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# How Departments Can Respond to the Changing Popularity of the Sociology Major

Stephen Sweet<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

While the popularity of the psychology major and the sociology major were comparable in 1970, sociology witnessed a decline while psychology witnessed expansion. This article considers strategies of expanding the popularity of the sociology major, considering data from a variety of sources. Primary recommendations are to configure programs to maximize prospects that students discover sociology early in their college careers and to limit the number of barriers that might prevent students from enrolling in sociology courses. Departments that expanded the number of sociology majors from 2008 to 2014 are identified. These departments prioritized expanding the major as an objective and developed a variety of methods to increase access, visibility, and vitality of the sociology program at their institutions.

### Keywords

program design, curriculum, sociology trends, sociology programs

My interest is to identify how department-level practices and decisions might influence undergraduate students to gravitate toward sociology as opposed to some alternative major. Although much is known about the type of student who is attracted to sociology and how student values influence the choice of the sociology major, surprisingly little analysis has been directed to the structural contexts that impact the popularity of the sociology major from one institution to the next. Why might a sociology program expand in one college and decline in another? And, perhaps more importantly, what can declining programs do to increase interest in the sociology major?

Numerous resources published by the American Sociological Association (see especially McKinney et al. 2004) as well as within the journal *Teaching Sociology* (e.g., Kain 2007; Vaughan, Peterson, and Carlson 1990) advocate for ideal structures of the sociology major from a curricular perspective as

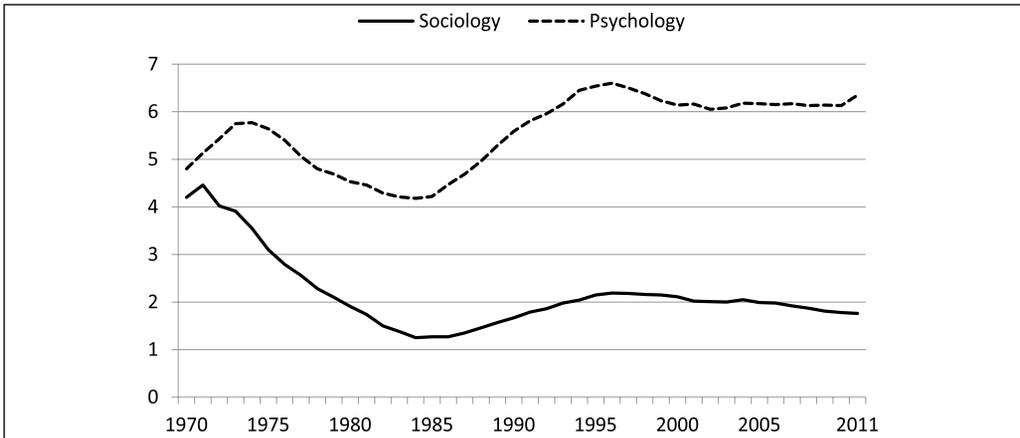
well as means to assess learning from the major (e.g., Pedersen and White 2011). However, to my knowledge, no resource has yet offered a theoretically informed systematic appraisal that considers why student interest in the sociology major might thrive in some institutions and why it might languish in others. Additionally, to my knowledge, no source has considered how specific curricular designs might impede or enhance recruitment into the sociology major. To help illuminate answers to these concerns, I consider my own biography, present a case study of a college with declining majors,

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Stephen Sweet, Department of Sociology, Ithaca College, 107 Muller Faculty Center, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA.

Email: [ssweet@ithaca.edu](mailto:ssweet@ithaca.edu)



**Figure 1.** Percentage of bachelor degrees awarded in sociology and psychology 1970 to 2011.

Source: NPR Planet Money based on data from the Digest of Educational Statistics, <http://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/05/09/310114739/whats-your-major-four-decades-of-college-degrees-in-1-graph>.

analyze organization-level trends from colleges and universities across the United States, and draw on in-depth interviews with representatives from departments that have had substantial growth in their majors. Analysis is informed by market theory, conservation of resources theory, and life course theory, which offer frameworks from which to understand how opportunity structures influence career pathways into (and sometimes away from) the sociology major.

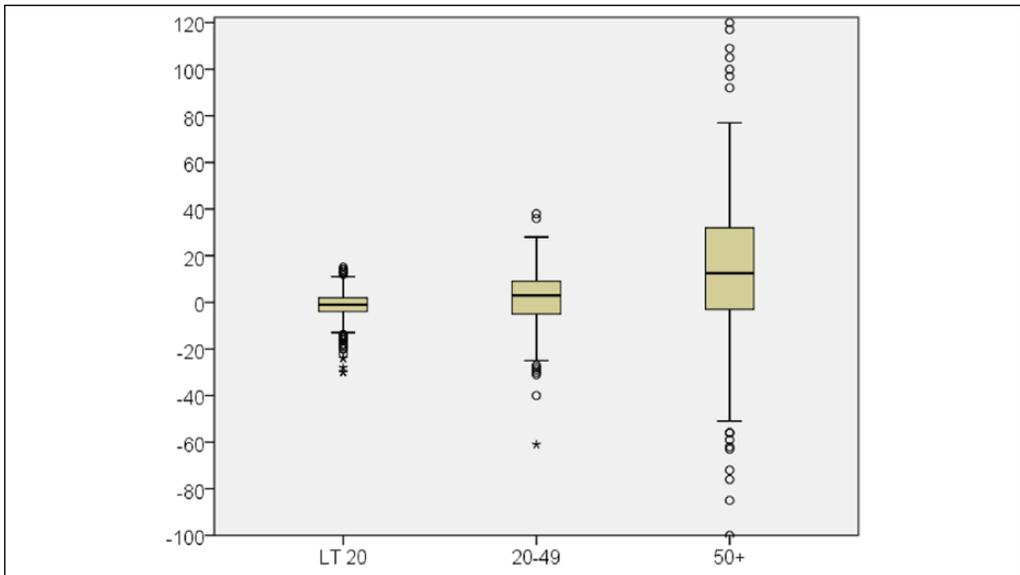
Four propositions are advanced that relate to the following overarching considerations: changing student demographics, prospects of discovering sociology, entry opportunities, and barriers. I conclude by considering specific strategies to expand the major, initiatives that departments might consider if they are to sustain and enhance the popularity of their programs.

## ENROLLMENT TRENDS, MARKET SHARES, AND THE SOCIOLOGY MAJOR

Sociology majors come from a market of students who are interested in social issues and are captivated by initial exposure, career interests, and personal values (Spalter-Roth et al. 2010). Potential sociology majors could possibly be attracted by other majors that coincide with career interests and values, such as psychology, economics, anthropology, and so on. Sociology has much to offer students, but so do these other disciplines. To some extent, the success of individual sociology programs hinge on their abilities to compete against alternative majors.

To help illustrate this dynamic, Figure 1 shows national-level trends in the popularity of sociology among undergraduate students as compared to psychology. Notice that sociology and psychology were positioned in fairly comparable positions in 1970, but by 2011, there were more than three psychology graduates for every one sociology graduate. Why did one discipline rise and the other decline when both disciplines have the potential to be equally captivating? Certainly the reaction to the Vietnam War and civil rights unrest played some role in the high level of interest in sociology in the early 1970s, and the rise of conservative politics in the 1980s might explain some of the decline. Recent opportunity shifts might explain some of the limited interest in the major today, evidenced by fewer sociology majors listing job preparation as a reason for selecting the sociology major in the wake of the Great Recession (Spalter-Roth et al. 2012). But also observe that counter trends are not observed, such as during periods of relative liberalism in the 1990s. For reasons open to speculation, sociology has lost a market share of the undergraduate population compared to the share it possessed four decades ago.

National trends documented in Figure 1 combine degree recipients from individual organizations and should not be confused with organizational trends (think ecological fallacy here). Organizational trends are the focus of my study. When analysis shifts to trends within specific colleges and universities, a complex story emerges, as some programs reduced the number of graduates with sociology degrees and others increased that number (sometimes substantially). So the national problem of declining interest in



**Figure 2.** Numeric change in sociology BA degrees awarded 2008–2013: Comparison of institutions on the basis of number of sociology BA degrees awarded in 2008 (Data: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, N = 972).

Note: One extreme outlier excluded.

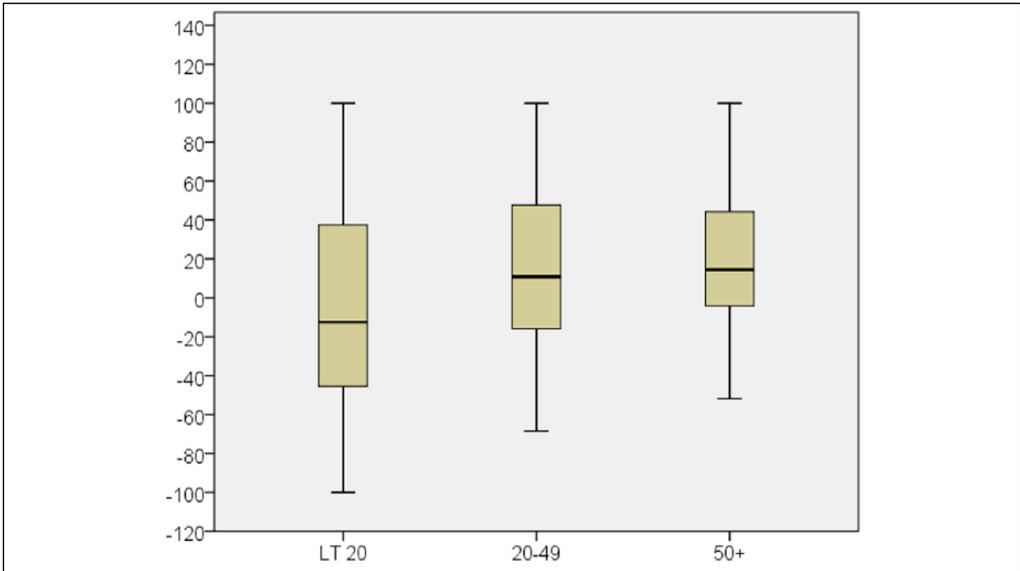
sociology is not always experienced at the local level within specific institutions. And sometimes it is even more pronounced. The observations presented in the following reveal that trends in the major are not simply a national concern for the discipline; they are also local concerns that are potentially amenable to local solutions.

For both practical and analytic reasons, my focus is on more recent trends when considering organizational data from national data sets, comparing 2008 with 2013. Analysis relies on data from the National Center for Educational Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).<sup>1</sup> First, a couple of notes on how these data were analyzed. Although the concern of my study is trends in the sociology major, the IPEDS data do not contain this information, only the number of bachelor degrees earned in sociology.<sup>2</sup> More than 7,500 institutions complete the IPEDS surveys each year. The analyses presented here are restricted to colleges and universities designated as not-for-profit private institutions or public institutions. Additionally, because my interest is to explain trends in the sociology majors, multivariate analysis further limits institutions to those that offered sociology BA degrees in both 2008 and 2013.

The box plots presented in Figure 2 show that the median numeric change in the number of

sociology bachelor's degrees provided from 2008 to 2013, for all program sizes, was 0 or close to 0. It also shows that larger programs were more dynamic with respect to numeric change, with a greater change variation evident from one program to the next (as reflected in the size of the main box defining the middle 50 percent of cases as well as the whiskers reflecting 1.5 times the interquartile range). Note, however, how interpretation shifts when analysis focuses on the percentage change, the degrees awarded in 2013 relative to the degrees awarded in 2008 (formula:  $[(2013 - 2008) / 2008] \times 100$ ). Figure 3 shows that with respect to percentage change, smaller programs exhibited more variability over time. This is to be expected, as a small program that graduated (for example) two majors in 2008 could demonstrate a 100 percent increase by graduating four majors in 2013. In contrast, a large program that had the same numeric change of an additional two sociology degrees awarded would have a negligible impact on its overall percentage change score.

Both numeric and proportional change frameworks are important to consider when it comes to evaluating programs or assessing need for (or outcomes of) potential change initiatives. Irrespective of the size of the program, even a modest fluctuation in the number of degrees awarded can affect that



**Figure 3.** Percentage change in sociology BA degrees awarded 2008–2013: Comparison of institutions on the basis of number of sociology BA degrees awarded in 2008 (Data: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, N = 972).

Note: Percentage change is top coded at +100 and bottom coded –100.

interpretation of that program's vitality and decisions about how to allocate resources. However, because smaller programs are more prone to greater proportionate changes, as a consequence they may experience greater frequency of angst (or joy) with respect to relative yield. In good years, positive changes may help smaller programs generate support for resource allocations by presenting themselves as having remarkable potential for growth when such growth occurs. However, unless this trend is sustained, such a case may be difficult to establish.

The previous analysis shows that program enrollments within institutions are dynamic in both positive and negative directions, far more so than is understood from any cursory analysis of national-level trends. Understanding that some programs expand majors while others remain constant or contract suggests that local initiatives can counter (as well as give shape to) national-level trends.

## THE IMPACT OF STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS AND STUDENT INTERESTS

Having established that there is considerable variation in the change in the number of degrees awarded

from one institution to the next, I now consider the extent that student demographics might influence trends observed. Analysis is limited to data present in the IPEDS and is restricted to a few key variables, simply because of the limited number of demographic variables present in these data. I adopt a change score approach (Allison 1990) in which the dependent variable reflects the difference in the number of degrees awarded in each college or university in 2013 relative to the number of degrees awarded in 2008 (positive scores indicate more degrees awarded in 2013). Analysis considers three institutional contexts: smaller programs that awarded fewer than 20 bachelor degrees, medium-sized programs that awarded 20 to 49 degrees, and larger programs that awarded 50 or more degrees in 2008.

One obvious explanation for within-institution changes in sociology bachelor degrees awarded is overall institutional enrollment, which fluctuates on a year-to-year basis. If institutions increase the number of total degrees awarded, then it should be expected that they will also award more sociology bachelor degrees as well. The regressions presented in Table 1 support this conclusion. For smaller and medium-sized programs, when institutions increase the number of degrees awarded, they also tend to award more sociology bachelor

**Table 1.** Regression on the Numeric Change in Sociology Bachelor Degrees Awarded at Public and Not-for-profit Institutions in the United States from 2008 to 2013.

	Number of Sociology BA Degrees Awarded in 2008											
	Less Than 20			20–49			50+			All Institutions		
	B	SE	Sign	B	SE	Sign	B	SE	Sign	B	SE	Sign
Constant	.569	.746		–5.694	1.930		–24.670	8.166		–4.345	1.377	
Number change all degrees awarded 2013–2008	.010	.002	**	.012	.003	**	.006	.006		.005	.002	*
Number change non-sociology social science degrees 2013–2008	.006	.012		.034	.016	*	.093	.022	**	.086	.009	**
Percentage of students receiving Pell Grants	.006	.018		.109	.053	*	.674	.219	**	.110	.034	**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		.068			.221			.227			.185	
N		548			247			168			965	

Note: One extreme outlier omitted.

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$

degrees. Evidence revealing this relationship is not surprising. What is interesting is the limited strength of this relationship. Remember that approximately 2 percent of all degrees awarded are for sociology (Figure 1). For each additional degree awarded, it should therefore be expected that the regression coefficients register at approximately .02. Table 1 shows regression coefficients that are half that size or far less, indicating that total degree award fluctuations (a proxy for enrollments) actually have less influence on the change in sociology degrees earned than anticipated. In other words, other disciplines benefit more from enrollment expansions than sociology does, suggesting that sociology is not competing as effectively as might be hoped in the market of potential majors.

It is possible that unique demographic characteristics of institutions might disadvantage some programs relative to others in specific contexts, leading to declines in enrollment. It should be easy to recognize that not all individuals are equally likely to be attracted to sociology, with its keen interest in issues relating to disadvantage and injustice, and thus, sociology programs situated in institutions that have greater proportions of disadvantaged students might have greater appeal. However, disadvantage and selection of the sociology major do not always operate as might be

predicted. One would expect, for instance, that racial minorities are differentially drawn to the sociology major. They are not. In fact, racial minorities are underrepresented in the sociology major relative to presence in other undergraduate majors (*Chronicle of Higher Education* 2014; Spalter-Roth et al. 1996). The American Sociological Association documented that, following the onset of the Great Recession, fewer students who majored in sociology did so with beliefs that it was preparing them for future careers (Spalter-Roth et al. 2012). So it seems that economic context might influence perspectives on the utility of the major as well as the tendency to gravitate toward the major. Disadvantage and constrained opportunities might intersect, as the economic context of strain might drive students who are most economically vulnerable toward sociology. If this expectation is true, then institutions that service students who most strongly felt the brunt of economic strain might be most apt to have gained sociology majors during the Great Recession.

To test the prospect that institutions with disadvantaged students tended to have greater prospects for growth in the sociology major, the regressions presented Table 1 include the percentage of students who were receiving Pell Grants in 2013. The Federal Pell Grant Program provides need-based

aid to low-income undergraduate students to promote access to postsecondary education. Institutions that have more Pell Grant recipients are likely to be those serving student populations most adversely affected by the 2008 economic downturn. Regressions show that institutions that had higher proportions of Pell Grant recipients were the most apt to exhibit expansion in the sociology major in the wake of the Great Recession (significant coefficients ranging from .109 to .674).

A third explanation draws from market theory, considering the preexisting interests that students might have, which in turn might draw them toward sociology. The IPEDS does not have data that directly measure these interests, but it does include data that reflect trends in related majors. Perhaps a declining popularity of the sociology major might be a consequence of declining interest in the types of issues that are also addressed by sister disciplines. If such a relationship exists, then the expansion and decline in sociology should correspond with similar changes in closely related fields. To test for this prospect, regressions presented in Table 1 include a variable indicating the change in the combined number of degrees awarded in disciplines that are closely related to sociology (including ethnic studies, psychology, anthropology, criminology, economics, political science, and history). Note that in all institutions and in the restricted analysis for medium and large programs, the relationships are positive (significant coefficients ranging from .016 to .093). Findings indicate that as other closely related disciplines gain majors, sociology tends to do so as well. Conversely, when these closely related disciplines tend to lose majors, so does sociology. These findings suggest that program growth relates to changes in student interests and that differences in these interests from one institution to the next, and over time, can explain some of the trends in the popularity of the major. But even then, notice that the regression coefficients are small. On average, it takes an increase of more than 10 degree awards in these seven closely related disciplines to correspond with 1 additional degree award in sociology. These findings suggest that maximizing expansion in sociology programs requires not only tapping into student interests (which contribute to growth) but also demonstrating the value of the major relative to the value of other closely related fields that share common interests.

The regressions reported in Table 1 are limited by containing only a few select indicators. The indicators tested only explained a small portion of

the variation in the changes observed from 2008 to 2013. At best, approximately one-fifth (R squares that range from .068 to .227) of the variance in changes observed could be explained by changes in enrollment, changes in related degrees awarded, and percentages of students receiving Pell Grants. The model leaves four-fifths of the variation unexplained. Nonetheless, data support the following propositions:

*Proposition 1: Student demographics matter.*

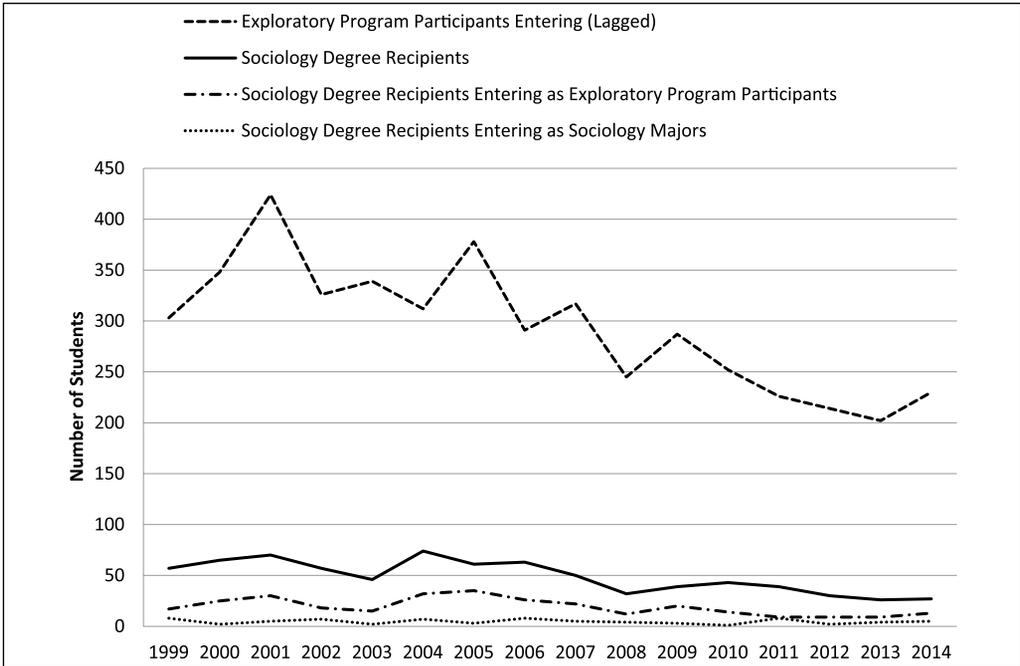
Institutions that attract the types of students who may have interests in sociology (and closely related disciplines) have greater prospects for expansion in the major.

## MAXIMIZING PROSPECTS OF DISCOVERING SOCIOLOGY

Most students do not enter college with the intent to major in sociology, and many do not even know what sociology is. Most sociology majors “discover” the discipline, with three in four students attributing the enjoyment of their first class to their decision to become a major (American Sociological Association 2006). Here I introduce the impact of career investments—the extent that students dedicate themselves to a defined area of study—to highlight how program discovery structures affect pathways into the major. For illustration, I use enrollment in the sociology program at Ithaca College as a case study.

Ithaca College is selected for two reasons. The first reason is simply that I had access to relevant data (the use of which has been approved by my institution’s Human Subjects Review Board). The second reason is that the popularity of the sociology major at Ithaca College has changed over the past 15 years, from a high of 74 majors graduating in 2004, declining steadily to 27 majors in 2014. My colleagues and I have been puzzled as to why this decline has occurred. As I argue in the following, the most compelling explanation that I could find relates to changes in career investment patterns among students at Ithaca College.

Before presenting findings, I offer just a few notes about the case study institution. Ithaca College’s enrollment fluctuates from year to year but averages at approximately 6,100 undergraduates. In 2013–2014, the average undergraduate age was 20 years, and nearly all were enrolled full-time. The vast majority of classes in the Sociology Department were taught by full-time faculty members (11 in 2014). The



**Figure 4.** Trends in the sociology program and exploratory program at Ithaca College 1999–2014.

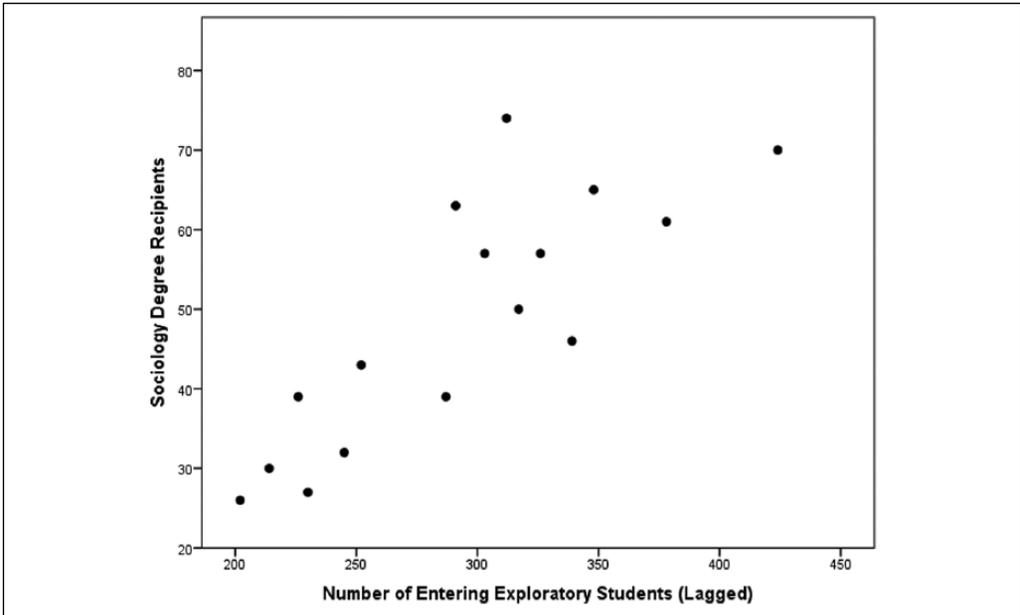
average class size is 22 students, and in fall 2014, classes filled to 94 percent of capacity. There has not been a substantial change in any of these characteristics over the past 15 years. The sociology program at Ithaca College compares favorably to those at other institutions with respect to the select recommendations advanced by the American Sociological Association’s Task Force on the Undergraduate Major (McKinney et al. 2004) as assessed by Sweet, McElrath, and Kain (2014).

Some changes in the sociology program occurred during the timeframe studied here. The Sociology Department revised its major in 2004, moving away from a structure that encouraged students to concentrate in subareas of the discipline to a structure that encouraged exposure to different core areas. The department enhanced its website presence and expected all members to develop and maintain personal webpages. The department also created guides and pamphlets to help students understand the value of the sociology major. In 2012, the department became a member of Alpha Kappa Delta. Although enrollment was not the primary driver of any of these initiatives, department members anticipated that these types of changes would serve to enhance attractiveness of the major. Because of continued declining enrollments in the major, and also understanding that these changes

were not as evident at the national level, department members spent considerable time in meetings and in hallway conversations asking “What is happening?” and “What should we do differently?”

A market analysis shows an important finding: that greater shares of students at this particular institution were entering the college with more clearly defined intents to major in other disciplines. As a consequence, the internal market from which sociology majors were generated became more constrained over time, resulting in fewer students recruited to the major.

The bottom-most line presented in Figure 4 shows that it is relatively rare for students who graduate from Ithaca College with a sociology degree to enter the college with that intent. In 2000, for example, only 2 of the 65 students who graduated from Ithaca College with sociology degrees entered as freshmen as declared sociology majors. Averaging data across years estimates that only 9 percent of graduating sociology majors initiated their enrollment at the college with an apparent intent of achieving a degree in this discipline. There is a modest (but nonsignificant) correlation between the number of students graduating with sociology degrees and the number of students entering the college as freshmen as declared sociology majors (Pearson Correlation .316,  $p = .233$ ,



**Figure 5.** Scatterplot of the number of sociology degree recipients and number of entering exploratory students at Ithaca College 1999–2014 (correlation .822).

*ns*). Even if this relationship were significant, variation in the number of students entering the college as sociology majors as freshmen explains only 10 percent of the variance in the number of students graduating with sociology degrees. From this analysis, I conclude that changes in the sociology major should not be attributed to changes in the capacity of the department to effectively tap the external market of students who enter college intending to major in sociology.

In contrast, the changes in the internal market (students enrolled in other programs at Ithaca College who might be converted to the sociology major) played a major role in generating changes in the popularity of the sociology major over time. Observe that in 2000, 25 of the 65 students who graduated with sociology degrees entered Ithaca College in its “exploratory program” with no defined major. Averaging data across years reveals that the exploratory program provided 39 percent of the students who ultimately graduated with sociology degrees. The upper two lines in Figure 4 show the trends in the number of students graduating with sociology degrees and the number of students entering into Ithaca College as exploratory students with no defined major. The latter variable is lagged forward 4 years to reflect the positioning of each cohort relative to its intended graduation date.<sup>3</sup> Note that the decline of sociology graduates

corresponds with the trend in exploratory program participants (Pearson correlation .822,  $p < .000$ ). Fully 68 percent of the variation observed in the number of sociology degree recipients at Ithaca College can be explained by the number of exploratory students entering the institution. Figure 5 recasts the analysis into a scatterplot, showing even more effectively the strong relationship between the number of students who entered Ithaca College with no defined major and the number of students graduating with sociology degrees four years later.

If this dynamic exists at other institutions, it leads to the following proposition:

*Proposition 2:* Prospects for discovery matter. Sociology programs are more likely to thrive when institutions enroll greater numbers of students who have yet to firmly decide on a major. Sociology programs are more likely to contract when institutions enroll more students with firmly defined intents to major in disciplines outside of sociology.

## ENTRY OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS

It is well known that students gravitate to the sociology major in part because it meshes well with personal interests, values, and career goals (Senter,

Van Voreen, and Spalter-Roth 2013, 2014). Most of the literature on student selection of the sociology major focuses on identity correspondence, career selection processes in which individuals direct themselves to endeavors in which they have a sense of a personal belonging or competency (Cech 2013). In other words, one explanation for why students select the major is that it fits with the biographies that they have and continue to construct. But what happens if that discovery occurs too late in the game to make a difference? Life course research underscores the importance not only of value-identity correspondence but also the timing and sequencing of key life events as well as the structures that shape career transitions (Elder 1999; Hogan 1980; Sweet and Moen 2006). I draw on life course theory and use my own biography to illustrate why timing of exposure to sociology matters.

Even though I immediately loved sociology, I pursued a psychology major because it was a more obvious career path for someone who wanted to “help people.” I did not find my psychology classes to be nearly as interesting as my sociology classes, but they were good enough, and I believed they would lead to a future job. Why didn’t I major in sociology as an undergraduate? In my case, I came of age and entered college in 1982, as the sociology major was approaching its nadir and as conservative politics was on the rise in the United States. None of my friends were sociology majors, and as a consequence, network ties did not exert any leverage. I was also (and still am) a status-conscious white male. The interplay of those elements, a socially conservative society, social networks, and social identity, might have acted in a combined fashion to dissuade me from sociology and pull me toward psychology. However, as I discuss in the following, the intersection of these contexts does not offer a complete explanation.

In my junior year, I experienced a turning point (Clausen 1995), one that made me far less convinced that psychology offered transformative promise. This occurred in Patrick Turbett’s class on the sociology of mental health. Particularly important was a discussion of Eaton and Weil’s (1955) study concerning the rarity of depression among Hutterites, a group that co-existed within the dominant American culture where depression is commonplace. The ideas that mental health disorders reflected societal disorders and that mental health reflected societal health were mind-blowing. None of my psychology professors had discussed these fundamental observations, and I internalized a new belief that “big solutions” were to be found in

sociology, something far more attractive than “small solutions” that I had been learning in psychology. In this light, the psychology major did not seem to be such a smart career move after all. But I did not switch to the sociology major for a very simple reason: I had already invested my course credits in the psychology program. If I were to take sociology as an alternative or second major, it would have scuttled my intent to graduate a semester early, and it might have even necessitated graduating behind my classmates. Within the framework of conservation of resources theory (which operates on the proposition of economic rationality in decision-making processes), the entry costs into the sociology major outweighed the potential returns on that investment (Hobfoll 2001). As a consequence, exposure to the sociology of mental health came too late in my career to make a difference on my potential selection of the sociology major. These observations suggest that it is not sufficient to structure a program that provides an opportunity to discover sociology; it is also necessary to structure the program so that discovery takes place early enough in the college career for the major to be a viable option. I advance two propositions relating to entry options and barriers:

*Proposition 3:* Early exposure matters. Programs that maximize opportunities for early exposure to sociology enhance prospects that students will become majors.

*Proposition 4:* Limiting barriers matters. Programs that erect fewer barriers to the completion of the major enhance prospects that students will become majors.

## DRIVERS OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES FOR GROWTH

If the propositions hold, there should be evidence of corresponding strategies implemented in programs that experienced substantial growth in the numbers of their sociology majors. And if that has occurred, it is worth considering how those initiatives took hold, considering the drivers that may have led some programs to develop initiatives to expand the popularity of their majors. The examples provided here draw from interviews of representatives (most commonly department chairs) from sociology departments in institutions that experienced significant growth in the number of students graduating with sociology degrees from 2008 to 2013. Findings presented offer an exploratory analysis, and it is important to note that other departments that saw no growth in their

majors may have implemented similar initiatives with no observed positive results. Thus, the strategies and drivers discussed in the following are not meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive, nor have they been verified as effective. They simply identify promising practices that may be worth considering.

Semi-structured interviews occurred prior to the composition of this article, so they were not designed to directly test or verify the propositions advanced. To select growth programs, IPEDS data were coded to identify a random selection of institutions that shared similar characteristics and growth patterns, namely, that they had a similar number of sociology majors in 2008 (20–49) and that they saw an increase of at least 10 students graduating with undergraduate sociology degrees in 2013 as compared to 2008. Twenty department chairs or directors of undergraduate programs within sociology departments were contacted via email, with 15 responding with interest in being interviewed. Of those interviewed, 13 indicated that a substantial increase in their program had occurred, 1 indicated a decline had occurred (this decline was attributed to decisions made by that university's institutional research office on how to report graduate frequencies), and 1 informant could not confirm the trend because the department did not track its number of majors. Analysis is restricted to the 13 programs that confirmed expansion. Analysis does not compare different types of institutions against one another, but as institutional context might matter, the sample includes five research universities, four master's colleges/universities, and four baccalaureate colleges of arts and sciences.

### *Drivers of Change*

Interviews inquired into three drivers of change: departmental initiatives, the indirect effects of changes occurring in other programs on campus,<sup>4</sup> and the impact of different types of students enrolling at the institution over time.<sup>5</sup> Of these three prospects, interview participants offered the strongest and most consistent affirmation that deliberate action on the part of departments was a critical component in expanding the major, registered by 9 of the 13 departments studied. An additional 2 departments did not focus on increasing the number of majors, instead concentrating effort on increasing the quality of their programs. These respondents argued that the improvements in program quality led to growth in the number of majors. Three departments attempted to leverage prospects of increasing the size of the department's faculty and viewed increasing the number of majors and

the quality of the program as a means of accomplishing this objective. These observations provide compelling evidence that expansion of sociology programs is not something that simply happens (driven by external forces such as institution-wide enrollment shifts or programming changes that occurred elsewhere on campus). Instead, expansion is driven by a desire to address enrollment concerns, program quality, and/or program capacity.

A challenge that potentially thwarts efforts to expand the major is competition from alternate initiatives that can divert department attention to other matters (Sweet et al. 2014). For this reason, I inquired how the participants' departments set increasing the number of students graduating with sociology degrees as a priority. Prioritization most commonly stemmed from ongoing attentiveness to trends in enrollment, with concerns shared among department members on how these trends affected the quality and reputation of the program. Concern over the prospects of securing new or replacement faculty lines also led departments to place the size of the major as a concern. In the case of two departments, the department did not take on the issue of expansion or program quality as a goal, but the concern was taken up by a subset of faculty. In most instances, expansion of the major was identified as a goal for the department, with recognition of the adverse consequences of enrollment declines and the positive consequences of enrollment expansion on the vitality of the program. Commonly, a key agent in departments (usually the department chair) mobilized support for collective efforts. However, in one department, such support was not present, and efforts were exerted by a small subset of faculty members who set improving the quality of their program as a primary objective.

### *Expanding Access to Discovery and Easing Constraints on Program Completion*

Eight departments revised their programs with an eye toward easing access of entry into the major and limiting the number of barriers that might dissuade students from deciding to major in sociology. One strategy was to expand prospects of initial exposure to sociology courses, especially to students who could possibly be interested in pursuing the sociology major. Programs did this by offering more lower-level courses and focusing course offerings on those that draw students. Some departments gated enrollment in introductory level classes so that these classes primarily served first- and second-year students. Other programs offered

large introductory sections, which in turn provided more seats for prospective majors. One institution reported particular success by expanding its online course offerings. Other strategies included working with feeder schools (e.g., a local community college) to ease student transition into the major upon transfer and working with departments across campus to guide students to take sociology courses (e.g., working with a biology department to integrate sociology into course selections of pre-med students). Sometimes it helped to prioritize the needs of majors, who were pre-admitted into courses in advance of non-majors. Finally, representatives from growth programs highlighted the importance of faculty leading students into the major via advising and informal one-on-one encounters. For example, one institution made a deliberate effort to guide promising students from introductory-level courses into the major. The importance of advising was a common theme revealed in the interviews.

A different set of strategies to expand access to the sociology major involved adjustment of degree requirements. For example, one department removed replicate course prohibitions that made it more difficult for students to have courses count toward a double major. Another department structured sociology classes so that they fulfilled requirements in other majors/minors and satisfied general education requirements (e.g., writing effectiveness or quantitative literacy). This approach served to increase the likelihood of exposure as well as enabled students to “double-dip” as they strived to satisfy the requirements of the sociology degree while also satisfying requirements that exist outside of the major.

Eight departments deliberately aligned staffing and staff recruitment efforts to maximize prospects that enrollment in the major would expand and that course offerings could satisfy demand. Some departments set out to generate support for staff increases by increasing the popularity of the major, and other departments were able to create more popular majors because they were allotted more staff lines. Clearly, having sufficient staff resources enhanced prospects of offering more (and more diverse) courses, which likely contributed to expansion in the major. In addition to the volume of staff, departments also were strategic in assignments of responsibilities. This strategy enabled some departments to devote specific staff members to direct undergraduate programs or to be more intensely involved in advising. As a means of generating student interest, some departments devoted

the efforts of younger, more popular, more successful, and/or more interested teachers into courses that serve as gateways to the major. Other departments included in their selection criteria for new hires the promise of the candidate’s teaching of undergraduate students.

### *Visibility and Demonstrating Relevance*

Nine of the 13 programs exerted effort to make their programs more visible to students, which in turn could enhance prospects for discovery. The approaches varied and included developing public recognition (awards) for student accomplishments, posting department initiatives on Facebook and Twitter, and holding informational meetings. Additional strategies included targeted correspondences and similar outreach efforts. Departments also worked to establish a sense of community among their majors, including social events, developing memberships in AKD Honor Society, and engaging the department’s sociology club.

Six of the 13 programs developed means to demonstrate the value of the sociology degree, and these efforts were commonly tied with efforts to increase the program visibility. Initiatives included holding an annual career day, inviting former students to speak on campus, publicizing the careers chosen by graduates and their successes, offering a course on careers in sociology, and sponsoring an annual alumni day in which graduates were invited back to campus. Some programs designed course components to focus on the types of careers that students pursued following graduation, most notably in health care and human services.

## THE LIMITS OF GROWTH

Nearly all of the interviews indicated the expansion of the major resulted in positive outcomes. Benefits included generating a positive reflection on the quality of the program, justifying expanded staffing, and enhancing opportunities to engage more students in sociological inquiries of greater depth and breadth. Only one interview indicated a negative appraisal of growth, which was attributed to a feeling that the institution was falsely marketing their department as a criminology program.

Although departments almost always looked on growth with favor, increased enrollment in the major also created difficulties, as all participants reported challenges that also resulted from their expansion. Foremost among the challenges were staffing-related concerns, which included additional students to

advise and more courses to manage. In some departments, there were insufficient seats in current classes to meet demand. In response, some departments increased seating capacities, which was not viewed with favor. For departments that were able to recruit and hire additional staff, complexity of department management increased (but this was generally seen as a positive trade-off).

## CONCLUSION

I conclude with a few comments regarding the logistics of change, enrollment expansion, and the implications of the status quo. First, I believe that it is important for departments to regularly track trends in the popularity of the sociology major. Occasional fluctuations should be expected, but long-term declines should be attended to with an active stance. In some circumstances, the origins of declines might not be attributed to program weaknesses but to other factors such as changes in the student body. But this does not mean that departments should not react. Instead, departments should engage in ongoing assessments of challenges and respond accordingly. I believe that more often than not, healthy programs retain and sometimes expand their majors, even in the context of changing student demographics.

Second, the popularity of a sociology major should not come at the expense of program quality. However, this can happen. For example, if expansion occurs without needed resources, then quality can be undermined. For this reason, I suggest that departments benefit by considering target goals for the number of students to be enrolled—benchmarked against the carrying capacity of existing resources. If target goals surpass this capacity, then action steps should include a discussion to consider if and how resources are to be realigned to match target goals or alternately to recalibrate goals accordingly. And servicing the major is not the only contribution of sociology programs, so contributions to students and programs that exist outside of the major need to be considered as well.

Third, there exists a tension between recruiting students into the major and some recommendations advanced by the American Sociological Association's Task Force on the Undergraduate Major. Of particular concern are recommendations five and six that advance a four course level progressive learning structure that includes appropriate prerequisites as well as fulfillment of sequences of courses ((McKinney et al. 2004:9–17). With each requirement and prerequisite added, logistical

constraints are introduced that might lead students to conclude that pursuit of the major is too complicated or too lengthy to complete. Understandings of this tension might lead some departments to prioritize progressive learning structures over enrollment concerns and others to do the opposite. It might also lead to a rethinking of the merits of a four-tier curriculum that begins with Introduction to Sociology and ends with a capstone, perhaps with a three-tier structure (or some other approach).

Finally, I want to conclude by further articulating why I believe local-level initiatives are important elements in countering the downward trend in the sociology major. Peter Berger (1963:24), in his *Invitation to Sociology*, observed the following:

Some like to observe human beings, others to experiment with mice. The world is big enough to hold all kinds and there is no logical priority for one interest as against the other.

So long as each discipline carries weight in the framing of analysis (and what is to be analyzed in the first place), I agree with Berger in spirit. I value the insights generated by scholars in our sister disciplines in the social sciences, including those in psychology. In 1970, psychology and sociology attracted relatively equal numbers of students, indicating no logical priority of one interest over another. If students' selections of college majors are accurate reflections of current values, it is hard not to conclude that students now find mice to be more interesting than human beings. As a consequence, students are taught to gravitate toward individualistic solutions to the myriad social problems present today, and less force guides them to the structural and cultural concerns that sociologists focus attention on. This is not to say that undergraduates are not being exposed to sociology, but it is a question of how strong the sociological voice resonates among them. The major is one means of strengthening that voice on campus. I have tried to show that efforts at the department level can potentially affect trends within institutions. If the strategies identified are applied across institutions, then one might optimistically expect a cumulative effect that could impact national-level trends. Interventions at the local level are not the only solution to this problem, but they are a start.

## NOTES

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1. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) gathers and disseminates information from every college, university, and technical and vocational institution that participates in the federal student financial aid programs, offering yearly snapshots of postsecondary institutions at the national level. Aside from documenting national trends, these data can be used to reveal what happens at the organizational level because each college or university can be compared with itself over time with respect to concerns such as enrollment, student characteristics, degrees earned, and a variety of other indicators.
2. Although the number of degrees earned can be used to approximate trends in the major, they are not the equivalent of the size of the major for a few reasons. First, because students may major in any subject without ultimately completing the degree, the use of degree attainment to estimate major enrollment introduces a negative bias against institutions that have higher dropout rates. It also introduces a negative bias against institutions that have a slower progression to degree. And degrees earned are not the equivalent to the number of individual students earning degrees, as students who double major are counted twice, once first and second degrees are calculated using the IPEDS data.
3. The lagged variable is based on aggregate data. It is therefore not 100 percent accurate with respect to the graduation of individual students, as it assumes that all exploratory students graduated in four years. With respect to the 2007 entering cohort at Ithaca College, 69 percent graduated within the four-year timeframe anticipated in the lagged variable.
4. Programmatic changes outside of the undergraduate sociology major were identified by a small subset of participants as potentially explaining some of the growth trend at their institutions. Three participants reported that revisions to the MCAT had increased interest in taking sociology classes, which might contribute to generation of new majors. One participant reported her institution's addition of a PhD program in sociology helped it generate additional classes taught at the undergraduate level, which might have had some sway.
5. To determine if changes in student composition may have shaped enrollment trends, interviews asked, "Do you think the change might be attributable to some change in the type of students enrolling at your institution?" This was not viewed by any of the participants as being a primary explanation of the trends observed, but two institutions had a substantial growth in overall enrollment, which was suggested as possibly contributing to increases.

Another institution had more at-risk students being enrolled, which the participant suggested might increase students gravitating to major in sociology because (unlike some other programs at that campus) the sociology program had no minimum grade point average requirement.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Stephen Sweet** is an associate professor of sociology at Ithaca College and visiting scholar at the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College. He has written extensively on issues relating to curriculum development, pedagogies, work, and opportunity. His most recent books are *Changing Contours of Work* (with Peter Meiksins, Sage 2017) and *The Work-family Interface* (Sage 2014).