

Criminal Justice Assessment Report 2020-2021

1. The Annual Assessment Meeting

The program currently has no full-time faculty, so there was no formal annual assessment meeting this year. Professor Renfrow is submitting this report based on data from his Fall offering of CRIM 115 to ensure that student learning in courses associated with this program receives assessment, even if on a small scale.

The College is in the process of hiring a full-time faculty member in POLS/CRIM/LAW, so this new colleague will lead the process of program redesign, which will have major implications for future assessments.

2. Closing the Loop

CRIM 115 fulfills general education requirements related to justice. As noted in our last general education assessment report, I have found the goal to “express empathy for diverse persons” difficult to conceptualize and operationalize. This Fall I designed a new assignment asking students to immerse themselves into a podcast and case file associated with a potential wrongful conviction. My primary goals were for students to move from seeing the criminal justice system as an abstract structure and toward seeing it as a collection of people in specific roles moving a case towards its conclusion, and to see all of this from the point-of-view of the accused rather than from the point-of-view of someone outside the case. In short, I was hoping the exercise would humanize the entire process.

Immersing themselves in case documents, students quickly saw how discretion and individual-level actions at each phase of the criminal justice process have profound impacts for the accused. They started to view “the accused” as people located within specific systems of inequality rather than as depersonalized “criminals”. Throughout the semester, students wrote brief reflections as part of online forum discussions, and at the conclusion of the semester, they wrote an extended reflection on the case and what they’ve learned about the criminal justice system (e.g., “How does investigating this case make you feel about the criminal justice system? As you write, reflect on the phrase ‘innocent until proven guilty’? Did that hold true for Deborah?). Overall, it appears—based on these reflections—that students are progressing toward the goal.

While the reports devote most of their attention to the specifics of the Pieringer case, the reports also provide some indication that students are rethinking their views on the criminal justice system as a whole:

My feelings about our justice system have developed considerably. In my opinion, our justice system was created to be quick and stern. In turn, this developed an effective system that was highly inflexible. Considering that we live in an everchanging society, it makes it hard for systems like this to continue to be the proper form. No one locks up their own people as frequently as we do. This is a sign of ineffectiveness within our system. All thing considered, it isn’t terribly designed, but obviously it’s not the best that it could be.

Many students concluded that—from the point of view of the accused—the current criminal justice system needs reform. One aspect of that reform is renewing its focus on the rights of the accused, with

the acknowledgement that the current system does not operate free from the inequities found in society more generally:

Our nation is incarcerating more of its people than any other country. Credibility, independence, and objectivity are crucial and necessary conditions for the establishment of an appropriate and effective judiciary and judicial system for the peaceful settlement of disputes. The creation of an accountable and functional system that protects human rights, promotes access to all, and guarantees clear and impartial resolution is a central principle in this nation.

I was especially pleased to see students integrate our other discussions in these critiques. It appears that using a single case helped student to recognize and connect broader themes to their occurrence in the real world. Many students noted, in particular, that the current system may not produce justice for our most vulnerable citizens:

Being touch on crime helped politicians and corporation, yet significantly ostracized and criminalized minorities, especially African Americans. The effects of the war on drugs are still affecting minorities today, with a false sense that notion is wrong with criminal justice system.

These types of reflections suggest that students are beginning to express empathy for other people. Given the level at which students engaged in this assignment, the enjoyment they expressed in taking a deep dive into a specific case, and the quality of their reflections, I plan to continue using the assignment. I will continue to refine the reflection prompt to better align with the language of the learning outcome. As I develop a comprehensive rubric, I will be better able to quantify this outcome. In addition, I will use a different case in the future.

3. Examination of Data

Our second program goal is to “approach criminal justice as a critical social science”. We expect students to “be able to apply and critique theories explaining criminal conduct in society”. Given that CRIM 115 is the course within our curriculum where students learn criminological theory, we assess this learning goal there using the measurable outcome: “students will be able to apply theories to specific cases”. The midterm exam this Fall included the following question designed to assess students’ ability to apply theory:

Drawing on the assumptions of Differential Association Theory, Social Control Theory, or Low-Self Control Theory, design an intervention program that should reduce delinquency in our community. (You can focus on our local community here or back at home.) Be sure to address the following issues: *What does your chosen theory assume about the nature of people? What factors does it suggests leads to delinquency? What specific interventions should be implemented to reduce delinquency based on those specific factors?*

The following rubric was used to evaluate responses:

 /2 **Assumptions about humans:** Differential association assumes that we are generally conformists; Social control and low self-control assume that we are selfish and likely to break norms

 /3 **Factors producing deviance/crime:** varies by theory and some of the following details must be present for chosen theory.

- Differential association assumes that all behavior, including crime, is learned (i.e., techniques, motives, justifications are learned), people are criminal when they have excess of definitions; learning takes place through intimate personal associations with others; association characteristics are **duration, frequency, intensity, and priority**
- Social control assumes that we are likely to break rules but social bonds with conventional society reduce that tendency; bond elements include belief, commitment, involvement, and attachment.
- Low self-control assumes that we are likely to break rules but we develop the ability to delay gratification and reign in our desires early in childhood (by ages 8 to 10); caregivers supervise us, caregivers teach us to recognize deviant behavior by acknowledging when we break rules, and caregivers punish use for rule breaking

___/3_ **Application:** must explicitly connect factors producing deviance with invention strategies. Simply saying you would create an afterschool program is not sufficient. What specifically would the program entail based on your selected theory?

___/2_ **Writing and clarity:** must be well-written, grammatically correct, and easy to comprehend

The response was worth 10 points. The average score was 7.83 out of 10 points possible. The grades were distributed as follows:

A 7 students

B 3 students

C 6 students

D 5 students

F 0 students

These results indicate that students in this course did well at applying criminological theory to their community. For the most part, we met our goal.

One area where students lost points was by not explicitly stating their theory's assumption about human nature. While the prompt asks for this information, several students did not include it in their response. It is unclear whether students do not know the assumption or if they simply failed to include it. In the future, I will make sure that students are reminded to address this point. I will also devote more time to this point during class discussion where specific theories are introduced and underlying assumptions are identified. A second area where students lost points is in specifying the connection between the factors producing crime and their intervention. Overall, students knew what the theory suggests; however, they did not always identify an intervention consistent with what the theory identifies as delinquency's primary cause. Proposed interventions, instead, tended to focus on peers and education regardless of what the theory suggests. Moving forward, we will spend more time during class discussion making such connections.

4. Program Changes

This year we introduced a new special topics course on Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence. Early enrollment numbers suggest that there is considerable interest among students. Otherwise there have been no changes to our offerings or major requirements.

5. Action Plan for Coming Year

Professor Renfrow plans to continue working on the CRIM 115 to assess general education learning outcome 1. He will also implement the strategies noted above to improve student learning related to applying theory.

Next year we plan to assess program goal 4, which focuses on the senior experience and experiential learning. It is becoming increasingly evident that we need to take a closer look at the internship experiences our students are having to ensure that they are meeting our goals.

6. The Updated Assessment Plan

We are not updating the assessment plan this year because program requirements are likely to undergo a major redesign when a new faculty member is hired. One of their duties as chair of the program will be to ensure that program goals and learning outcomes are aligned with the new requirements.