

Training a New Generation of Education Researchers: UW-Madison Sociology 496 - Research to Enhance Equity in Education

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Why offer this class?

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) not only have the opportunity to provide relevant, actionable research to improve practice in schools, they also can help train a new generation of education researchers to appreciate the advantages of working closely with practitioners throughout the research process and to develop the skills to do so effectively. Since 2016, the Madison Education Partnership (MEP) has prioritized this dual mission, supporting internships and other training opportunities for graduate students in the education sciences. This spring, we took this investment to the next level, offering an [undergraduate course](#) designed to bring these ideals to life.

We had three motivations for offering this course. First, much as our graduate interns represent a proximate investment in enhancing the human capital infrastructure for educational research in the next generation, undergraduate researchers represent a more distal investment. We hope that, at a minimum, our undergraduate students will develop an appreciation for the importance and complexity of work in education. Second, just as we hope our research enhances the educational outcomes of students in the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD), the District's investment in our undergraduate class enriched the educational experience and opportunities of our undergraduates. Finally, our students made modest but real contributions to knowledge in the District.

What happened?

During the spring of 2024, we launched the class, Sociology 496: Research to Enhance Equity in Education. Co-taught by MEP Co-Directors Eric Grodsky (Professor of Sociology & Educational Policy Studies at UW-Madison) and Beth Vaade (Senior Executive Director of Research, Assessment & Improvement in MMSD), this course was open to undergraduate students with junior standing or instructor consent based on prior coursework in research. The class was designed as a part of the Madison Education Partnership to engage students in applied sociological research to address contemporary problems of practice of interest to the class and to administrators in MMSD.

Students worked in small teams on research projects in consultation with our District partners. At the start of the semester, we created a short list of research areas where the district had 1) an interest in new research findings and 2) a central office partner who could serve as the client to support the work. Students then selected and refined research questions that they vetted in person with the MMSD client. Once they decided on their questions, each group identified and shared relevant research connected to that area with the class, taking turns leading class on their topics. They then conducted original research using MMSD data, with two groups leveraging administrative data and the other collecting qualitative data in MMSD. Students

prepared and delivered two presentations– one for their clients and one for District leaders– and a research paper to share with MMSD. Throughout the process, the class also read research that grounded students in the challenges confronting the field; met with MMSD leaders including the superintendent to discuss their use of research; and learned through readings and class presentations about the unique role RPPs play in conducting research for school districts.

Student Project Descriptions

Student Relationships and their Association with Student Belonging and Academic Achievement in the Madison Metropolitan School District

Based on climate surveys completed by middle school students in MMSD linked to student academic achievement data, this group demonstrated that student belonging, but not student relationships, is predictive of student achievement (as measured by test scores and GPA). In fact, students expressing more positive relationships with their peers seemed to be slightly *less* academically successful. The group recommended intervening to increase student sense of belonging.

Student Navigation of Standalone Honors, Earned Honors, and AP Honors English Classes at Madison East High School

As part of its push to enhance equality in course-taking across students, some of Madison’s high schools are experimenting with changes to how they offer honors instruction. Madison East’s English Department offered three different types of advanced coursework in the 2023-24 school year: stand-alone honors, embedded honors, and Advanced Placement. This research team interviewed students and a counselor at East High to learn about what information students had to make their choices among these offerings, how they perceived different course options, and how they experienced these varied opportunities.

Comparing Pathways: AP vs. DE Programs and College Enrollment Outcomes

MMSD is fortunate to share a city with the state’s flagship public university and an excellent community college. This makes it possible for students to take advantage of dual enrollment (DE) opportunities at two different local colleges in addition to opportunities to take Advanced Placement (AP) courses. This project uses administrative data to evaluate the variation in enrollment across these courses and differential associations between DE enrollment, AP enrollment, and baccalaureate college attendance among MMSD students who were in 12th grade in 2021 or 2022.

What did we learn & gain?

We learned a lot from having this class, for our students, the district and MEP. Our students got to take an applied research project through the entire lifecycle in just four months - honing in on a research question in consultation with district partners, grounding the question in current research, collecting and/or analyzing data, reflecting on and presenting their findings to key stakeholders orally, visually, and in writing. They experienced what it is like to be an education researcher working in a very applied setting. As a result of their excellent work, district clients and leaders learned more about topics they care about, by pushing their thinking and bringing up ideas to improve practice. These leaders also got a chance to work with young scholars and

students, something that our MMSD stakeholders cited as a big benefit and one that made them happy to participate.

For MEP, we recognize the value of this experience to grow our RPP. The course gave us a way to live our mission, producing quality research on relevant, equity-centered problems of practice and training future scholars to do more collaborative, practice-focused work. Co-teaching this course also strengthened our partnership. As instructors representing the research and practice sides of MEP, we spent time together frequently throughout each week building, implementing and refining the course - which gave us more time to discuss new ideas, talk shop and learn more about each other's roles outside of MEP. In creating the course, we had to build out our own thinking about how RPPs work and best practices in this type of research, find the right theoretical articles, areas of interest and key ideas and then document and share those in a way we had not previously. When we brought our MMSD stakeholders to the table, we were able to strengthen those relationships around new lines of work and ways of working together; demonstrate a new way that they can see MEP adding value to MMSD and UW; and honor their expertise in a university setting. Through those experiences, we hope we have built stronger MEP champions in MMSD.

We also learned more about leading a research practicum in the context of an RPP. The general design of the course worked well, but we erred on the side of giving students too much latitude in choosing a topic and underestimated how difficult it would be for them to converge on viable research questions. This led to delays in securing data and data collection opportunities for our students and contributed to a compressed schedule for producing the presentations and papers. Through this course, we learned a great deal about how to structure productive classroom discussions (thanks in large part to the [Discussion Project](#)); the challenges of balancing student control over sessions; how to fairly reward students based on their contributions to the projects; and moves for monitoring and managing group dynamics. We also gained experience in developing our MMSD partners as clients and leaders, learning when we needed to provide stronger guidance and when we could let them drive the conversations and decisions with students with less oversight - all important considerations that we could test "live time" in a low-pressure environment. These lessons will help us think about how we grow our practice-side partners' capacity to work with researchers.

What will we do next?

We plan to teach this course again in Spring 2025, building off areas that went well and improving in areas where we can get stronger. Based on our students' feedback,, we plan to shift a few key practices, such as:

- Choosing research topics in advance of the semester, with clients already onboarded and data ready to go so students can hit the ground running faster and have more time for analysis
- Grade group work differently so that we can account better for individual group member's contributions

- Decide whether we want to replicate the experience of these students as independent researchers (similar to university faculty) or paid consultants (similar to researchers on contract work)