

FROM PROGRAMS TO CAREERS: CONTINUING TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE MASTER'S DEGREE IN SOCIOLOGY

Nicole Van Vooren, Roberta Spalter-Roth, and Janene Scelza

American Sociological Association
Department of Research and Development



An Overview of Master's Programs in Sociology

Recent reports from the National Academy of Sciences and the National Science Foundation propose that universities consider developing applied and professional master's programs that provide strong disciplinary foundations along with internships and research experiences to prepare students for careers in business, non-profits, and government agencies.^{1,2} In recent years, some sociology departments have been developing programs to prepare students for careers outside of the academy. Yet, relatively few departments evaluate whether or not their programs are successful in preparing students for careers where they employ their sociological knowledge by tracking their master's students after they graduate. This data brief examines the characteristics of sociology master's programs, the experiences of the students in these programs, and the outcomes of program participation for students.

Findings from the American Sociological Association's (ASA) Bachelor's and Beyond project show that almost three quarters of sociology undergraduate majors who pursue graduate studies do not stay in sociology, but rather enter professionally-oriented programs (see Table 1).³ Of those who do go on to graduate school in sociology right after graduation about 28 percent report that they plan to pursue a PhD. The majority of graduate students in sociology are enrolled in master's programs. For these students the master's degree may not be a stepping stone toward a PhD degree, but a degree that can improve their job opportunities. For those who intend to use their master's degree in this fashion, do their programs present opportunities to such as internships and consumer-oriented research projects as well as a strong disciplinary foundation?

Research Design

An ASA-appointed Task Force on the Master's Degree in Sociology was unable to find answers to questions on the characteristics on students enrolled in master's programs, the features of programs, and the outcomes for students.

The Task Force advised the ASA Research Department to begin to study master's programs. The Research Department developed and administered three surveys to answer their questions. The first was a brief survey of graduate directors of sociology departments concerning the characteristics of their master's degree programs. The second was a survey of students enrolled in master's programs in 2008. This first wave of the student survey, conducted in winter of 2008-09, asked students about their graduate school experiences and their future plans. In the second wave, conducted in the winter of 2009-2010, respondents were asked about their current status, and those who respondents who had completed their master's degrees were asked what sociological skills they used on the job and what skills they wished they had learned as part of their studies. The third wave of the longitudinal survey will be conducted in the winter of 2011. (All of

Table 1. Majority of Sociology Majors Enrolled in Non-Sociology Graduate Programs

<i>Graduate School Fields</i>	<i>Percent Enrolled</i>
Sociology	22.4
Other Fields	77.5
<i>Social Work</i>	16.9
<i>Education</i>	11.4
<i>Law</i>	10.5
<i>Other Social Sciences</i>	9.4
<i>Psychology/Counseling</i>	8.6
<i>Engineering</i>	7.3
<i>Business/Management</i>	4.5
<i>Public Policy/Affairs</i>	3.8
<i>Other</i>	5.1
Total	100

Source: ASA Research and Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Bachelors Degree in Sociology? Wave II*



these surveys can be found at <http://www.asanet.org/research/masters.cfm>).

Applied vs. Traditional Programs

The graduate director's survey was sent to the directors of 224 programs that awarded at least one sociology master's degree in AY 2006/07. There was a 54 percent response rate (122 departments). Of these departments, 85 percent reported having a free-standing master's program and 15 percent did not award an intentional master's degree. Of these free-standing programs, more than half (53 percent) of the graduate directors who responded reported that their departments offered a terminal applied, professional, or clinical track as an alternative to a traditional master's program that prepared students for a PhD in sociology. Within terminal master's programs, about one-third of require an internship as part of the curriculum, with applied programs being about eight times more likely to do so than traditional programs. Faculty members who teach in applied programs were significantly more likely to have non-academic employment experience. Applied programs were more than four times as likely to have an outside advisory board to provide suggestions for curriculum changes and to help students with contacts and job search, although only about 10 percent of all programs have such boards. Applied programs were significantly more likely to offer online courses to meet the needs of working students. Finally, applied programs were twice as likely to recruit students from their own baccalaureate programs as traditional master's programs suggesting that these students were more likely to want to remain in the local area. For a full list of characteristics, see http://www.asanet.org/images/research/Images/jpegs/mastersprog_comparison.jpg.

Graduate School Experiences

The first wave of the student survey was sent to about 1,600 sociology master's candidates. Of these candidates, 872 responded. More than three-quarters of students reported entering sociology graduate programs because of their interest in the field. In examining the candidates' experiences, we divided them into groups defined by their future plans: those who intended to obtain terminal degrees and those who intended to pursue a PhD. There were some differences in the

programs each of these groups pursued. Master's only students were more likely to have taken only one theory course, while those pursuing a PhD were more likely to have taken two courses. Those pursuing a terminal master's degree were more likely than those pursuing a PhD to have taken only one statistics course (62 percent versus 55 percent) and less likely to have taken three or more courses. There was no statistically significant difference found in the number of methods courses taken between master's and PhD students. The largest percentage of those enrolled in either type of program took two such courses. In terms of future occupational plans, the largest percentage of master's-only students anticipated combining social services with management or with research (40 percent). For a full description of student experiences and future plans, see *Paying Attention to the Master's Degree in Sociology* at <http://www.asanet.org/research/MAinSociology.pdf>.

Outcomes

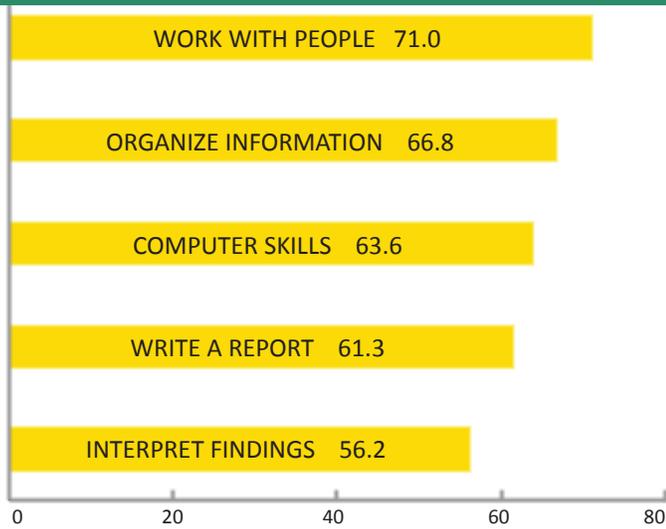
More than 500 of the original 872 student responded to the 2008 cohort responded to the second wave of the survey. We found that one year after the first wave of the student survey almost 40 percent was working in full time positions. Those who were in the workforce clustered into three types of occupations. The first was research occupations, with students employed as assistants, associates and directors, applying a variety of methods including evaluation, survey, field, and policy research. The second occupation was coordinating or managing a wide variety of programs including those directed at families, college students, communities, consumers, and voters. The third occupation was case work and counseling. The remaining respondents were still working towards their master's degrees. More than half of the respondents did not expect to pursue a PhD or other graduate training in the foreseeable future. About 12 percent were pursuing a PHD, although more may do so after completing their master's degree whether applied or traditional.

Job Skills Used and Desired

In the first survey, the majority of master's candidates reported being satisfied with their graduate program (56 percent) with an additional 30 percent being very satisfied. One year post-graduation, the follow-



Figure 1. Skills Used Most Often on the Job (in percents)



Source: American Sociological Association study, *What Can I Do with a Master's Degree in Sociology*, Wave III.

up survey asked those who were employed full-time to report which skills and activities would have been useful preparation for these positions as well as which skills they used most often on their jobs. Almost half of respondents reported that their jobs are closely related to their sociological studies, suggesting that master's students are working in jobs that they feel utilize the skills learned in their programs including organizing information, using computers, writing reports, and interpreting data, all of which are skills that can be learned as part of a sociology master's program (see Figure 1). To our surprise, the skill most frequently reported as being used on the job was "working with people" (71 percent). It is not clear to us that this is an intentional skill learned in sociology programs or if these are skills learned in internships or other out of classroom activities. Between half and two-thirds used research and writing skills. Grant writing was the skill that most respondents (57 percent) wished they had learned. About a third wished they had had better access to career counseling, and nearly 30 percent wished they had participated in an internship program.

Conclusion

The results from the graduate director survey indicate that there is potential for building applied programs that include more faculty and advisory boards with

non-academic experience. These changes could help develop curricula and create internships that help students obtain positions that employ their sociological skills. From the student survey, we found that the majority of students were either satisfied or very satisfied with their sociology graduate school experience, although only 13 percent of those who intended to go into the workforce directly were satisfied with the career counseling that they received. Those in the labor force used the skills that they learned in their sociology programs. There are some very specific skills, such as grant writing, that they realize would have been useful as part of job preparation. In the third and final wave of the survey to be conducted in the winter of 2011, we will learn more about respondents' career trajectories and their continuing satisfaction with their master's programs.

Endnotes

- 1 National Academy of Science, National Research Council, Committee on Enhancing the Master's Degree in the Natural Sciences. 2008. *Science Professionals: Master's Education for a Competitive World*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- 2 National Science Foundation. 2009. "Science Master's Program." Retrieved October 1, 2009 (http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=503428&org=NSF&sel_org=NSF&from=fund).
- 3 See ASA's Master's Degree webpage at <http://www.asanet.org/research/masters.cfm> more details about this project's research design and findings.



The following are research briefs and reports produced by the ASA's Department of Research and Development for dissemination in a variety of venues and concerning topics of of interest to the discipline and profession. These briefs can be located at http://www.asanet.org/research/briefs_and_articles.cfm You will need Adobe Reader to view our PDF versions.

TITLE	DATE	FORMAT
Teaching Alone? Sociology Faculty and the Availability of Social Network	2010	PDF
Mixed Success: Four Years of Experiences of 2005 Sociology Graduates	2010	PDF
Sociology Faculty See Smaller raises but Still Outpace Inflation in AY 2009-2010:Other Social Science Disciplines Not Able to Recoup Losses	2010	PDF
What's Happening in Your Department? Department resources and the Demand Side of Hiring	2010	PDF
Down Market? Findings from the 2008 ASA Job Bank Study	2009	PDF
Paying Attention to the Master's Degree in Sociology	2009	PDF
What's Happening in Your Department With Assessment?	2009	PDF
Sociology Faculty Salaries AY 2008/09: Better Than Other Social Sciences, But Not Above Inflation	2009	PDF
Idealists v. careerists: graduate School choices of Sociology Majors	2009	PDF
What's Happening in Your Department: Who's Teaching and How Much?	2009	PDF
Decreasing the leak from the Sociology Pipeline: Social and cultural capital to enhance the Post-Baccalaureate Sociology Career	2009	PDF
What's Happening in Your Department? A comparison of Findings From the 2001 and 2007 Department Surveys	2008	PDF
PhD's at Mid-career: Satisfaction with Work and Family	2008	PDF
Too Many or Too Few PhDs? employment Opportunities in Academic Sociology	2008	PDF
Pathways to Job Satisfaction: What happened to the class of 2005?	2008	PDF
Sociology Faculty Salaries, AY 2007-08	2008	PDF
How Does Our Membership grow? Indicators of change by gender, race and ethnicity by Degree Type, 2001-2007	2008	PDF
What are they Doing With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?	2008	PDF
The Health of Sociology: Statistical Fact Sheets, 2007	2007	PDF
Sociology and Other Social Science Salary Increases: Past, Present, and Future	2007	PDF
Race and Ethnicity in the Sociology Pipeline	2007	PDF
Beyond the Ivory Tower: Professionalism, Skills Match, and Job Satisfaction in Sociology (PowerPoint™ slide show)	2007	PPT
What Sociologists Know About the Acceptance and Diffusion of Innovation: The case of engineering education	2007	PDF
Resources or Rewards? The Distribution of Work-Family Policies	2006	PDF
Profile of 2005 ASA Membership	2006	PDF
"What can I Do with a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?" A National Survey of Seniors	2006	PDF
Majoring in Sociology—First glances: What Do They Know and Where Are They going? 2006 PDF	2006	PDF
Race, Ethnicity & American labor Market	2005	PDF
Race, Ethnicity & Health of Americans	2005	PDF
The Best Time to Have a Baby: Institutional resources and Family Strategies Among early career Sociologists	2004	PDF
Academic relations: The Use of Supplementary Faculty	2004	PDF
Have Faculty Salaries Peaked? Sociology Wage growth Flat in constant Dollars	2004	PDF
Are Sociology Departments Downsizing?	2004	PDF
Sociology Salary Trends	2002	PDF
How Does Your Department compare? A Peer Analysis from the AY 2000-2001 Survey of Baccalaureate and graduate Programs in Sociology	2002	PDF
Graduate Department Vitality: Changes Continue in the Right Direction	2001	PDF
Minorities at Three Stages in the Sociology Pipeline	2001	PDF
The Pipeline for Faculty of color in Sociology	2001	PDF
Profile of the 2001 ASA Membership	2001	PDF
Use of Adjunct and Part-time Faculty in Sociology	2001	PDF
Gender in the early Stages of the Sociological career	2000	PDF
New Doctorates in Sociology: Professions Inside and Outside the Academy	2000	PDF
After the Fall: The growth rate of Sociology BAs Outstrips Other Disciplines Indicating an Improved Market for Sociologists	1998	PDF
Update 1: After the Fall: growth Trends continue PDF		PDF
Update 2: BA growth Trend: Sociology Overtakes economics PDF		PDF