

It is a great honor to be criticized rather than simply ignored, and thus I was thrilled to read Prof. DeCesare's detailed deconstruction of my opinion piece, "Time for a New Curriculum for Social Statistics?" (Fall 2010). I am, in fact, very sympathetic to Prof. DeCesare's point of view. I would love to see our students learn how to do calculations and use percentages. Unfortunately, given the fact that all of our students have had many years of dedicated training in these activities in middle school and high school (to little avail), I am not optimistic that they will learn these skills in their sociology coursework, nor am I persuaded that sociologists are the best people to teach them. Moreover, these are hardly competencies that are closely associated with sociology. As for the rest of the curriculum, I merely observe (based on my own experience) that most of my professional colleagues are unable to interpret the following formula:

$$S = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n \frac{(x_i - \bar{x})^2}{n-1}}$$

or to use it to calculate a standard deviation by hand, yet they can read and interpret articles that use quite advanced statistical models. I challenge Prof. DeCesare (and any other readers) to test their colleagues -- or perhaps themselves -- on this very basic formula. If (most of us) don't find formulas useful, why should we expect our students to find them useful? I'm not saying that the traditional curriculum can't be made to work; I'm suggesting that it's hard to make it work, and that this is because it's a bad curriculum. Were we designing a social statistics curriculum today, I sincerely doubt that we would include a chapter on how to read shaded tails of normal curves. Like much of the curriculum, it's there because it was convenient in 1960. It's time for a curriculum for today.