

CAMPUS DAY PRESENTATION

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I. First Time: This is my first time representing the sociology department at campus day and I'm really excited to be here. I came to Wake relatively recently, after spending several years at the University of Notre Dame.

Most people ask me whether I followed Nathan Hatch here. In fact, I started here in January of 2005, and he was named Wake Forest's new president in February of 2005, so he actually followed me here.

Apparently, Notre Dame wasn't the same for him after I left.

At any rate, I am new to Wake and to this event, so if I say things that seem totally irrelevant to the purpose of our time here, please excuse me.

As you have probably heard already, at Wake Forest, we aspire to uphold the Teacher-Scholar Ideal: to be world-class teachers *and* world class scholars. You can read some of the specific things we do to achieve this in the sociology department in the handouts and also on our website.

II. Nervous: I'm also a bit nervous because it can be difficult to talk about sociology briefly. Unlike disciplines like economics and political science and psychology, people often don't know much about what sociology is and what sociologists do. So I feel a greater burden of explanation here.

III. In Brief: Let me begin, then, with a one-line summary of sociology that is often given when people ask, "What is sociology?"

Sociology, some say, is *the painful elaboration of the obvious*. Sociologists just tell us what everyone already knows about society, but in much more tortured language.

In reality, sociologists are enemies of common sense. Many sociologists will tell you that the first principle of sociology is "*things are not what they seem.*" Whether we are studying two people interacting on the street or the process of globalization, sociologists want to press people to go beyond their common sense understandings of how things work in society.

IV. Example- Divorce: Because we all live in society and through its major institutions – like the family, education, religion – we often feel like we know why people get divorced, why some people succeed in school and others don't, who goes to church and who doesn't, and so on. We have common sense understandings of these things based on our own observations of the world around us.

But things are often not what they seem. For example, why do you think people get divorced?

HAVE STUDENTS/PARENTS RESPOND

When I ask my students why people get divorced, they point to conflicts within the marital relationship or actions taken by one of the spouses. And these more individualistic explanations are good, to a point. But they don't help us to understand why people are so much more likely to get divorced today than 100 years ago.

- They don't take into account the fact that when the *life expectancy* was 35 years rather than 77 as it is now, you just had less time to develop the kinds of problems that could lead to divorce.
- They don't think about how women's greater *economic independence* today makes divorce a more viable option for many.
- They don't know that "*no fault*" divorce is a recent innovation and makes getting divorced a much less complicated process legally.
- And they certainly never lived in a time when divorce was *highly stigmatized* socially.

So, through research and teaching, sociologists attempt to liberate people from the constraints of their own particular experience of society.

V. Liberal Education: And in this sense, the goals of sociology are very much in line with the goals of a liberal arts education. Any liberal education worth its name, to quote Martha Nussbaum, *“liberates the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world.”* It cultivates humanity.

Well, you might be thinking, cultivating humanity sounds like a nice idea, but what can someone *do* with a sociology major? My very serious answer to that question is you can do whatever you want.

Of course, the absence of a single clear vocational track in the sociology major is the source of some considerable anxiety for students and parents alike. Some would say that if you are prepared to do anything, then you are prepared to do nothing.

I disagree. Here are some of the things that my sociology students have done after they graduated: Harvard and other law schools, the University of Illinois and other medical schools, master’s and doctoral degree programs in sociology and other fields, jobs at Wachovia Bank and Coca-Cola, work for the United States Census Bureau and the Urban Institute.

A couple of years ago, one of my former students even signed a \$68 million dollar contract to play professional basketball for the Golden State Warriors.

Actually, I don't think he ever graduated, so that's probably not a good example.

My point is that sociology is part and parcel of a liberal arts education, and that it provides students with the critical thinking, analytical, and communication skills necessary to realize their callings in life – whatever that calling might be.

I appreciate the opportunity to tell you a bit about sociology. Thank you for your time and attention.