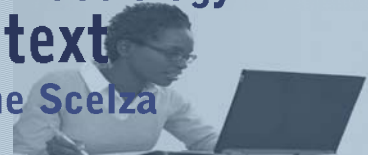


What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in Sociology? The Department in Context



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In January 2009, the ASA Research Department and ASA's Task Force on the Master's Degree in Sociology invited graduate directors in 224 departments to participate in an online survey about their programs. This survey was the first part of a new study of the training and early career experiences of current master's candidates in their departments.

The survey emerged from the Task Force's response to chairs who requested help from ASA to develop strategies to ensure that the terminal master's degree in sociology is meaningful for those who wish to secure careers closely related to their sociological studies. Of the 224 departments that had awarded at least one master's degree in sociology in AY 2006/07, more than half (122) completed the survey. The information on departments obtained from the graduate directors provides the background and the context for the online survey that will be sent to more than 1,400 master's candidates this month. The first wave of this survey will ask about program experiences, including curricular and extra-curricular activities, finances, goals after graduation, and demographic characteristics.

Many sociology departments, especially those with fewer than six faculty members, report that they do not have the resources or support to build programs to help graduates take full advantage of their sociology training when they enter the job market. Currently, there is a lack of information about the career trajectories of master's degree recipients that would help inform current students. Few departments track their students, especially those that do not progress to a PhD degree in sociology. The Master's Task Force recommended the longitudinal survey to help close the information gap and to better position programs to help students.

DEPARTMENTAL CONTEXT

Of the 122 departments that completed the survey, 85 percent reported having a freestanding master's

program, while 15 percent reported not offering a separate master's degree program but instead awarding the degree *en route* to obtaining a PhD. Enrollment in these freestanding programs varies considerably, ranging from 3 students to 72 students, with a median of 20 students currently enrolled.

Almost two-thirds of master's programs (64 percent) are found in freestanding sociology departments. The next largest group of programs (18 percent) is found in combined sociology and anthropology departments, followed by sociology and criminal justice programs (8 percent), and sociology combined with more than one discipline (5 percent) or included within a broader social science division (4 percent).

Almost two-thirds of the freestanding sociology departments (63 percent) report that a master's degree is the highest degree offered. Of the reporting departments offering a freestanding master's program, more than half (53 percent) offer an applied, a professional, or a clinical track.

Below are comparisons of the program characteristics between departments that offer the more vocationally oriented applied, professional, or clinical degree with those that offer a traditional academic master's degree.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TYPES OF DEGREES

The departments with applied, professional, or clinical tracks do not differ significantly from the departments offering traditional programs in terms of whether they require a master's thesis or have a non-thesis option. Greater variation can be found in the types of offerings, the experience of faculty members, and the source of their students (see Table 1).

- About 56 percent of programs with applied, professional, or clinical tracks require a

master's thesis for students compared to 58 percent of departments with no such track. Because about 70 percent of *both* types of departments report that they offer a non-thesis option, this suggests that programs have more than one track.

- One-third of programs with applied, professional, or clinical tracks require students to participate in an internship program compared to only 4 percent of students being required to do so in programs without this track. Internships appear to be a key program element for the more vocationally oriented programs.
- Although most programs, regardless of type, do not have external advisory boards that can identify how sociological skills can be conceptualized for the job market, provide information on job trends, or engage in mentoring, 10 percent of programs with a vocational track have such boards compared to 2 percent of traditional programs.
- One-third of programs with applied, professional, or clinical tracks employ faculty members who have had non-academic professional experience compared to 25 percent of programs without this track. These figures suggest that the former type of program is more likely to provide access to the non-academic world than the latter.
- Whether the majority of master's students in a department were undergraduate majors in the same department varies significantly by whether the master's program has an applied, professional, or clinical track. About 40 percent of master's students in departments with a vocationally oriented track have their undergraduate degrees from the same department. In

Table 1. Comparison of Characteristics of Master's Programs*

<i>Master's Program Characteristics</i>	<i>Departments Offering a Professional, Applied, or Clinical Track</i>	<i>Departments Without a Professional, Applied, or Clinical Track</i>
Master's thesis required	56.6%	58.3%
Non-thesis option	70.4%	68.8%
Internship required	33.3%	4.1%
Has an external advisory board	9.8%	2.0%
Faculty members have non-academic professional experience	33.3%	24.5%
Majority of candidates received their BAs from the same department	40.4%	20.4%
Offers online master's courses	26.9%	2.0%

* Includes freestanding master's programs only.
Source: ASA 2009 Survey of Graduate Directors

contrast, only 20 percent of master's candidates in more traditional departments were undergraduate majors in these departments. This may suggest a student body at vocationally oriented departments that is more likely to stay in the area and want training that will result in a non-academic career.

- Programs with applied, professional, and clinical tracks are significantly more likely to offer online courses than other programs. More than one-quarter of the former offer on-line courses versus only 2 percent of more traditional master's programs. This suggests that the former may be more oriented to those who are already in the labor force and need a more flexible schedule.

When the first wave of the student survey is complete we will know more about the characteristics of the students in these different types of programs, including their current labor force status, their finances, their racial and ethnic background, their future goals, and whether the programs they attend are meeting their needs. The second wave of the student survey (to be conducted one year later) will tell us whether those seeking jobs that reflect their sociological training have been successful in meeting this goal.

One graduate director responding to the survey expressed gratitude that ASA is examining master's education issues in sociology, noting,

"Given that this is the majority of graduate degrees awarded in sociology, it is certainly about time that we study this degree in much greater depth. I would be eager to learn [what] ASA might recommend we consider for master's curriculum development, marketing, and, most importantly, the development of a master's degree that might better channel our students into employment—similar to the Master of Social Work or the Master of Public Administration."

To learn more about the work of the ASA Task Force on the Master's Degree in Sociology, see the report, [*Thinking about the Master's Degree in Sociology: Academic, Applied, Professional, and Everything in Between*](#)

This article originally appeared in the March 2009 edition of ASA Footnotes.