

Social Capital for Sociology Majors: Applied Activities and Peer Networks

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ROBERTA SPALTER-ROTH AND NICOLE VAN VOOREN
DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH ON THE
DISCIPLINE AND PROFESSION
AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

MARY S. SENTER
CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

At its 25th anniversary, the National Association of Scholars (NAS) continued to promote the message that it has endorsed since its founding that colleges should be meritocracies focused on teaching, research, reasoned discourse, and the scientific method. Other kinds of activities such as student participation in community activities to bring about social change are regarded as “dumbing down” of the curriculum and spreading political views among students (Schmidt 2013). It is a message rooted in idealized recollections of how America’s colleges operated in the middle of the 20th century, before the advent of increased diversity programs, women’s and ethnic-studies departments, and service learning and community activities that the association regards as anathemas. The article suggests, further, that NAS is facing a challenging future, barring a major resurgence of traditionalist thinking on college campuses, and the appeal of their message might not be enough to carry the group another 25 years (Schmidt 2013).

Colleges are still meritocracies that emphasize teaching and research. However, as baccalaureate graduates face a tighter job market and more difficulty in attending graduate school, efforts to increase their

success at these post-graduation activities through providing additional social capital may be on the increase. Social capital may exist in the form of contacts and social ties so that individuals can access and use resources embedded in social networks to gain returns such as finding better jobs (Lin 1999).

Sociology is a scientific, non-vocational major that concentrates on sociological concepts and skills, with more than 90 percent of students majoring because of their interest in these concepts (Spalter-Roth et. al 2013). Many departments and faculty members are creating learning activities for their students that take place outside of the traditional classroom in order to give their students the resources and contacts they need to succeed in the job market. This research brief examines to what extent departments are offering such activities, since opportunities for such experiences exist in an organizational context, and to what extent students are participating in them.

The findings in this brief come from two longitudinal studies of senior sociology majors funded by the National Science Foundation.¹ The first tracked majors who graduated in 2005 before the Great Recession

¹The authors thank the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation for supporting the 2005 and 2012 *Bachelors' and Beyond* surveys.

and the second in 2012 after the recovery had begun. Each *Bachelor's and Beyond* study has three waves—the first wave surveys senior sociology majors, their learning activities, their satisfaction with the major, and their future plans. The next two waves survey them after they had completed their undergraduate degree and were in the paid labor force, in graduate school, or in both. The first survey of the class of 2005 seniors showed that majors who participated in a range of activities outside of traditional class sessions were more successful in finding jobs close to sociology and in gaining admission to graduate school (Spalter-Roth, Van Vooren, Senter 2009). Among other questions, the first wave of the 2012 survey documents the extent to which post-recession sociology majors report that they engage in these participatory, experiential, and outreach activities as part of their undergraduate experience and what contacts they use in their job search and pursuit of graduate training. These activities can promote the development of social network ties (Senter, Van Vooren, Kisielewski, and Spalter-Roth 2013).

SAMPLE

The stratified sample of 104 departments that participated in the 2005 *Bachelor's and Beyond* study was invited to participate in the 2012 study. Along with these departments, the 2012 invitation was also extended to any department that wished to have its students included in the study. The result was an additional 129 interested departments for a total of 233 departments. In order to participate, departments were asked to send a list of their senior sociology majors graduating between April and August 2012 and their email addresses. Ultimately, 160 departments sent the ASA Research Department their lists after obtaining institutional review board (IRB) and/or any institutional approval necessary to disclose this information beyond the IRB approval granted to ASA by the Western Institutional Review Board.

STUDENT SURVEY

ASA's Research Department created the student survey, with the help of the study's Advisory Committee, replicating many questions from the 2005 questionnaire while adding new questions about the social networks that students used or plan to use in pursuing jobs. The final version of the survey was launched with an invitational email to students in

March 2012, which was followed up with four reminder emails before the survey closed in early May. In the end, 2,695 students had participated in the survey, for an average departmental response rate of about 40 percent (36.8 percent). We weighted the responses so that they were more reliable. We compared demographic and institutional characteristics of respondents with those of recent baccalaureates in sociology, based on the National Center for Educational Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

BACHELOR'S AND BEYOND DEPARTMENT SURVEY

In late October, 2012, the departments participating in the second *Bachelor's and Beyond* project were mailed a summary of the data provided by their students.² In addition, they were asked two questions about their department. The first question asked:

How much emphasis does your department place on out-of-class activities for your majors that have a "real world," applied focus—for example, service learning, volunteering, community-based research, and internships?

The second focused on peer networks by asking:

How much does your department encourage your majors to develop peer networks through activities such as sociology clubs, AKD chapters, department picnics, and use of departmental lounges/student study spaces?

Four response options were provided for each question, ranging from "a great deal" to "almost none (or none)" for the first question and from "a great deal" to "not at all" for the second.

Departments that did not respond to this first e-mail request for departmental information were sent follow-up reminders or were further contacted by telephone. In the end, 143 of the 160 departments provided responses—for an 89 percent response rate. Data on the Carnegie classification of departments were also available. The three categories used in this analysis are Doctoral institutions with 69 institutions or 43.7 percent of the sample, Masters' institutions with 58 schools or 36.7 percent of the total, and bac-

²Departments received such data summaries if five or more of their students completed the first wave survey.

calaureate institutions with 31 colleges or 19.6 percent of the entire group.

In addition, data were gathered for 15 departments that did not respond to e-mail and telephone requests for information. Departments that made easy-to-find mention on their “home page” of activities such as internships or sociology clubs were coded as providing a great deal of emphasis, while departments with no mention of application or peer networks on any of their web pages were coded as providing no such emphasis.

Further, an additional content analysis was conducted on those departments (of the 143) who responded “a great deal” to both questions about “real world” application and peer networks. A summary of the activities listed on six departments’ websites that provided easy-to-find information on out-of-class activities is included in the Appendix. This information is presented to give a sense of the substance behind the response of chairs that their departments provide “a great deal” of emphasis on application and peer networks and to give other departments examples of how they might organize their own websites if they have interest in promoting these types of activities.

FINDINGS

First, we present the data on departmental assessment by chairs or undergraduate directors on the learning activities for their students that take place outside of the traditional classroom. Second, we present data on participation in these activities by student sociology majors.

DEPARTMENTS

Table 1 shows that about one-third of departments report that they emphasize “real world applications of sociological knowledge “a great deal.” These activities include internships, community services, career counseling, career-related mentorships, and job fairs. About one-fifth of departments provide few of these activities, with the modal group providing some activities. The table also shows that the departmental emphasis on application varies significantly by institutional type. More than one-half of Master’s institutions place a great deal of emphasis on applications

with only about 20 percent of doctoral and baccalaureate institutions reporting this high commitment to what we refer to as “real world” applications. Doctoral universities appear to be the most likely to provide few out-of-class activities that could enhance employ-

Table 1. Departmental Emphasis on “Real World” Application by Institutional Type: Percentages*

	Doctoral	Master’s	Baccalaureate	Total
A little or less	31.9	6.9	29.0	22.2
Some	47.8	41.4	48.4	45.6
A great deal	20.3	51.7	22.6	32.3

*Statistically significant chi-square of 20.83, with df = 4, sig. < .001.

ability even though they have the largest percent of students expecting to go into the job market.

Table 2 shows that fewer departments encourage peer networks for students such as sociology clubs and other group activities. Overall, about one-quarter of departments report that they provide a great deal of encouragement to majors to develop peer networks; about one-half provide some encouragement, and about one-quarter provide only a little or no such encouragement. In contrast to the significant differences among types of departments shown in Table 1, Table 2 indicates that departments associated with each type of institution are similar in their encouragement (or lack of encouragement) of peer networks. While it appears at the outset that baccalaureate insti-

Table 2. Departmental Encouragement of Peer Networks by Institutional Type: Percentages*

	Doctoral	Master’s	Baccalaureate	Total
A little or less	30.4	27.6	19.4	27.2
Some	50.7	43.1	45.2	46.8
A great deal	18.8	29.3	35.5	25.9

*Not statistically significant chi-square of 4.07, with df = 4, sig. < .400.

tutions are more supportive of peer network creation, the relationship between institutional type and peer network encouragement is not statistically significant.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION

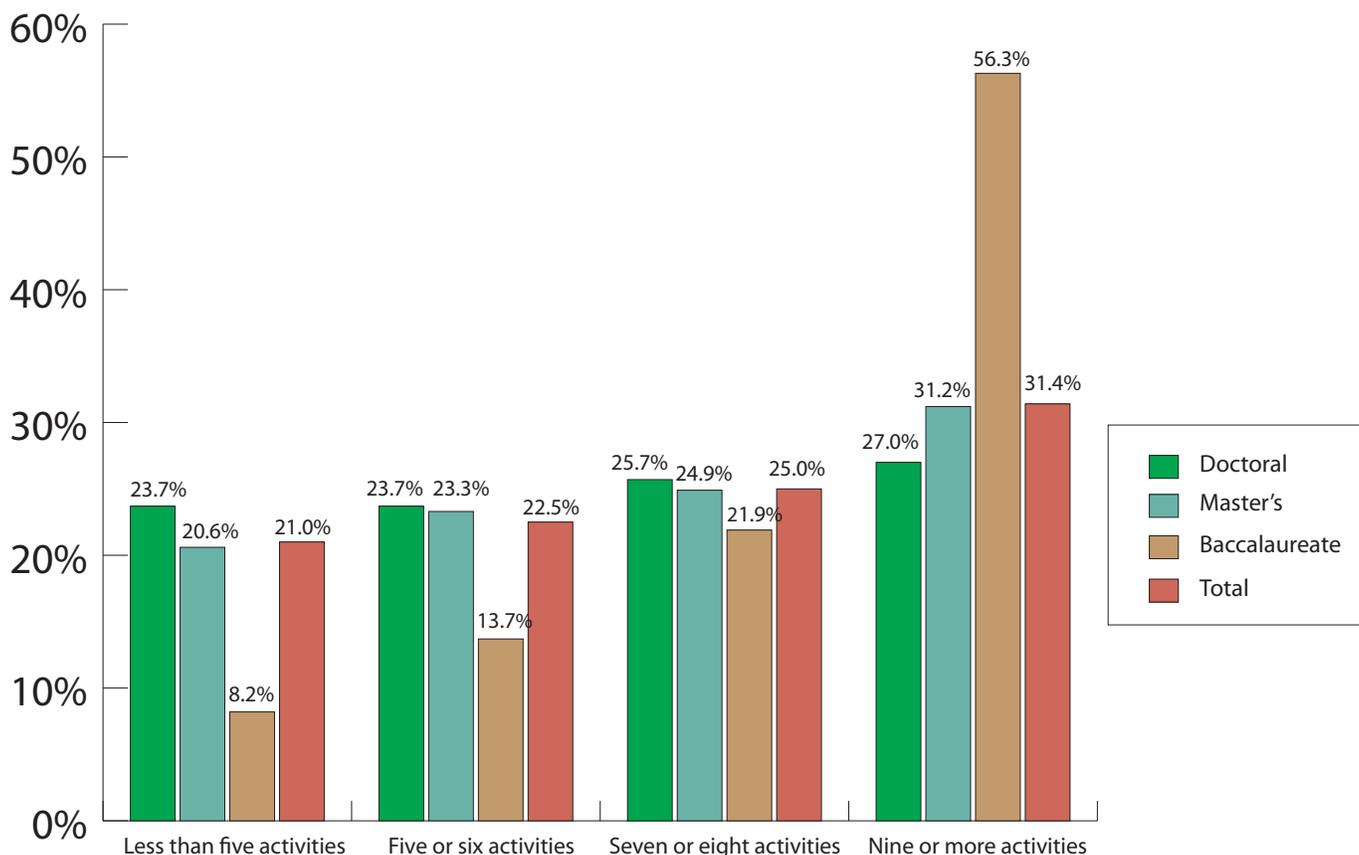
In 2012, senior majors participated in many out-of-class activities, perhaps to make themselves more attractive to employers, who suggest that there is a mismatch between college curriculum and the skills that employers need and that internships might close the gap (Fischer 2013). In addition, students may recognize—even if only implicitly—that these kinds of

activities can increase their social capital. Overall, senior majors participated in an average of about seven out-of-class activities out of a possible 15. However, Figure 1 shows significant differences between types of institution with senior majors at baccalaureate-only schools more likely to participate in the most activities (nine or more) and students at doctoral institutions were more likely to participate in the fewest activities (fewer than seven). Yet even senior majors at doctoral institutions take advantage of out-of-class activities along with their participation in classes, demonstrating the attractiveness of these activities. We found that seniors' participation in some out-of-class activities are relatively ubiquitous across sociology programs, while other types of departmentally-supported peer activities are relatively rare.

Table 3 shows that more than 80 percent of students report that they did participate in a group or team project for at least one of their classes and did par-

ticipate in a study group for a class. By contrast, only about one-half of students report participation in activities that are explicit in their focus on career development—internships (whether paid or unpaid); seeing a career advisor; and attending “jobs fairs, on-campus interviews by firms, career-related mentorship programs, or other networking opportunities.” And, fewer students—no more than one-quarter—report involvement in Alpha Kappa Delta or a sociology club on their campus. Regardless of the type of activity in which seniors participated, in 2012 student satisfaction with the sociology major increases when they are given opportunities to interact with their fellow students on substantive projects, when they interact with faculty in a variety of ways beyond the classroom, and when they take part in activities such as internships and service learning projects that provide for transitions to the next stage of their lives—be that graduate school or employment (Senter et al. 2013).

FIGURE 1. STUDENTS AT BACCALAUREATE INSTITUTIONS PARTICIPATE IN THE MOST ACTIVITIES.



Source: American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates Survey, 2012.*

TABLE 3. ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION (PERCENT)

Group or team projects for one or more classes	92.0
Study groups for a class	81.5
Received mentoring advice from a faculty member	70.1
Community or other volunteer activity other than an internship or class project	63.5
Saw a career advisor	56.0
Jobs fairs, on-campus interviews by firms, career-related mentorship programs, or other networking opportunities	52.5
Internship	50.9
Work with a group advocating some cause	50.7
Service learning project	47.3
Independent study or research project with faculty member	35.1
Leadership development program	31.0
AKD or other sociology club	24.8
Study abroad	21.8
Department honors program	18.7
Attended local, national, or regional sociology meeting	15.8

Source: American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates Survey, 2012.*

SUMMARY

Sociology is not a vocational discipline *per se*, but rather a scientific discipline that teaches concepts and skills—the reasons that almost all students major. Nonetheless, many departments—especially those at Master’s comprehensive universities—do attempt to create out-of-class activities and encourage majors to participate in them so as to increase their social capital through contacts and networks that provide resources such as access to employment. Activities such as internships and participation in sociology clubs such as Alpha Kappa Delta can increase graduates’ attractiveness to employers and to graduate departments. In addition, activities such as participating in community organizations can fulfill majors’ desire to “change society”—a reason for majoring chosen by almost three-quarters of respondents. As noted, we found that some out-of-class activities are relatively ubiquitous across sociology programs, while other types of departmentally-supported applied and peer activities are relatively rare. Still, almost all students participated in at least one such activity, with an average of seven out of 15 per student. Contrary to the views of the NAS, we have no evidence that departmental sponsorship of such activities reduces the academic rigor of majors. By contrast, student participation may well enhance student success, while also

boosting their satisfaction.

Of course, students cannot participate in such activities unless they are made aware of them. We suggest that students at baccalaureate institutions may have heightened levels of participation in such activities because the smaller size of such colleges may facilitate communication about activities both among students and between faculty and students. While department chairs at Master’s institutions report greater departmental emphasis on “real world” application and the development of peer networks, they may be less successful in alerting students to the opportunities available. Consequently, departments might consider new or improved ways of translating departmental commitment into student knowledge. Ease of finding these activities on department websites is certainly one way that can increase student participation. Without becoming job counselors or community organizers, faculty members should consider encouraging student participation along with their ongoing emphasis on teaching, research, and the scientific method.

In the next research brief using data from the 2012 *Bachelors and Beyond* survey, we will explore further the kind of social capital that students use to find jobs that are close to what they learned in sociology. A future brief will examine the relationship between

out-of-class activities, sources of social capital, and employment at positions that reflect what they have learned in sociology courses.

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APPENDIX TABLE. SAMPLE OF SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENTS' WEBSITES PROMOTING CAREER INFORMATION

Institution	Activities Mentioned
Butler University Department of Sociology and Criminology	Experiential learning (internships, service learning, research opportunities), link to ASA resources, alumni tracking, Alpha Kappa Delta information (sociology undergraduate honorary society). Website: http://www.butler.edu/sociology-criminology
Humboldt State University Department of Sociology	Link to <i>Bachelors and Beyond</i> brief and other ASA resources, service learning mentioned in newsletter, links for potential employers and organizations, link to university career services, professional development guide. Website: http://www.humboldt.edu/sociology/index.html
Radford University Department of Sociology	List of graduate placements; potential employers/job tracks; list of websites/resources for job search including ASA; internships page/links to organizations and search engines; alumni tracking/newsletter. Website: http://www.radford.edu/content/chbs/home/sociology.html
Southwestern University Department of Sociology and Anthropology	Capstone requirement, internship information including links, ASA information, AKD information, link to Alumni placement, link to university career services. Website: http://www.southwestern.edu/departments/sociologyanthropology/
Texas A&M University Department of Sociology	Internship opportunity info page, "Choosing Courses for the Job You Want" page, undergraduate publication opportunities. Website: http://sociweb.tamu.edu/
University of Texas at Austin Department of Sociology	General career information, possible job tracks, links to career services and ASA site, resources links—how to's for resumes and cover letters, AKD and Sociology in Action information. Website: http://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/sociology/
Truman State Department of Society and Environment (includes sociology)	Website shows internship opportunities, alumni survey, Alpha Kappa Delta information. Link to ASA career information, sociology club (now Students for Social Change), link to university career center, jobs site. Website: http://societyandenvironment.truman.edu/

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What Leads to Student Satisfaction with Sociology Programs?	PDF	2012
On the Upswing: Findings from the ASA 2011-2012 Job Bank Survey	PDF	2012
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Research about Minorities in Sociology: Surveys, Datasets, and Measurement	PPT	2012
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The Effects of New Technology on the Growth of a Teaching and Learning Network	PDF	2011
The Future of Sociology: Minorities, Programs, and Jobs	PDF	2011
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Networks and the Diffusion of Cutting-Edge Teaching and Learning Knowledge in Sociology	PDF	2010
The Gap in Faculty Pay Between Private and Public Institutions: Smaller in Sociology than in Other Social Sciences	PDF	2010
Still a Down Market: Findings from the 2009/2010 Job Bank Survey	PDF	2010
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