

## Alumni take multiple paths to career success

*A recent visitor to the sociology department asked me what does a sociologist with a PhD do? After a brief pause, I started my answer providing examples. I am impressed with how diverse the origins and the destinations of our students have been and continue to be. Three alums from different departmental eras, whom we caught up with for this issue—Lyssa Thaden, Michael Sullivan, and Deborah Thorne—illustrate this diversity. They report on their work, their passions, and how sociology took them in quite different career directions. –Don Dillman*

Lyssa L. Thaden (PhD, 2010) Managing Director, AccessLex Institute

As an undergraduate computer science and mathematics education major, I thought my life would lead to teaching. But when I was approached to take a job in the Admissions Office of my alma mater, that trajectory was put on hold as I explored the career side of higher education. What became clear to me (after having had experience as a resident director and working in the president’s office for my work–study assignment, as well) was that colleges were interesting organizations. And I wasn’t entirely sure that we were being as effective as we could be as it related to my passion areas of access and affordability of those higher education dreams of many students.



That led me to pursuing a master’s degree in organizational leadership. It was in my research methods class—led by a sociology faculty member—that I found significant interest in the way that sociology approached education. Throwing my professional career to the wind, I applied to a number of sociology programs and ultimately landed at WSU for one really clear reason: the faculty were approachable,

doors were actually open during my visit, and students seemed collaborative in my conversations. In short, it seemed to exhibit a culture that would be supportive and ensure a successful student experience—something I knew would be important to me as someone relatively new to the field.

Despite having worked on a variety of campuses, I remember arriving in Pullman and feeling a little overwhelmed by the sheer size of the institution. I was so grateful for the cohort experience and a small group of people that at least were immediately friendly faces. (I still miss them and am always happy when travels take me near.) I was also really appreciative of the many faculty over the years who kept true to their open door policies. (Louis Gray once told me that he knew it was me by my knock. I'm not sure what that says....) Scott Myers helped me land a great student fellowship opportunity my first summer with the Association of Institutional Research and the National Center for Education Statistics. Irene Beattie and Monica Johnson allowed me to participate in their interesting research while continuing to prompt me toward my dissertation. Tom Rotolo guided me through the research and publication process. Lisa McIntyre helped me hone my sociological teaching skills and gave me the opportunity to teach a variety of classes. And Greg Hooks let me play into my administrative background by doing some department work.

At the same time, I was also engaged in a research project through the financial aid office, studying the financial literacy of college students and creating curriculum. (I also got to employ fellow graduate student Bryan Rookey, which took us on a couple of fun association presentation adventures.) That grant-funded project ultimately led to a job offer from the granting organization, and after passing my qualifying exams, I decided that I could work full-time while finishing my dissertation. That turned out to be a little more personally challenging than even my optimistic self realized it might be. But, thanks to some good cheerleaders and the sociology department continuing to give me a little office space to hide in to write and code, I finally emerged on the other side of the PhD.

Today I'm the Managing Director of the Center for Education and Financial Capability for Access Group (soon to be AccessLex Institute). Access Group is a nonprofit membership organization comprised of nearly 200 nonprofit and state-affiliated American Bar Association-approved law schools. My current project is creating a personal finance program specifically for law students (who have a pretty different educational experience than many other graduate programs). We're in the process of doing surveys and panel interviews with students at 45 law schools across the country to help inform this work. (I am perpetually grateful for the great instruction I received from Don Dillman in his survey course, along with all of the

other research coursework and applied experiences I was able to engage in during my time at WSU.) I love that I've been able to find a great opportunity to put my academic skills to work alongside my applied work—which has been a great fit for me.

*(Access Group also has a grant-making side of the organization—offering everything from dissertation grants to both directed and unsolicited grant programs. We also hire research and policy interns in our DC office. I would love to see applications for any of these programs or positions from fellow WSU grads, students or friends!)*

In my spare time, I'm an adjunct instructor for Eastern Washington University where I teach an online section of Introduction to Sociology. I also coach and participate with the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Team in Training program, helping people to learn to run marathons while raising money to help find cures for cancer. (Dissertations are harder than marathons!) I have one adorable husband, one even more adorable almost-three-year-old son, and three crazy cats that keep me loved.

Michael Sullivan (PhD, 1984) Senior Vice President, Nexant



I received my PhD from the sociology department at WSU in 1984, specializing in research methods, statistics, and social psychology. In the course of my career I have worked in a wide variety of settings including: university teaching, operating my own research company, working as an analyst and manager in government and business, and eventually as an executive in a consulting firm providing services to utilities and governments across North America and Europe.

Today, I am one of four Senior Vice Presidents in a 600-person engineering firm with offices in North America, Europe, Asia, South America and Africa. I head the Strategy and Planning practice—a division of the company comprised of electrical and mechanical engineers, statisticians, economists, psychologists, mathematicians, public policy experts, and me—the lone sociologist. We provide system planning, design, and evaluation services to the energy sector (i.e., utilities, government and resource development). The practice has about 40 professionals that produced about \$19 million in revenue in 2016. I'm proud to say we are making the world a better place.

You might be wondering how a sociologist came to be head of a department in an engineering consulting firm. It is a long story, but the short version of it is that, along with luck and hard work, my training as a sociologist was almost ideally suited for managing interdisciplinary research and management teams—and as it turned out, during the last 35 years, interdisciplinary teams have become increasingly important in managing businesses and government in the context of persistent technological change.

A lot my career success is owed to Lew Carter (statistics), Louis Gray (statistics, experimental design and social psychology), Mike Allen (multivariate analysis), Duane Alwin (experimental design and econometrics), Lee Freese (social psychology and the philosophy of science), Don Dillman (survey design), Mel De Fleur (social psychology and theory), and Bill Catton (theory). Each of them gave me something different and special that has been extremely useful in understanding how the world works and in formulating solutions to problems that occur in applied research settings. They showed me different paradigms for solving problems. I also want to acknowledge the importance of one of members of the department I didn't work closely with who may have had the most impact on my eventual career development.

One afternoon, Irving Tallman (then chairman of the department) and I were discussing my lack of interest in studying substantive issues in depth (e.g., poverty, criminal justice, equality, etc.). I told him I liked to work on a wide range of research problems instead of focusing exclusively on one issue—the way most of my counterparts were approaching their work. I was a little worried about the potential impact of this on my career. After some back and forth, he told me he thought I was kind of a “gun slinger”—which I took as a compliment at the time—and that there was a job title that was well suited to gun slingers. It was called a consultant. I will never forget that conversation because it completely cleared up my confusion about what I should be. I wanted to be a consulting sociologist.

It took me a while to realize that dream. In early '80s there weren't many jobs for applied sociologists, let alone consulting sociologists, and I needed to keep body and soul together. So I tried my hand at teaching; but I wasn't very good at it and didn't enjoy it. I worked in government, but the pace was too slow for me and the whole effort seemed to center around overcoming institutional barriers and inertia, which seemed like a huge waste of time. I tried working as a research scientist in a big electric utility, but the barriers and inertia, while less severe than government, were still a constant source of frustration. Meanwhile, I had always harbored a fantasy of starting my own consulting firm. As time went on and I gained

experience in the working world, it became increasingly clear that if I wanted to control the research I was doing and get paid as much as I thought I was worth, I was going to have to start my own firm and soon. Fortunately, the opportunity to do that came fairly quickly and I took it.

The personal computer was introduced into the market in the mid-1980s and began almost immediately to change the nature of work in all kinds of organizations. I was lecturing at the Haas Business School at Berkeley at the time and decided with a colleague, John Freeman, that there was a great consulting practice in advising businesses about how to respond to the organizational challenges arising from the integration of this new technology into the business environment. Making a long story short, this seemingly good idea didn't work; but as often happens, a different opportunity arose from the same disruptive technology that worked like gangbusters.

Regulatory and other market forces were dramatically increasing the need on the part of electric and gas utilities in the US for information about their customers. To support planning, they needed to do appliance saturation surveys, commercial and industrial customer end-use surveys, customer satisfaction surveys, and value of service interruption surveys. They also needed advice about how to assess the impacts of programs intended to encourage customers to install energy-efficient equipment and to conserve energy. In the end, they even wanted to know how to change customer behavior using social norms! In the beginning nobody knew how to do these surveys and structure the evaluations needed to assess the performance of so-called demand-side management programs, but the methods I had learned at WSU were ideally suited to developing solutions; and PC-based survey data collection systems brought the investment cost in CATI systems within easy reach. So we built our first CATI with 6 stations. Within two years we had a 40-station commercial survey lab doing university quality research at competitive prices.

The demand for information used in planning and evaluation in these organizations has grown pretty steadily since the late 1980s. Similar things were happening in the health care and automotive industries. John Freeman, Catherine Coffey and I founded Freeman, Sullivan Co. (FSC) to meet this demand. We went after the market "hammer and tongs" as they say, hiring sociologists, economists, statisticians, psychologists, and even a few engineers to manage the projects we were undertaking. The story of FSC is for another time, but suffice it to say the company generally prospered—with one or two tough times—until 2014 when I sold it to Nexant, Inc. As a condition of the sale, I was required to stay on and run the Strategy and Planning practice along with my remaining business partner, a brilliant

economist named Stephen George. My earn out is over, but I remain the leader of the S&P practice. I'm hoping my management team will soon come into my office and announce that they need my office for a younger and more thoughtful leader. So, now you know how a sociologist comes to be the leader of a department in an engineering company.

Deborah Thorne (PhD, 2001), Associate Professor, University of Idaho

If memory serves, it was the late 1980s when, in my early 30s, I began working as a secretary in the sociology department at WSU. I planned to go to college, but had not settled on a major. The more sociology articles I photocopied for McIntyre and Wharton, the more I was attracted to the discipline. I eventually earned my BA, MA, and PhD in sociology, graduating in May 2001. That August, we left for Cambridge, MA, where I spent a year on a post-doc with the Consumer Bankruptcy Project (CBP) with Elizabeth Warren at Harvard University. The next year, I accepted a faculty position in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Ohio University. Finally, last October, we returned "home"—I accepted a faculty position at University of Idaho.



At WSU, I learned to write well, to conduct solid research, and to teach well. Lisa McIntyre was probably the best teaching mentor I could have asked for. Teaching large introductory classes—from 150–400—is now my forte. At Ohio University, I received the University Professor award twice, primarily for my ability to teach the “mega classes.” I would have to say that Don Dillman’s survey design class not only was one of my favorites but also had a tremendous impact on my career—on the CBP, my colleagues rely on me to design our surveys. And, without a doubt, it was Jim Short who taught me how to be a true academic professional. I never had a class from Jim, but I watched him go about his career with such grace and tact.

And, of course, WSU is where, 20 years ago, my chief research interest, consumer bankruptcy, commenced. About the time I was starting the doctoral program, the national rates of consumer bankruptcy were spiking. Thus, this phenomenon was what I wanted to study. Hundreds of thousands of households were going belly up, and I wanted to know why and what the experience was like for them. Back in the day, the only other sociologist studying the topic was Teresa Sullivan at University

of Texas. Despite that, Lisa McIntyre enthusiastically chaired my committee. Indeed, my research on bankruptcy is what caught Elizabeth Warren's attention and eventually led to my post-doc position with her—which was one of the best experiences of my life, and which undeniably launched my career.

Thanks to my career trajectory, I've lived on the west coast, on the east coast, and in the Midwest. I'm respected as a scholar of consumer bankruptcy and consumer debt. I earn a decent salary, have some job security, and have health insurance. I work on a college campus in an academic environment—with great colleagues and some really smart young people. And, for more than 20 years, I've studied what I genuinely care about: who files bankruptcy, why people file, the effects of bankruptcy on familial relationships, the increase in filing rates among older Americans, and how bankruptcy has become a marker of the middle-class experience. Overall, it's been a wonderful journey. I grew up working-class in a very rural community, married at 19, and had no plans to attend college. But as serendipity would have it....

