
**Report of the Ad Hoc
Graduate Education Committee
American Sociological Association**

Placement of Graduate Students

Subcommittee on Placement

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PLACEMENT OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

Introduction

The American Sociological Association has targeted graduate education as a focus for a series of reports on the state of services provided to advanced students in sociology. Recently, under the guidance of former ASA President William Gamson, an Ad Hoc Committee on Graduate Education was established. The Committee was charged with the task of surveying a number of graduate programs. During the Committee's first year - 1994-1995 - four subcommittees were convened in the following areas: professional socialization; the teaching of teaching; placement; and successful practices in Master's-only programs.

As members of the Subcommittee on Placement of Graduate Students, we are pleased that we have this opportunity to look more closely at the specific issue of job placement.

Initially the Subcommittee had hoped to generate possible programs to review through a process of nominations and self-nominations. Several announcements in *Footnotes* described the tasks of all the subcommittees. When no nominations or self-nominations were forthcoming, committee members generated a list of ten schools via networking based on several criteria. Schools chosen included two M.A.-only programs, private and public institutions, and schools located in different parts of the country. All the schools had a strong core of graduate students and needed to place a number of graduates each year.

In framing our task, what we were looking for was both a range of approaches toward placement and a sense of what were the paramount concerns regarding placement for individual departments. In addition we were looking for departments to help frame what parts of the placement process they thought they did particularly well. Finally we were looking for a sense of the role the ASA could play at a national level in helping to provide support services/training/workshops, etc. in the area of placement. In each department we started our discussions with the Director of Graduate Studies but also, if appropriate, spoke to other members in individual departments.

We developed an open-ended questionnaire which helped to guide these conversations. In addition, one member of the subcommittee was a graduate student and helped to reflect in the formulation of the questionnaire some specific student concerns.

We do not feel that this report illustrates the definitive discussion on placement. Rather we hope that the report helps to frame some of the concerns

around this issue, some of the ways individual departments approach placement, where there seem to be gaps in placement knowledge and services, and a guide to the types of questions and concerns departments and the ASA should address regarding the placement of graduates. We also hope that the broader tasks of the Ad Hoc Committee on Graduate Education generate a lively discussion on a range of graduate issues.

The following departments participated in the survey on placement of graduate students. We found their comments and insights very helpful:

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Highest Degree</i>
University of Massachusetts-Amherst	Ph.D.
Fordham University	Ph.D.
CUNY-Queens	M.A.
University of Akron	Ph.D.
Vanderbilt University	Ph.D.
Auburn University	M.A.
Indiana University	Ph.D.
Iowa State University	Ph.D.
Michigan State University	Ph.D.
University of Texas-Austin	Ph.D.

Findings

Core Placement Activities

In the course of the interviews, it became clear that virtually all schools engage in *some* activities designed to aid in the placement of sociology graduates. These activities form what might be thought of as the traditional core approaches to placement and fall into seven general categories:

1. *Formal and informal opportunities for graduate students to participate along with faculty in research presentations.* Graduate students are given the opportunity both to witness research presentations and to make

presentations of their own research. This activity will help placement by providing graduates with an experience that will be part of the recruitment process when they seek jobs themselves. For example, the University of Akron has approximately ten brown bags a year with both faculty and graduate students participating.

2. *Formal and informal attention to placement skills.* Most schools said that they paid some attention to providing graduate students with two key skills - resume writing and interviewing - that would be vital in their job search. Formal attention to such skill building, however, is inconsistent. The University of Akron provides brown bags 3-4 times a year where they discuss how to prepare a resume, a cover letter, and interview skills. Iowa State's graduate students organize their own seminar series generated from topics they are particularly interested in at any one time. These seminars may focus on various skill building topics including job application cover letters. Other programs sometimes integrate this training into some type of professional development course or leave the task to a student's mentor.
3. *Encourage graduate students to attend professional meetings and present papers at such meetings.* The exposure of graduate students to the profession through attendance at and participation in such meetings is thought to be important and worth the allocation of at least some resources. For example, at Fordham, graduate students are provided \$150 to present papers at professional meetings. If students agree to do a departmental brown bag they can qualify for \$50 more. Michigan State rents a van to transport graduate students to regional meetings. The University of Texas-Austin has a \$2,000 budget (sometimes supplemented by money from the Chair's budget) for participation at meetings. Students closest to completion of their degree are favored in the funding process.
4. *Teaching experience.* By providing graduate students with teaching experience - in courses both under the supervision of faculty as a teaching assistant and also courses in which the graduate student is largely independent - graduate programs provide their students with valuable experience. Students also often become quite entrepreneurial and end up teaching in several schools in the area. However, although such a wide range of teaching experience helps to prepare them for their first job years, it often gets in the way of completing degree requirements and so can also work against successful placement.
5. *Research experience.* With national cutbacks in funding, fewer schools are able to fund students participating in research projects. The University of Akron does not have that problem. They currently have "lots of external funding" and can easily provide students with funded research experience. Such experience goes a long way towards preparing students to become

competitive in the job market, especially when combined with some teaching experience. Vanderbilt University also is in the position of offering funded research opportunities along with non-funded research. Other departments, not as well-endowed with outside funding establish collaborative opportunities with faculty so that students work on research projects other than just their dissertations. Such variety contributes an edge in the marketplace.

6. *Making ASA Employment Bulletin available to students.* The *Employment Bulletin* is thought to be the primary data source for job availability.
7. *Supplying students with letters of recommendation.* Departments say letters of recommendation to potential employers are supplied by the faculty members who serve on the committees of students. In some cases non-committee members also participate in this process.

Shifting Placement Environment

During the course of the interviews, it became apparent that, due to the competitive marketplace, departments increasingly feel that these core activities inadequately serve the placement needs of sociology graduate students. The interviewees raised a number of important issues that reflected on how and why the profession needs to think in more innovative ways about how to prepare our students for placement. Among the issues raised were:

Skills and interests of graduate faculty. Most current faculty members were not themselves trained in the skills helpful in preparing for job placement. As a result, they tend not to think about passing a coherent set of placement skills onto students. This does not imply that they are not aware that more could and/or should be done to develop a placement strategy but in some cases they are clearly uncertain how to approach such a task.

An individualistic approach by faculty. In most departments, when faculty members assume responsibility for helping in the placement process, they do so as individuals. There seems to be little in the way of teamwork or a sense of shared, communal responsibility for the placement of students. Since the job market is such a difficult one to break into, it seems surprising that departments, or at least a small core group of faculty, do not work in a more formal way to help graduates strategize about their placement opportunities. For example, a more self-conscious effort to target post-doctoral programs or other types of fellowship programs while working on a degree might be a legitimate focus for a small group of faculty in individual departments.

The limited nature of follow-up. Almost no departments collect longitudinal data on their placements. Except as individual faculty members,

they tend not to keep track of what happens to their students after they graduate. The limited nature of this follow through makes effective networking extremely unlikely.

Poor linkages to the applied community. Most departments simply are not geared to help students seek jobs in non-university settings - one department termed this narrowness “foolish,” and concluded, “we must change.” The work experience of the faculty tends to be exclusively in academic settings. Most schools surveyed have virtually no viable network with government agencies, private businesses, public policy organizations, or other non-academic settings where sociology students might successfully find internship and/or employment opportunities.

Linkages to the applied community tended to be more characteristic of M.A.-only programs like Auburn University which relies on university placement services for positions in a wide variety of applied settings including hospitals and mental health facilities. Iowa State has an MA internship program that places students in agencies. Fordham - a Ph.D. program - has used resources in New York City for advanced internships in settings like the United Nations. Fordham’s primarily part-time student population also provides the program with good links to government and industry. The University of Massachusetts-Amherst has placed students at the World Bank, while Michigan State has success placing students in the field of demography in applied settings. Vanderbilt also has supplied contacts in government and industry as well as with non-profit agencies.

Length of time on market. Departments understand that it may take a student several years to find a position after finishing their degree. However, it is difficult to prepare students for this post-degree struggle. Some departments are becoming more aggressive in exploring post-doctoral opportunities, but these efforts are of limited effectiveness. Other programs have their students apply for full-time and one year replacement positions in tandem in hopes of providing their students with “back-up” plans if a tenure track position does not become available when they are first on the market. One department stated that through internal networks, students are learning to have “no false expectations” when beginning their job search. Another department argued that students were “very naive,” observing “Students who have finished, students who have defended a proposal and students who haven’t even done a proposal all want to be on the market.” Obviously, there is a wide learning curve out there.

Downward placement. Most interviewees noted that when they placed their graduates in academic settings, those settings tended to be less prestigious in terms of academic reputation than the settings from which the students graduated. Some of the interviewees wondered whether, in fact, they were not preparing their students adequately for the actual skills they would

need to be effective in their employment setting. For example, if a research-driven department places students largely in smaller state schools with a teaching focus, should that change some of the graduate experience? Indiana University put it well when they stated, “Most of our students will not get jobs at a place like this. So our concern and the national concern is to prepare [students] for the context in which they will be working.”

The University of Massachusetts-Amherst finds that overall placement is much more difficult than in the past. Most, if not all, of their students target academic careers. In addition, the majority of the students would like to stay in the Amherst area and so find themselves at smaller schools. Their experience is not unique.

Moving Beyond Core Activities

The interviews did surface examples where departments had ventured beyond the more traditional core activities and engaged in innovations designed to better prepare their graduates for placements in today’s environment. Among the more interesting innovations were:

Professional development and/or teaching course. While most schools have experimented with teaching courses or training, few have professional development courses. Where they exist, such courses often reflect the passion of a particular faculty person as opposed to being a formalized and institutionalized part of the curriculum.

When discussing these issues faculty were aware of the potential value of such an experience. One interviewee stated that “if the ASA could help it would be great”. The ASA 1995 Subcommittee report on the *Teaching of Teaching* and the report on *Models for the Professional Socialization of Graduate Students* might be very useful to refer to for programs thinking of starting such courses. Both reports are available through the ASA.

Of the departments surveyed in this project we found that Akron has added a course specifically designed to impart teaching skills to graduate students. The University of Texas has separate courses for both professional development and teaching in its core curriculum. And Indiana University has just received a grant to develop two or three courses which will become a regular part of their graduate curriculum. Other departments reported either having some type of ongoing program, having had programs in the past, or are considering developing such courses. What is clear is that courses often are the most obvious place for certain specific types of placement skills to be offered. It is unusual for skills to be either addressed or acquired in any formal way if such courses do not exist in a department, although at Auburn University these workshops are provided at the University-level.

Tool box of skills. CUNY-Queens has been especially innovative in identifying and then teaching a set of skills they believe are required to ensure the professional success of their graduates. They have identified a key set of skills and hold faculty accountable for presenting those skills to students. (See Appendix A)

Weekly newsletter. Iowa State's department provides a weekly newsletter as a way to cut down on memos. In the newsletter, faculty and students are informed about what is going on in the department, jobs, pre-registering information, scholarships and funding. A departmental staff person does the newsletter on Pagemaker software.

Active graduate networks. CUNY-Queens has benefited from an alumni network. They maintain a rich data base on their past undergraduates and track everyone and where they went after graduation. That information is now available on the WEB. Since a disproportionate number of graduate students end up in market research in the New York area, they often call the program director when they hear of job openings in their companies. Such a combination of both undergraduate and graduate contacts works to their students' best placement interests.

Acculturation of students into a professional environment. A number of schools have taken more proactive steps to integrate their students into a professional culture. CUNY-Queens introduces their undergraduate students to the usefulness of a Masters degree in seeking job placements (55% of their undergraduate students continue in graduate school). Iowa provides all incoming students with a booklet of applications to professional societies. CUNY-Queens also is creating a "survival guide" which will provide students with a practical, step-by-step approach to succeeding in their graduate program.

The use of a placement committee. To move beyond the individual approach to graduate placement, the University of Massachusetts - Amherst has created a faculty committee with shared responsibility for providing students with placement skills, mostly resume writing and research presentation.

Innovative admissions practices. Michigan State has moved beyond traditional admissions practices by creating a two-tiered approach. Applicants must pass a traditional academic screen for suitability. The second admissions screen requires that at least two faculty agree up front to work with the student. This approach ensures a closer relationship between students and faculty and, it is hoped, will aid in the placement process.

Areas for Further Study

The interviews suggest a number of placement issues that might well benefit from further exploration and discussion. Among the areas that might warrant further exploration are:

The nature of effective, on-going professional development and teaching skills courses. What is the nature of these courses? How can a department sustain its commitment to their delivery?

The continuing tension between a research and a teaching agenda. It became clear that a great many of graduates who find jobs in academic settings come from institutions that place primary emphasis on research but go to schools that place at least equal emphasis on teaching. Do graduate programs need to place more emphasis on teaching? If so, how should they best do that? And how does a teaching emphasis co-exist with a research emphasis within the framework of a Ph.D. program?

Overproduction of Ph.D.'s. A number of interviewees expressed the interest of their departments in downsizing their admissions. They raised both the ethics and efficacy of admitting students to graduate programs in larger numbers than the job market seems to warrant. Michigan State, which currently stands at 75 students, is accepting an entering class of around 10 with a goal of approximately 50 active students. The goal at Michigan State is to be able to provide better advice to a smaller cohort, fund students so that it funding doesn't become divisive in student cohorts, and effectively place students at the end of their degree program. These are realistic and reasonable goals, but what are the implications for the profession-at-large of gearing admissions numbers more closely to job prospects?

The University of Texas is wrestling with attempts to target a smaller number of admissions, but has found that when targeting between 15-20 new students for the fall they were ending up with a significant larger percentage of accepted students deciding to attend. This might reflect the poor job market after an undergraduate degree, but it "might be just postponing problems."

How departments do admissions. What are the skills needed to be successful in the current market place, and how does a department gear its admissions policies to meet those expectations? How do departments successfully predict just what the market place will be looking for, both in terms of numbers and skills? These were unanswered questions raised by interviewees.

Strategies for mentoring and placing minority and foreign students. The ASA MOST grant focuses on both mentoring undergraduate minorities in

sociology toward a graduate career and reformulating critical parts of graduate curriculum. Consistency in training of minority undergraduate students will eventually impact on more departments addressing issues of placement for minorities. Indiana University has had recent success in admitting minority students, but they haven't gotten to the placement stage yet.

Fordham has a number of minority students supported through an NIMH grant, but anticipates that enrollments will dramatically drop when funding is over. The University of Massachusetts-Amherst currently is a recipient of an ASA MOST grant and anticipates that the extensive mentoring system characteristic of the MOST grant will "eventually impact on placement." On the whole, departments see their problems with minority students more at the recruiting stage than at the placement stage.

Regarding foreign students, many programs have fewer students due to funding problems. Iowa State, however, has a large number of foreign students and finds that students stay in the United States or return home depending on the individual country (i.e. Korean students return home) and/or its economic situation. On the whole, departments offered no consistent insight into the differences in placement of foreign students although there is clearly a tension between placing a student in the US versus helping to place a student in their home country.

The effectiveness of the both the *Employment Bulletin* and the ASA Convention Employment Service. Departments were very flattering regarding the ASA *Employment Bulletin*, and made clear that the *Bulletin* was the main source for job announcements. However, any expansion, especially in the areas of applied positions and post-doctoral announcements, would be helpful. Distribution of an assessment of the convention employment service from both the perspective of the employer and the job-seeker might be useful knowledge for students about to go on the market and their mentors.

How Can the ASA Contribute?

Specifically, the interviewees generated a number of ways in which the ASA might expand its role in helping departments with placement issues:

- *Expanded Employment Bulletin.* Have the *Bulletin* provide more information on non-academic, applied placements.
- *Leadership Role.* Have the ASA take a proactive leadership role in offering a vision for the sociology profession that places equal emphasis and prestige on academic and applied settings.

- *Data collection.* Have the ASA collect, analyze, and publish data on placement issues, trends in job availability, what skills are being required, who fills the jobs advertised in the Bulletin in terms of training, fields, etc.
- *Funding.* Have the ASA find out about funding models in MA and Ph.D. programs. How long are students funded at each level, what percentage of students receive funding in any one year, what type of funding do they receive (tuition, tuition and stipend), and what types of funding sources are available (teaching assistantships, research assistantships, etc.)? While the *ASA Guide to Graduate Departments in Sociology* provides some of this information, the format is uneven and incomplete.
- *Introductory pamphlet.* Have the ASA prepare a pamphlet that would be given to all entering sociology students across the country giving them a realistic introduction to career prospects, discussing academic and applied possibilities, and outlining skills that will lead to successful placement. This would provide a shift to “anticipatory” socialization.
- *Placement of students in non-sociology departments.* Have the ASA provide data to graduate programs regarding placement opportunities in other disciplines. While many Ph.D. sociologists find their way to criminal justice programs, it may be useful to know how many find professional careers in journalism departments, business schools, social work departments, and other related academic fields. For example, some students at Vanderbilt have gone on to business schools. Should the ASA help to articulate strategies on how to target such departments?
- *Membership in the ASA and other appropriate professional organizations.* Have the ASA take a more proactive role in soliciting graduate student membership in its organization. At the present time, the ASA does a fair amount of outreach to attract graduate student members including significantly reduced membership fees. In many cases, if students do join organizations, it tends to be at the regional level where they are more likely to give research papers. However, links to the national organization are a critical way for students to gather a perspective on the emerging job market, post-doctoral opportunities, convention presentations and daily debates in the field long before they need the *Employment Bulletin*. All these benefits flow directly from information resources at the national level. Perhaps there is a way to fund a percentage of advanced students to an annual membership; or to directly solicit students with membership materials.
- *Facilitate workshops.* Have the ASA facilitate a series of training workshops for faculty in the area of placement strategies. Is there a way to establish a mentoring hot-line on the national level that could answer individual student-generated questions regarding the market-place experience?

- *Accountability.* Have ASA help frame a means of justifying graduate education to trustees of universities by providing models for and an understanding of professional roles.

Concluding Statement

Indiana University hits the mark by stating that “these days any job is an incredible achievement.” That said, what we need is to have departments become as sophisticated, diverse, and effective as possible in placing their students. Ineffective placement hurts not only individuals, but impacts on the internal well-being of individual departments and can have long-term adverse impact on the discipline. It is clear that the stakes are high and departments are attempting to address these issues as effectively as they can as individual units.

We hope that this report on the *Placement of Graduate Students* helps to bring together some of the range of ideas and strategies that are being used across the country. We also hope that we have helped to name some of the directions that individual students and their mentors, departments, and the ASA need to explore in order to satisfy the demands of job hunting in today’s marketplace.

We are indebted to the ten departments that frankly shared their successes and their frustrations and limits with us and hope that we accurately reflected some of their concerns. We envision this report to be the beginning of a larger dialogue of graduate student issues and hope that you find some of the suggestions useful in dealing with your own students.

Appendix A
CUNY-QUEENS' TOOLBOX of SKILLS

I. Computer "Combat" Literacy

word processing package

statistics package

data base package

spread sheet package

graphics package

internet skills

- browse/WEB
- telnet/log into remote computer system
- file and transfer protocol

II. Market Research Skills

SRI-VAL

- objective to teach students market research skills
- provide "flying time" including psychographics

PRIME

- market research software, 1995 New York data donated to Department of Sociology

III. Census

how to use it

what does it mean

IV. Statistical Skills

univariate and multivariate statistics

sampling design