in recent years.[1] With inequality at near-record levels, we began an interdisciplinary inquiry into social class at a time when unemployment was at record levels since the 1930s and millions had lost homes and wealth they would never regain. The contemporary debate about the causes of the "Great Recession," and what to do about it, had to be informed by an understanding that we were living in an increasingly unequal and stratified society. The world of higher education, too, was becoming more unequal as elite schools held on to their status as gatekeepers to privilege and a raft of online and for-profit institutions promoted a costly but impoverished education to poor and working class students.

A college education should lead to a literate citizenship – to graduates who take part in a vigorous public discussion about the causes, consequences, and possible responses to inequality. To have a public voice on these issues, or to go on to a career or academic path that engages them, requires an understanding of the concept of social stratification, or social class. But without quantitative literacy, or even better – quantitative skills – students can't get the full picture or participate in understanding and acting. Social discourse is made clearer when key terms and ideas are defined precisely, or at least in such a way that participants can agree on the subject they are talking about.

The relationship of formal education to quality *private* discourse is regularly overlooked. When friends, neighbors, and co-workers understand their society beyond headlines, soundbites, and tweets, their conversations will prepare them to actively engage as citizens in a democracy. Productive public discourse requires that participants have already thought about and discussed relevant issues.

Evergreen graduates often lack quantitative skills, since they can choose their own programs and courses without distribution requirements, as Evergreen's transcript review group recently observed. But curricula can be designed that appeals to students' interest in a generative concept or controversy, like social class, and embeds quantitative methods as integral to understanding.

In the Fall of 2009 and Winter of 2010, Allen Mauney and Sarah Ryan taught a half-time academic program called, "Class in the United States," approaching the question of social class and inequality with statistical and sociological concepts and tools. Our purposes were two: first, to see if social class is (still?) a valid and useful concept to help us understand our society, and, second, to employ statistical methods to quantify differences between groups or strata. The key to integrating conceptual and quantitative tools would be a big, class-wide research project: designing, administering, and analyzing a survey of Evergreen students about social class.

We took into consideration our students' need for quantitative curriculum and their current high demand for statistics. As a result of the growing emphasis on quantitative research in the social sciences, graduate programs in many disciplines require statistics as a pre-requisite; our school's own Master of Public Administration program is one of these. Statistics courses in Evening and Weekend Studies are always full with waiting lists, yet, paradoxically, undergraduates with a social science emphasis are likely to have avoided quantitative methods in their Evergreen programs. Our program, Class in the U.S., was designed to appeal to those interested in either inequality or statistics, but not necessarily both. We imagined, more than was actually the case, that the statistics credits would be the program's main appeal. As it turns out, we had quite a few math-avoiding students.

Our class was conducted each Saturday, for two quarters, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The participants were a fairly typical of Evening and Weekend students: most worked full time, and their ages ranged from 19 to 50-something. During both fall and winter quarters, a fairly large number, 8-10, were in their first quarter at Evergreen, so it was their first experience with interdisciplinary study.

Students used a popular book on statistics rather than a traditional textbook. The conversational tone of book suggested that quantitative methods can be used by the general, educated public and not just students headed for graduate school or research. Allen wrote workshops that focused on tasks and techniques that would later be employed in the survey. During the fall quarter, our seminar texts introduced social class as a concept and as a contradiction in a county whose political ideals deny the existence of rigid hierarchies. The New York Times book, *Class Matters*, focused on growing inequality and how class has evolved over the last few decades. We included monographs, also, that focused on particular classes – the "Power Elite" (C. Wright Mills' book of the same name), the professional middle class (Barbara Ehrenreich's *Fear of Falling*), and the working class (Michael Zweig's *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*). Over the fall, our goals were to introduce statistical methods and the use of Excel, to give students time to think about and reach their own definitions of social classes, and to consider whether social class lines were problematic and present in our immediate community.

In the second quarter, we used a text that modeled a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative analysis – Oliver and Shapiro's *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. The authors' methodology and presentation formats were used as a model for the class's work. We read an anthology of key theoretical works on social stratification and a monograph about the way Americans' inability to understand class distorted politics. We used the same statistics book both quarters as well as *How to Conduct Surveys: A Step by Step Guide*, by Arlene Fink. The book was designed so that beginners could write, administer, and evaluate their survey as they read the book. By the end of the second quarter, the students had become data-hungry when reading economic and political analysis. Students better understood the value of case studies, theory, and statistical analysis and were eager to connect their own experience and expertise with the material they were reading. When authors made general

arguments that claimed quantitative authority and persuasive power but did not provide their data, methods, or analysis, the students become suspicious. Their primary complaint about the final book on politics and class was that the author had not provided much quantitative evidence for his thesis.

II. The survey: making the pieces fit together

The centerpiece of the program – and the element that created the interdisciplinary synthesis – was the survey project. This project was the most innovative aspect of the program. The students were assigned, from the beginning, to write, design, test, administer, enter data, and interpret the results of a survey of Evergreen students on the topic of social class. This sounds straightforward enough, but it was actually a very complex process to write the questions. What questions do you ask people if you want to know about social class? It's tricky in a country with a widespread notion that "everyone's middle class," and it's particularly tricky when your respondents are students.

The survey required that students take a theory or definition and turn it into a question that a respondent could, and would, answer. To do this, they had to decide if social class was simply a matter of money, or was the notion of "social capital" also important? Did privilege or poverty have signifiers other than income? Does it make any difference for students if they are from working class families, rather than middle class ones? Would they find the same patterns about class and race that authors they read had found? How could they get answers that could be quantified and analyzed?

Students had to take their own observations about class, the authors' definitions and theories, patterns that others had observed, and data from other sources and use these to design questions that could be answered in a 15-minute written survey. In traditional textbooks, data are simply made available in appendices, disconnecting students from the sources of the numbers they calculate with. The survey made it tangibly clear that their results were about individuals and groups of people which enhanced their critical reading of the texts in similar ways. The surveying process required that they engage with the authors' work on a much deeper level than simply writing a response paper.

For instance, Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Fear of Falling*, said that the middle class in the U.S. is made up of professionals and managers, not the small shopkeepers of yesterday. This new middle class passes their class status on to their children not through large inheritances but through making sure that their children get college educations. What questions could our survey ask to see how many Evergreen students met this definition of "middle class"?

The survey project made the statistical knowledge connect with an inquiry into our immediate environment. The students experienced working not with someone else's data, but with numbers they had gathered, based on their questions.

In the first quarter of the program, our students really struggled with the process of writing survey questions. They were just beginning to discuss and debate ideas, definitions, and theories of class, so testing them in the immediate community was a difficult process. Some students who were deeply influenced by Marxism strongly felt that the only "correct" answer to the question of how many classes there might be (or how many meaningful differences in status) was simple: two – the capitalist (or ruling) class and everyone else. If you try to operationalize this view in a survey, what do you ask? "Are you a controlling stockholder in a major corporation?" How many would answer "yes"? On the other hand, students who felt that classes might be identified as lower, middle, and upper had a different problem. Would they, or any respondent, want to say s/he was "lower class"? And doesn't "upper class" connote a special kind of lineage, not simply wealth?

One of the authors we read, Paul Fussell, wrote about the cultural indicators of class and how people's taste reveals much about their social status. While the students chuckled in recognition of "types" in this humorous book, they rebelled against the labels and found it hard to write questions about culture and taste that might suggest status. Students were confronted with and clearly recognized social classification schemes and were clearly uncomfortable. By the end of the class, students differentiated between the appropriateness of blind class markers and their reality.

Finally, the student community is very different than other communities one might survey. Those who have the most privilege – those supported by wealthy parents – may have very little "income," as they are not likely to have to work while going to school. College students supported by their families may have little information about income and wealth or be unwilling to reveal it. For our survey, other tests for relative wealth, and for relative poverty, had to be created.

III. Raising the stakes – a public project

Whenever students have a purpose and an audience for their project work, it raises the stakes and adds weight and social responsibility to the task. In order to get a large sample, we, as faculty, had to lean on our colleagues and ask that they give us 15 minutes of class time to survey their programs and courses. The survey was administered by students, who visited programs in pairs, or threes. They wrote, edited, and agreed upon a script with which to introduce the project. The script had to present the survey straightforwardly without creating any reactions that might bias the result. So, their relationships with peers and with faculty were tested in the process of surveying programs. They promised to share the results, so this expectation also weighed upon them as they were entering data and performing analysis. The class had the unique opportunity to scrutinize a current survey being conducted by the Thurston County Economic Development Council. By comparing their work with an undoubtedly very expensive, professional document, the

students were again taken from a text and the classroom to activity in the broader community.

It wasn't until the end of fall quarter that the survey questions began to come together. Students labored in small groups around a general "topic cluster" like "basic demographics," which was age, race, gender, etc., or "financing education" which developed questions about how respondents paid for school.

IV. Statistical techniques and integrated learning

By the end of the quarter, students had substantial experience collecting and organizing large data sets. By seeing and touching large stacks of surveys, students got a tangible sense of their sample size and the scope of their collective undertaking. After working for hours entering piles of data into spreadsheets with 500 rows, students scrutinized the questions, the answers, and their coding schemes sharply. Students remarked that the time that they spent looking at sheet after sheet of questions was a great opportunity to come up with improvements, new questions, and alternate strategies. By looking at scores of results, patterns emerged and groups reported a sense of seeing underlying structure and trends before any formal analysis. This might be comparable to field work where repeated, direct encounters with phenomena give researchers a tentative insight into their subjects.

Students developed strong *working* relationships with their data-entry partners by developing methods that allowed them to efficiently produce excellent results. Using SurveyMonkey would have removed the researchers from their data and kept them from developing the same skills, critique of their own work, and response to the emerging data picture.

In a series of Excel labs and workshops, over the course of the fall quarter, students learned about normal data distributions, measures of central tendency, and measures of validity. They learned what confidence intervals are, why they mattered and how to measure them. They learned how to calculate a margin of error. Before the survey data was available, they practiced creating histograms and entering and formatting data. Substantial emphasis was placed on graphical analysis. By the end of the quarter, the criteria by which the class critiqued graphs and charts grew substantially. Students examined labels, units, scale, format, visibility, audience, and visual flow of the graphic's elements to assess the content and validity of the visual information.

In the winter quarter, we reviewed and repeated some of the fall workshops and then moved to our actual data as the completed surveys came in.

We had an impressively large sample – 531 Evergreen students took the survey. The large sample was important to the validity of our result, but it was also a challenge.

Students had written a survey with nearly 90 questions to be coded, so entering the data was an exercise in mass production management. The surveys were numbered as they came in, and, in teams of two, students coded the responses to 4 or 5 questions onto a master sheet organized by survey number. This took a huge amount of time, but it also reinforced a tendency to economize on the number of questions in future surveys!

Students formed groups to analyze questions around a certain topic. Their group assignment follows:

Assignment for Survey Analysis Groups:

You will choose a broad category of survey questions to analyze, based on your own interests. For instance, you might choose "How race, gender, or sexual orientation relate to class" or "veterans at Evergreen," or another broad question. Then, you'll decide which questions best inform your understanding of that issue and analyze those questions. Your product will be a presentation, and a written report, which includes:

1. Your calculations of at least one confidence interval on a question, at least one hypothesis test (See Lab 1 and the hypothesis test handouts).

2. At least one graph of your data, preferably more.

3. A narrative of a minimum of three pages about your topic. This will include a clear description of the general topic as it relates to social class. It must include references, correctly cited, to at least two of the texts that we've studied over the last two quarters. Your narrative must verbally explain what your data say.

Coming up with questions and hypotheses that could be quantified with the data was the most difficult and rich part of the process for the students. It tested whether they really understood both the sociological theory and the statistical methods.

As the groups worked, they found the value of the large sample, but and they discovered that, for drawing conclusions about Evergreen as a whole, we had oversampled evening and weekend students. Still, they had the right questions and a large enough general sample, to get valid results. The sometimes exhausting work that they did analyzing the questions at hand regularly suggested more questions and more lines of inquiry. Even as the struggled with deadlines, they found time and energy to consider future work. As they gave their reports, most of them had made the conceptual leap well enough to get some very interesting results, and the requirement to work with the texts in the final report caused them to refer back to theories and other people's findings.

Some groups were meticulous in taking a sample group – for instance, students aged 15-24 who worked while going to school – and looking at their class status not only through self-reported status but also through data on parents' education levels and likelihood to have or not have inherited wealth. Groups impressed us with their ability to wrestle with

data that did not conform to their expectations. For instance the group that looked at race, gender, and sexual orientation expected, because of the analysis *in Black Wealth/White Wealth*, to find that African American students would have a lower home ownership rate than white students, but their survey data said the reverse. To explain this, they had to look at the age and work status of respondents. A group looking at differences between Olympia, Tacoma, and Grays Harbor students found no statistically significant difference in the use of food stamps but found dramatic differences in the proportion of each group that reported ever having used a payday loan, which turned out to be a "rich" indicator of status differences.

V. What We Learned – Brief Self-Assessment

The most important lesson of the program was the value of a practical applied project like the survey. It forced students to articulate a response to both the sociological theory and the statistical methods in a way that engaged the community. We certainly learned quite a lot of detail about the management of the data entry and analysis aspect of the project, especially how to manage coding and try to maintain a consistent scale.

We probably should have found a way to deal with the "free rider" problem, with some students not really grasping tests of statistical significance, confidence intervals, or z-scores, but this is a tension we always face. Some students reported that, though they had never done any statistical work before, they became fascinated and relatively confident. Others still remained intimidated and unconfident. Several said that being called upon to help teach others dramatically reinforced their learning. Perhaps the answer lies in requiring a fuller individual portfolio that would include individually-produced calculations and graphs.

It is very likely that students who successfully completed the program will approach future statistical work differently than students who have completed a traditional statistics class. Students in our program have seen that various manipulations can tell them something about questions that they are intimately familiar with. I would expect students from the program to see more theory to lead to tools that provide better or further answers. Traditional students typically have not made that connection.
In integrating and synthesizing quantitative and qualitative approaches, though, nothing works like a big applied project or experiment.

Whether we would do it again? Certainly, after maybe four or five years. The program would probably work as a year-long, as well. Certainly, more analysis could have be done with the data during a third quarter. A group contract during the Spring of 2010 involved seven of the program participants in doing more data analysis, studying stratification in higher education, conducting interviews, editing the winter Class in the U.S. group reports into a cohesive single report, and presenting their work at an academic conference. Similar activities could be at the core of a third quarter.

Finally, we have concluded that quantitative skills can best be embedded in our programs through projects and experiments that engage students in forming the questions and pursuing the answers.

VI. Appendices
1. Sample group report from Winter 2010, attached.
2. Data set, edited report, original survey, and coding guide are all available at: http://blogs.evergreen.edu/classintheus/

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[1] Paul Krugman, The Conscience of a Liberal (blog), New York Times, August 13, 2009