

Research methods class takes hands-on approach

by Pierce Greenberg

Students in Dr. Julie Kmec's undergraduate research methods class spent the fall semester learning — and practicing — various research methods used in sociology. The class culminated with group presentations of audit studies that examined perceptions of race, class, and sexual orientation.

The class's hands-on approach exposes undergraduates to the rigors of data collection and analyses in sociological research.

"I started the class teaching it with PowerPoint slides and doing nothing but PowerPoint lectures," Kmec said. "But they are especially not effective in a methods class where you actually learn best by doing what you're reading about."

Kmec tries to strike a balance between in-class lectures, interactive group assignments, and individual activities.

"I think there's this misconception that what sociologists study is just what we see, and we don't really have any systematic way of collecting data. I even think this is true of the undergrads," Kmec said.

"So I really want them to get their hands dirty in collecting data, because it's really difficult to actually sit and think about how you measure all these concepts we have in sociology, like poverty and inequality and discrimination."

The final assignment involves carrying out an audit study which is a way to measure whether people discriminate against different statuses or groups. For example, one group handed out fake television pilot descriptions and asked people how likely

they were to watch the show. Some people received a pilot that starred a male–female couple, while others received pilots focused on male–male or female–female couples. By changing only the sexual orientation of the couple, the groups could determine whether people had differing perceptions of gay and lesbian couples on TV.

Kmec got the idea for incorporating an audit study into the class after a discussion with Stanford sociologist Shelley Correll. Correll’s work used an audit study of actual employers to show how mothers are penalized in the labor force.

“I talked with her about how you could do [an audit study] in the course of a semester,” Kmec said. “I think I glommed on to that idea.”



Dr. Julie Kmec

Three years ago, a former student from Kmec’s research methods class published the results of his audit study in *Sociological Forum*, an academic journal. Daniel Widner (B.A. 2008), a U.S. veteran, extended the class project to his senior project, before publishing it as a graduate student at the University of South Carolina.

“He came and talked to me about these experiences he had in Iraq... He was very intrigued if people were still biased against individuals from the Muslim world because of what happened in 9/11,” Kmec said. “It was something that stuck with him.”

Widner and co–author Stephen Chicoine found that an Arab American male needed to send twice as many job applications to receive the same number of call–backs as

a white male.

While publishing academic work isn't expected of undergrads, Kmec hopes that the class can teach them important real-world skills.

"If their employer is talking about why profits are low, I'm hoping a little of what they learned in methods helps them understand: What does profit look like? How are we measuring profit? Is it only about money or is it about getting new customers?" Kmec said.

She hopes the class also teaches students to think critically about news stories and other reports they come across.

"If they hear a news headline about poverty growing among American families, I want them to understand: What is poverty? How is the government defining poverty?" Kmec said. "I hope to give them the skills to critically assess where their data is coming from."



Undergraduate students Kendra Bay and Daniel Lilienthal present their research project.

