

## Sean Becker speech

Hi my name is Sean Becker and, as you may have guessed, I am an undergrad majoring in sociology here. But, to be honest, it wasn't always that way. I didn't come to this campus as a freshman dedicated to the field of sociology. In fact, I was hardly aware of exactly what sociology was or what sociologists really did.

During the fall semester of my sophomore year I was a psychology major and was taking a course called social psychology. At the time I had enrolled for it, I was wholly unaware that the course was cross-listed with sociology, much less that it was taught by the then-chair of the sociology department, Professor Doug Maynard. In fact, it didn't take long for me to realize that Professor Maynard had a not-so-subtle agenda of trying to convert psychology majors to sociology! At first I was unsure of what to make of all of this. After all, I was a committed psychology major and only had a fair idea of what sociology really was. But I slowly began to understand what it meant to take a sociological perspective on things, and it was on the last day of class that Professor Maynard sealed my fate. Once again in a not-so-subtle attempt to convert psychology majors, Professor Maynard said, "We can never understand human beings outside of their social context, in this way all psychology is social psychology". Well that did it; my curiosity was fully sparked. I enrolled in more sociology classes and eventually decided to switch majors.

I undertook the task of understanding sociology by engaging with professors and fellow students in a number of eye-opening classes and important discussions. This excavation uncovered treasures of knowledge that were certainly well worth my time. I began to really take a sociological perspective on issues in my life and in the world. From my most basic interactions with friends to the most macro political events, my study of sociology allowed me to understand human and institutional behavior in an entirely new light.

We as individuals are never really fully conscious of the way that our society conditions our thoughts and actions. In fact, the notion of society seems somewhat ironic. That is, all individuals within a society to some degree help construct and maintain the particular features of their society, yet actually have minimal agency to change society as individuals. We have power, but at the same time we don't. Our power comes from our ability to unite with others. That is, by acknowledging that our social reality is determined by an implicit agreement that is *inter-subjective*, one can fully appreciate the transitory nature of just about anything and everything. The defining feature of any stability is that it is temporary. For instance, although one may have lived their entire life with the assurance that their rights as a public employee were permanent and wholly safeguarded, it is not difficult for such stability to be challenged. Furthermore, in the recent protests here, I for the first time in my life gained a real sense of my own political efficacy. This newfound attitude was not achieved through introspection or self-discovery but through actual participation in a movement that was far larger than myself and, yet, still benefited from my contributions. The events at the capitol this semester were an example of collective action, that is, sociological theory applied to the real world. So, although competing ideologies often shape and take advantage of social currents for varying purposes, one must accept social malleability as an opportunity. Overall, the task of improving our society seems far less daunting once one admits that our social institutions and entire way of life are all relatively recent and are open to critique. Sociology offers the most comprehensive lens for such a venture.

Now, there are few other buildings in the world that house a greater wealth of sociological knowledge than the one we find ourselves in today. Throughout my time as a sociology student here I have been amazed by not just this intellectual rigor but also by the accessibility of the resources that this department has to offer. Ellen Jacobson has often found herself on the receiving end of one of my rants about what I should do with my future or what I should be studying. Similarly, I have always felt free to meet with any professor here to discuss not just coursework, but also just any ideas that I may have or, for instance, the prospect of graduate school, and have on numerous occasions taken advantage of such opportunities. It was through such interactions that I have come to participate in an invaluable mentorship – and indeed, friendship – with Professor Joseph Conti here, whose research has served as the inspiration for the senior thesis I am about to embark on.

In short, my undergraduate experience in this department has been profound and enlightening. I have definitely found it to be a useful and enriching experience. And I can confidently say that I am proud to be a sociology major here at the UW, and would not have it any other way. This department offers a community that can make a large university just a little smaller. Thank you.