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RESEARCH BRIEF

Is There a Transferable Sociology 'Core' in Ontario Colleges?

A Content Analysis of First-Year Course Outlines

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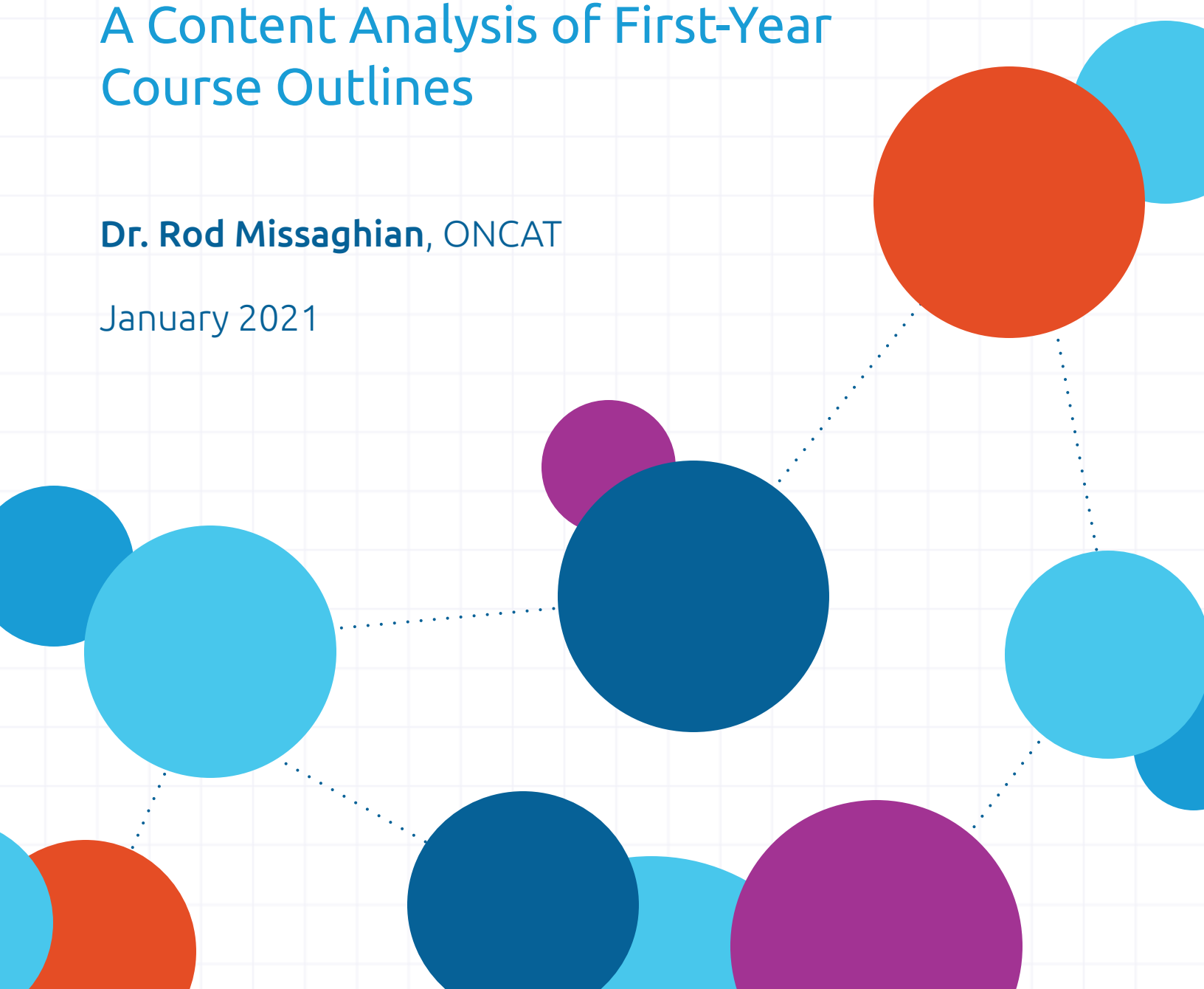

Introduction

Credit transfer is a complex organizational process requiring input from administrative staff, faculty members, and students alike (see BCCAT, 2018, p. 45; AACRAO, 2017, p. 12). Inefficiencies during this process place transfer students at risk of credit loss, as their new institutions may not recognize previously completed coursework. This can lead to the repetition of courses with equivalent content and learning outcomes, needlessly elongating time-to-completion and increasing the cost of education. Analyzing how colleges and universities interface with each other and determine course equivalencies can produce intelligence that could inform the improvement of transfer systems. However, research and evaluations of this interface—including work recently funded by ONCAT (HESA, 2020)—typically focus on how the bureaucratic machinery processes transfer credit assessments. This includes technical elements, ranging from the identification of transfer students, to the support role played by transfer advisors and other registrarial staff during the transfer process. However, faculty members' involvement in transfer-related processes remains somewhat of a 'black box' across many jurisdictions.

This 'black box' exists despite faculty members' considerable influence on transfer credit assessment and the development of articulated pathways across differentially structured postsecondary systems. In more centralized systems, such as B.C.'s, faculty come together in disciplinary committees to establish equivalencies between the courses offered at their institutions. In many American states, faculty also help to set the parameters for the establishment of "common cores," or sets of courses that become fully transferable across public systems (Logue, 2017; Missaghian, 2020). In more decentralized systems, such as Ontario's, faculty are also key players in the construction of bi-lateral agreements that identify transferable courses and receive frequent requests to evaluate new equivalencies.

As such, regardless of how a transfer system operates, it is fair to conclude that curriculum assessment—the process through which faculty members evaluate and contrast course outlines—plays a key role. Indeed, in some jurisdictions observers have claimed that faculty, as "stewards of their discipline's curriculum," effectively "'own' the system by which equivalency is established" (Compton et al., 2013, p. 48). Given this centrality, the absence of knowledge about how faculty perform transfer credit assessments is problematic. This is particularly true given claims that a "high degree of variation" exists in the evaluative criteria used by faculty during transfer credit decisions, often due to individual perceptions and personalities (Heppner et al., 2019, p. 48296). Such claims compel us to learn more about how faculty make decisions on transfer credit and how that evaluative process plays out.

To develop a better understanding of faculty's role in transfer, this summer the research team at ONCAT decided to explore the curriculum assessment process. Experience-driven design principles prevalent in disciplines like Digital Media, HCI (human computer interaction), and Marketing suggest that researchers should personally experience processes from the users' standpoint. This can help them develop empathy with user challenges and needs, enabling them to conduct superior research and develop superior products (Xue & Desmet, 2019). We adopt a similar conceptual framework and methodological approach for this exploratory project to understand a critical component of the transfer and articulation process: the evaluation and comparison of course outlines. Our overarching goal here is to develop insights that could inform upcoming ONCAT-funded interview- and survey-based research projects focused on faculty members' role in transfer.

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For this exploratory exercise, we chose first-year introduction to sociology college courses offered in Ontario and taught as part of General Arts and Science diploma/certificate programs. We felt most qualified to perform this exercise in sociology given that multiple individuals in the ONCAT research team have taught sociology at the post-secondary level, hold advanced degrees (MA, PhD), and have published peer-reviewed articles both drawing from and contributing to this discipline. In addition, ONCAT has long been interested in pathways between college and university. These specified programs often, but not always, explicitly cite preparation for transfer to other college and university program as a key function.

This exploratory empirical examination of course outlines revealed a high degree of consistency in the general makeup of introduction to sociology courses at Ontario colleges, while also identifying dimensions along which these documents remain unstandardized. The latter is identified as a potential barrier to the establishment of equivalencies between courses. However, the observed consistencies can serve as a foundation upon which to promote a more transferable set of introductory courses in sociology and other fields. This paper concludes by outlining areas for future inquiry as it pertains to curriculum assessment and faculty in the field of credit transfer.

Some Background

Faculty are a vital stakeholder in postsecondary education systems. Through their unions and senates, they influence, at a high level, how colleges and universities function. Their power is considerable enough to be viewed at times as a challenge to effective shared governance (Austin & Jones, 2015, p. 140). Collectively, as subject matter experts, faculty members also play a hands-on role in both the design and delivery of courses. When performing teaching duties, they exercise a degree of professional discretion in how they evaluate students' work and how they present course material. Encroachment on such professional jurisdiction is routinely met with a high degree of resistance. Given such powers, it is unsurprising that faculty also play a key role during transfer credit assessment, largely determining whether two courses are equivalent. In the U.S., academics advocate that "faculty, as the content area experts, should have primary responsibility for crafting the actual statewide articulation agreements" (Ignash & Townsend, 2001, p. 2). BCCAT (2018, p.7), British Columbia's agency in charge of overseeing provincial transfer processes, notes that there is a need to respect faculty expertise during transfer credit assessment:

> Faculty members are asked to participate in the articulation process because of their specialized knowledge of a subject, discipline, or field. When processing articulation requests, institutions should make evaluators aware of appropriate transfer credit options. However, *institutions should not overrule evaluators' decisions on transferability*, or on amounts of transfer credit, when these decisions are based on the evaluators' expert knowledge of the specific subject, discipline, or field. (emphasis added)

Faculty influence on the awarding of transfer credit is exercised in various settings, whether during the negotiation of articulation agreements, within formal articulation committees, or during case-by-case credit assessments.

As would be expected, faculty's transfer credit assessments do not occur in a vacuum, being influenced by both formal policies and informal criteria. Formally, we know that institutions have traditionally had policies that compel assessors to consider the accreditation of the sending institution (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2005), the timing of course completion, the grade achieved (BCCAT, 2015), and qualifications of the faculty member (BCCAT, 2006).[1] Recent international policy developments, like the Lisbon Recognition

1. BCCAT's (2006) statement of Instructor Qualifications for Transferable Courses states that "instructors who teach academic, degree-level transfer courses will usually possess, at a minimum, a master's degree or equivalent in the discipline or in a closely related area" (p. 1).

Convention (LRC), also commit signatories (including Canada) to provide access to an assessment of qualifications earned in other countries. Under the LRC, a policy of "reverse onus" places pressure on colleges and universities—and faculty—for demonstrating that credentials earned abroad do not meet the standards for transfer credit.

Despite suggestions that transfer credit decisions should be guided by principles of "parity in esteem" (Dennison, 2000), "reciprocity" (BCCAT, 2018), and executed in a consistent fashion (CMEC, 2020), with faculty members treating others' courses as they would their own, many anecdotes suggest that transfer credit decisions are often arbitrary. For example, some suggest applied coursework is given "short shrift" during transfer credit assessments, "counting as electives at best, or not at all, at worst" (Book, 2015, p. 201-202; also see McQuarrie, 2012). Similar views have been expressed about online courses (BCCAT, 2018). Some also suggest that transfer between college and university is hampered by a "long-standing university culture that has traditionally viewed college education and college students themselves as being of lower quality" (Gerhardt & Masakure, 2016, p. 81).

The multi-faceted environment in which faculty perform curriculum assessment, and its centrality to transfer credit decisions, makes it an important research area. The overlapping forces shaping faculty's curriculum assessment, combined with the general autonomy granted to faculty members, introduces considerable uncertainty into transfer credit decisions (HESA, 2020). This can cause problems for students seeking to complete their credentials in a timely fashion and has broader impacts on human capital development (Pizarro Milian & Munro, 2020). Despite this, there is a dearth of research on the process of curriculum assessment and no readily available data sources to explore the intricacies of this activity. As such, as a first step to better understand this critical process, and to develop insights to inform future ONCAT-funded survey- and interview-based research, we decided to analyze a set of publicly available introduction to sociology course outlines from Ontario colleges.

Data and Methods

The sampling strategy for this project was purposive, focusing on introductory sociology college courses that were mandatory as part of one- or two-year general arts and science diplomas or certificate programs, or available as general education electives that satisfied program requirements. These programs have an explicit transfer component, and many of them have transfer agreements with one or more Ontario universities.[2] Such parameters

2. For example, several programs, like those at Mohawk, Humber, Sault, Seneca, Sheridan, and Fleming, which have two-year GAS (General Arts and Science) diploma programs, have "University Transfer" in their online program titles.

ensure that we are analyzing a set of comparable sociology courses with relatively high affinity, being situated within similar programs. Programs were explored thoroughly prior to coding outlines, using information gathered exclusively through their online homepages. Recent course outlines were downloaded where available, and we also searched through public course outline databases. This process netted 13 out of a potential 24 course outlines. Through contacts with institutional transfer advisors, we also obtained an additional four outlines, for a total of 17.[3]

The general framework used to examine the content of introductory sociology course outlines is informed by i) the analytical approach used by American researchers who performed content analyses on community college sociology course descriptions (Rowell & This, 2013) and catalogues (Kain et al., 2007);[4] ii) transfer credit eligibility requirements, posted by institutions online;[5] and iii) documents outlining best practices in transfer credit assessment (BCCAT, 2018; AACRO, 2017). We performed a manual reading of each outline, using these components to create our initial list of codes. We then performed targeted word searches for sociological themes, comparing our counts (see Table 1) and their location in the document (i.e., course description, learning outcomes) to similar research (Persell et al., 2007; Rowell & This, 2013; Wagenaar, 2004). It should be noted that none of the abovementioned American research complete course outlines as we have done here.

Results

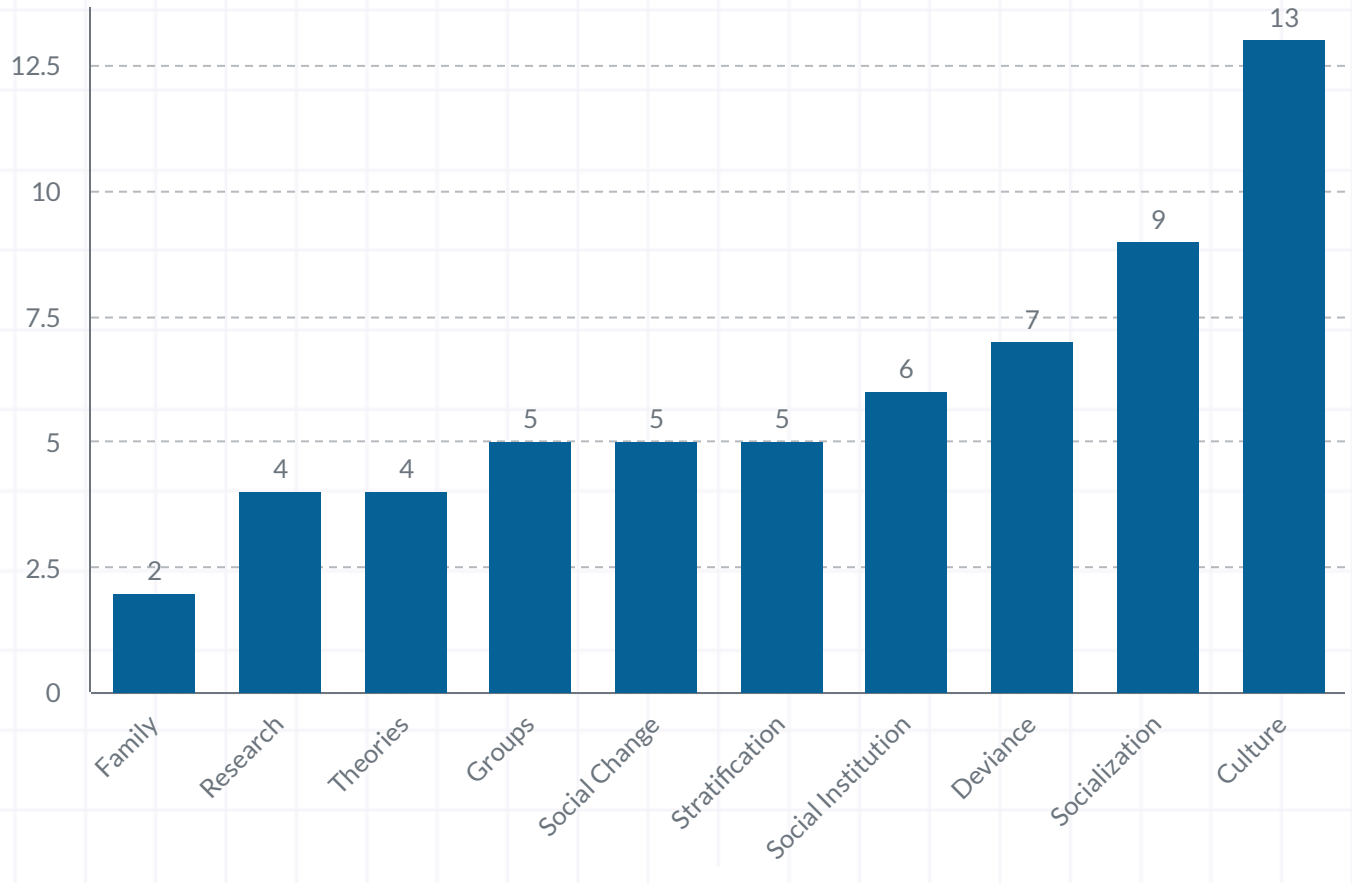
Course Descriptions

Course descriptions are consequential devices, and worthwhile to analyze, given that they serve as summaries of the objectives and main topics covered through a course. Particularly for faculty members facing time constraints, and who are unable to perform an in-depth review of the actual reading materials assigned, they serve as an expedient proxy for the information covered. As such, the first part of this analysis focuses exclusively on their content.

3. Northern College's General Arts and Science program did not have an introduction to sociology course, and La Cité's program had a criminology but not a sociology elective. This meant that we obtained 17 of a potential 22 course outlines available.
4. There are important differences between Canadian and American PSE (Davies & Hammack, 2005), as well as sociology practices (McLaughlin, 2005), that problematize our use of American research. However, without comparable Canadian research on this topic, we are left with few options.
5. Ontario universities with online information about transfer eligibility include criteria for evaluating course outlines. An acceptable course outline should include several components, such as a course description, a list of potential topics, and a course textbook. We used three of these components to help inform coding in this analysis.

For comparability purposes, **Figure 1** displays counts for the occurrence of Rowell and This's (2013) top ten sociological concepts across the course descriptions within our sample. **Figure 1** allows us to observe that culture is the most popularly cited theme across outlines, reflecting the centrality of culture and norms on sociological explanations of behaviour. Socialization—broadly defined as the process through which culture and norms are instilled in individuals within a society—also ranks very highly. In turn, deviance, the process through which individual behaviour differs from mainstream norms, rounds out the top three in our analytic sample.

Figure 1. Top 10 Sociological Themes in Course Descriptions



Note: The counts in this figure record only a single occurrence in the course description for each theme.

Figure 2 expands our focus, displaying the total number of distinct themes present in the course description of each college course outline. Here, we see considerable variation in the degree of specificity or detail present in each course description. In some cases, we see a comprehensive representation of the topics covered. Meanwhile, in others, there is only limited detail. We fathom that the latter could present an obstacle to curriculum assessment, making it difficult for instructors to evaluate if two courses are equivalent.

Figure 2. Themes Cited by College

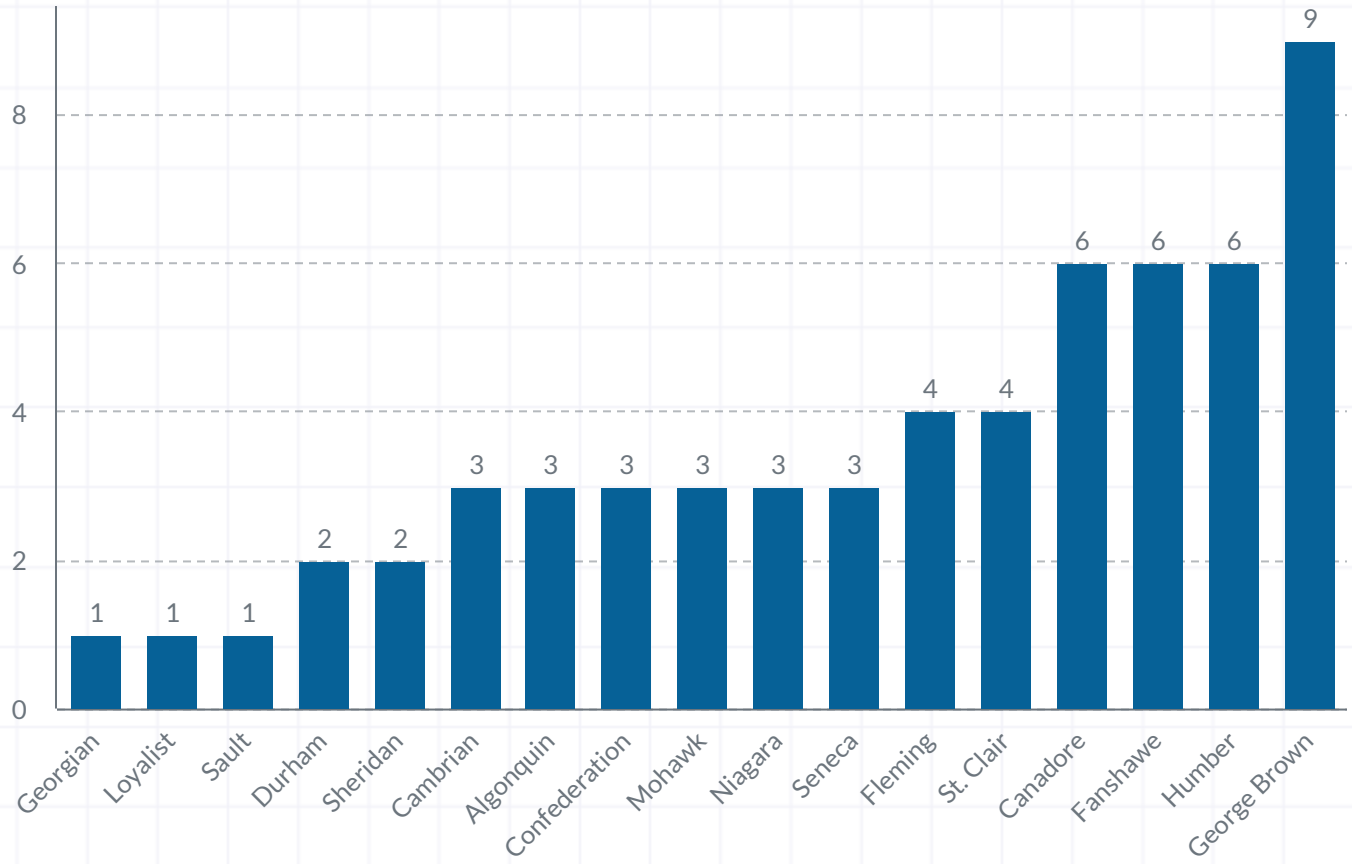


Table 1 (next page) displays the ranking of concepts in our Ontario course descriptions compared with Rowell and This's (2013) results. The concepts are listed according to their ranking in our analysis. We see that the first ('Culture') and second ('Socialization') ranked concepts on our list were almost identically ranked in Rowell and This's (2013) work, whereas the third-ranked concept ('Deviance') for this study sat at the very bottom of their top ten. The important takeaway is that each of R&T's 'core' concepts were also represented in at least one course description in the Ontario sample. This signals a considerable degree of uniformity in what sociology college faculty consider the core subjects that should be covered in introductory courses.

Table 1. Comparison of Sociological Themes in Course Descriptions

Sociological Concepts	Number of Institutions with at Least One Mention	Comparison to Rowell and This (2013)
Culture	13	#1
Socialization	9	#3
Deviance	7	#10
Social Institutions	6	#5
Stratification	5	#6
Social Change	5	#4
Groups	5	#2
Theories	4	#9
Research and Methods	4	#7
Family	2	#8

Other Sections of the Course Outline

Several outlines did not reference core concepts in their descriptions. It is important to remember that, though highly consequential devices, there are limits to what can be included in course descriptions, with some institutions even providing guidelines on word limits. As such, we looked to other sections of course outlines, such as learning outcomes and proposed weekly topics/modules, for information on course content. Learning outcomes, for example, have penetrated course outlines across Ontario colleges and universities in recent years, serving as signals of the competencies that students are expected to develop (Lennon et al., 2014; Taylor, 2016). Outlines also often contain detailed information on readings and the thematic structure of a course, which can communicate useful information about material not covered by course descriptions.

Expanding our scope to the entire course outline allows us to develop a far more robust understanding of the landscape of sociology courses at Ontario colleges. To orient our discussion, we draw on Wagenaar's (2004) work, which surveyed a representative sample of sociologists about what key concepts and skills they felt essential to include in an introductory course. **Table 2** (next page) displays a comparison of Wagenaar's top 11 concepts to our analysis of the top 11 concepts across our course outlines. While several of the most widely cited concepts are included in his top 11, there are a handful, like 'Foundations/Theory' and 'Gender and Sexuality,' which appear only within our sample.[6] This points to potential distinctions between what material is taught in these courses and what are considered key competencies.

'Culture' (referenced by 15 of 17 institutions) remained among the most popularly cited topics but was eclipsed by references to 'Research and Methodology' (see **Table 2**). The latter consisted of broader references to the sociological research process, as well more specific references to qualitative or quantitative research methods. Some schools, such as Canadore, included specific details about what social research entails, including understanding "hypothesis, independent and dependent variables, validity, reliability, representation, correlation and causation." Mohawk College was the only institution that did not explicitly mention research and methodology at all in their course outline. Of course, the absence of these topics from outlines does not mean that these topics were not covered in the course.

6. It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss differences between U.S. and Canadian sociology, but Canadian sociologists have noted national differences between how the discipline has evolved over time (see Davies 2009; McLaughlin 2004).

Table 2. Overall Presence of Sociological Themes Across Course Outline

Ontario Colleges' Top 11 Sociological Themes	Number of Institutions with at Least One Mention	Ranking in Wagenaar (2004)
Research and Methods	16	#9
Culture	15	#5
Socialization	15	#7
Foundations / Theory	15	Not Present
Gender and Sexuality	14	Not Present
Crime and Deviance	13	Not Present
Groups	13	Not Present
Stratification	12	#2
Race and Ethnicity	12	Not Present
Applied Sociology	11	#6
Sociology as a Discipline	10	#10

The main takeaways from this broader analysis of the course content are twofold. First, depending on what section of a course outline is being relied on, one may derive a different sense of what material courses cover. For example, we see that in **Table 1**, only four institutions made mention of 'Research' within their course descriptions. However, this was a far more pervasive category when other sections, such as learning objectives and weekly modules, were also included in the analysis. Though commonly used devices, course descriptions tell a very incomplete (if not misleading) picture about what topics a course actually covers. Second, there appears to be an extremely high level of consistency in the type of material covered across introduction to sociology courses in the college sector. However, there seem to be variations in the way certain sociological concepts, such as Culture or Socialization, are defined, as either general, topical, thematic, or 'core.'

A Note on Textbooks

Course descriptions, learning outcomes, and weekly schedules are useful for course evaluators to understand what course content is contained within an outline. However, in addition to content, there are other less obvious facets that faculty members and other evaluators are bound to engage with in equivalency decisions. Two of these important considerations are the textbook used and the evaluation scheme. In the absence of more detailed information and time, both can potentially be used as proxies to evaluate rough equivalencies in the content, rigour, or workload of a course. While a manual examination of the textbooks used by these courses is beyond the scope of this exercise, it is worthwhile to cite some important patterns.

Only two college outlines—Cambrian and Georgian—did not include specific information about a course textbook. The other 15 institutions cited a total of 12 different textbooks, with only three titles/authors being used by more than one institution. All textbooks were written by Canadian sociologists and had Canadian editions. As such, while the core concepts between Ontario college introduction to sociology classes appear similar, the textbooks assigned varied greatly. This is unsurprising in a system like Ontario's, where institutions enjoy great autonomy in how they structure and govern their programs (Eastman et al., 2018; Jones, 1997).

> "Whichever route [students] travel, the resulting transfer credit will depend on faculty decisions based on a comparison of course outlines. Though highly consequential, our understanding of this key process remains limited."

One takeaway from such diversity is that if curriculum assessment is done in a manner that places considerable weight on the textbooks used in an introductory course, evaluators may be less prone to deem courses in this area equivalent. A knee-jerk reaction to seeing two different textbooks, especially if their titles differ markedly, might be to assume that inconsistencies exist in their coverage of topics, leading to assumed substantive differences. As such, institutional policies should take care to emphasize that using the same texts is not a pre-condition for equivalency.

Discussion

On the surface, there appears to be a high degree of general uniformity amongst college introductory sociology courses, notwithstanding the different textbooks assigned. Using an analysis of the occurrence of targeted words and phrases, we discovered the presence of 'core' sociological concepts, many of which were identified previously in American research. We found that the majority of colleges are including key sociological concepts like culture and socialization, but that pertinent information is scattered across different sections of the outline, such as course descriptions, learning outcomes, and weekly schedules/modules. While not every outline contained every topic, we do see convergence between several key concepts/categories, with 14, 15 and 16 of a total of 17 institutions mentioning them at least once in their respective outlines (see Table 2). This convergence hints at the potential for articulation agreements to streamline equivalencies for general arts and science programs. However, it should be noted that introductory courses generally have more curricular consistency, as these courses prepare students for more specialized upper-level courses. Future research should repeat this analysis utilizing outlines for upper-year classes (e.g., mandatory theory and methods courses) in both colleges and universities which are often more specialized, and thus, for which universities may be less likely to grant equivalencies. In addition, comparisons between introductory courses at colleges and universities should also be explored.

One simple way to facilitate this research (and curriculum assessment for transfer credit purposes) would be to create a public repository of outlines for courses offered at every Ontario postsecondary institution. Within disciplines, the sharing of course outlines could promote greater awareness about emerging practices, be it the coverage of novel sociological topics, use of various research tools (e.g., data-scraping), shifting forms of delivery (e.g., online, blended), or assessment practices. Currently, researchers wishing to analyze curriculum have to gather these from each institution, requesting them from instructors and administrators who may consider such documents to be their intellectual property. Students seeking transfer credit for their previous coursework may also be forced to track down course outlines, wherever they may remain available.

In a field like sociology, discussions about what the field *is* and should focus on have raged on for decades (see Burawoy, 2005; Calhoun 1992; Carrol 2013; Davies, 2009; McLaughlin 2005). Thus, finding such a high degree of convergence on core concepts across course outlines is encouraging, if not a bit surprising. It represents the possibility for many disciplines, especially those with arguably greater internal consensus, to develop wide-

reaching articulation agreements that can facilitate student mobility. Ideally, across high affinity areas, such as introduction to sociology, arrangements could be a multilateral, allowing credits from courses like the ones we studied to be recognized at a system-level. Multi-lateral agreements would expand the range of possibilities for transfer students looking to move within the system.

Conclusion

College students in Ontario who wish to pursue further studies, be it in another college or university program, will need to transfer credits at some point. For some, the path is already clearly laid out in an articulation agreement. For others, the transfer journey may require an assessment of their courses. Whichever route they travel, the resulting transfer credit will depend on faculty decisions based on a comparison of course outlines. Though highly consequential, our understanding of this key process remains limited.

The exercise in this research brief provides us with preliminary insights into what faculty members within a familiar discipline face when they make these decisions. While analyzing course outlines can help us understand the structure and content of curriculum documents, there are limitations with this approach. Content analysis can only show us what instructors choose to include in a class, but how teaching unfolds in the classroom and the perceptions driving curricular decision-making cannot be gleaned by such an approach. We are already leveraging these insights to inform more in-depth explorations of faculty members' involvement in the transfer process. In a forthcoming interview-based study, we are exploring how sociology faculty members evaluate curriculum, and how their thinking relates to potential transfer equivalency decisions. For example, we are exploring how much attention faculty members place on the textbook used in a course, as well as how their perceptions about instructor credentials, and institutional reputations factor into this process. These are all factors that the content analysis used in this brief is unable to explain. We hope to work closely with the sector to continue to uncover the 'black box' of faculty decision-making in articulation and credit transfer.

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Established in 2011, the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) was created to enhance academic pathways and reduce barriers for students looking to transfer among Ontario's public colleges, universities, and Indigenous Institutes.