

Research Program on the Discipline and Profession

Data Brief

Sociology Holds the Line as Faculty Salaries Feel the Pinch in the Economic Downturn

By

Stacey S. Merola and Roberta Spalter-Roth

The years between 1982 and 1990 and 1991 and 2001 were periods of economic expansion for the United States. Throughout much of this period, however, wages and salaries were sluggish for workers who did not possess advanced degrees. In contrast, those with degrees beyond a college education experienced increases, especially in the late 1980s and late 1990s. The period of expansion ended in March 2001, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. As a result of the economic downturn, state appropriations for higher education in the 2001-2002 fiscal year were the lowest in five years and 13 states failed to appropriate enough money to outpace inflation.¹ Similarly, private universities have been feeling the pinch as the bear market causes drops in endowment portfolios. Some schools with large endowments such as Duke University and Stanford University have proposed faculty and staff cuts to help balance their budgets.² Given these trends, how did the salaries of sociology faculty fare during these periods of expansion and decline? How did faculty rank affect academic sociologists' salaries? How did salaries vary by type of college or university? Finally, how did salary trends in sociology compare to those in other social science disciplines?

Trends in Sociology

Sociology faculty salaries grew by larger percentages during the economic expansion of the 1980s than during the expansion of the 1990s, with the exception of the peak boom years between 1998 and 2000, when all U.S. aggregate wages and salaries increased. Between academic years 1982-83 and 1989-90, faculty salaries for all ranks increased above the rate of inflation by an average of 4.0 percent each year. Between academic years 1990-91 and 1999-2000 salaries increased on average by only 1.6 percent above the rate of inflation each year ([Table 1](#)). Only during the peak boom years of the 1990s (1997-2000) did sociology faculty see salary gains above those seen in the 1980s, with average increases of 5.1 percent above the rate of inflation. During the 2001-2002 downturn, average sociology faculty salaries managed to

hold the line, increasing by only 0.2 percent above the rate of inflation.

There was some variation in these trends by faculty rank and by type of institution of higher education. During the 1980s economic expansion, all ranks of sociology faculty experienced average salary increases of at least 3.0 percent per year over the rate of inflation. The rate of increase was highest for new assistant professors and lowest for full professors. During the boom years of the 1990s, percent increases for all faculty ranks were lower than in the 1980s. Full professors earned the highest percent increases, while associate professors earned the lowest (1.6 percent versus 1.0 percent above the rate of inflation, respectively). During the economic downturn, assistant professors experienced a slight decline in earnings in constant dollars.

The percentage change in sociology salaries varied by type of institution during the 1980s and the 1990s ([Figure 1](#)). From the mid 1980s, the greatest increases in sociology faculty salaries occurred at public institutions with collective bargaining agreements. Between academic years 1984-85 and 1989-90, salaries at these institutions increased by 26.4 percent, above the rate of inflation. During the 1990s, sociology faculty salaries at private universities increased by 19.6 percent above the rate of inflation, the largest increase among the three types of institutions of higher education. During the peak years of the boom (1997-2000), average sociology faculty salaries at public institutions with no collective bargaining agreements increased by 7.9 percent, the largest amount among the types of institutions. Sociology faculty salaries have been flat in all types of institutions during the current economic downturn, with slight losses at public institutions with collective bargaining.

Sociology Compared to Other Social Sciences

The salary trends in sociology were mirrored by the changes in salaries in other social and behavioral science disciplines, including anthropology, political science, psychology (general), and economics ([Figure 2](#)). All the disciplines, except political science, experienced greater increases in average salaries during the 1980s than in the sluggish period of the 1990s and flat salaries with the 2001 economic downturn.

Between 1982-83 and 1989-90, sociology faculty as a group experienced the largest percentage increase in salary of the five social science disciplines discussed here, 32.2 percent, above the rate of inflation. The remaining disciplines, with the exception of political science, were not far behind, however. During the peak of the 1990s boom, economics experienced the greatest percentage increase in average salaries (16.5 percent above the rate of inflation), and anthropology experienced the smallest increase (10.8 percent), with sociology salary increases (13.3 percent) falling in between these two disciplines.

Faculty in economics experienced the largest average increase in salaries between the peak years of the boom (academic years 1997-98 to 2000-01) at 8.5 percent above inflation, closely followed by political science. Anthropology had the lowest rate of increase (at 0.4 percent) over the peak boom period. Average faculty salaries in sociology increased by about 4.0 percent above the rate of inflation during the peak boom period. During the economic downturn starting prior to academic year 2001-02, salaries stagnated, with political science experiencing the

greatest losses (-4.4 percent above the rate of inflation). During this year, sociology barely held the line with a 0.2 percent increase. The greatest increase was experienced by anthropology (2.2 percent above the rate of inflation).

During this entire 20-year period, sociology faculty had the lowest average salaries (in 2001 constant dollars) compared to the other social and behavioral science disciplines (Figure 3). The differences between sociology and anthropology, political science, and psychology were relatively small, however. In contrast, the differences between these disciplines and economics were pronounced. For example, the average difference in salaries between sociology and economics over this time was \$13,712 (in constant 2001 dollars), with a low of \$11,238 in 1982-1983 climbing to a high of \$16,219 in 2000-2001 and (Figure 4). Part of the explanation for these differences may be that many economics departments are in business schools, which have higher average pay for faculty than colleges of arts and sciences. Another explanation may be the relatively strong market for economists outside the academy.

Conclusions

Sociology faculty salaries grew during the 1980s and 1990s, with some variation by rank and by type of institution of higher education. Although the period of expansion in the 1990s was longer than that of the 1980s, average faculty salaries in sociology and other related social and behavioral science disciplines grew at a greater pace above the rate of inflation during the 1980s than during the 1990s. Almost 20 years of rising salaries seem to have come to an abrupt halt with the downturn beginning in March 2001, although sociology faculty salaries held the line. In the wake of state budget shortfalls and declining stock values social science disciplines at both public and private institutions are feeling the pinch.

¹ Schmidt, Peter. 2002. "State Spending on Higher Education Grows by Smallest Rate in 5 Years." The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved Wednesday, October 30, 2002. (<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v48/i19/19a02001.htm>)

² Pulley, John L. 2002. "Stanford and Duke Consider Staff Cuts to Help Balance Their Budgets." The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved Monday, October 28, 2002. (<http://chronicle.com/daily/2002/10/2002102803n.htm>)

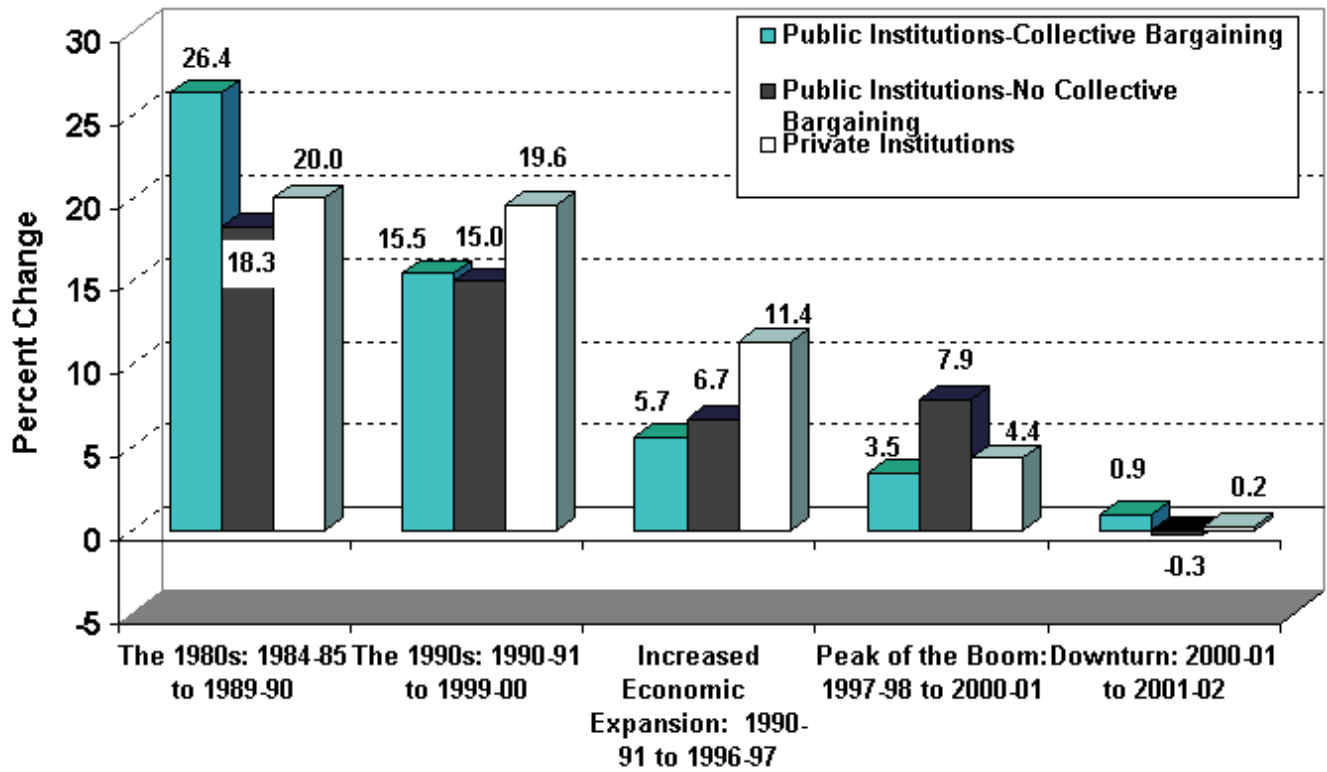


Figure 1: Changes in Sociology Salaries (in Constant 2001 Dollars) by Type of Institution

Source: Compiled by ASA using data from the National Faculty Salary Survey. Selected Years. Washington, DC: College and University Personnel Association for Human Resources.

Note: Constant dollars based on the average 2001 Consumer Price Index – All Urban Consumers, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S

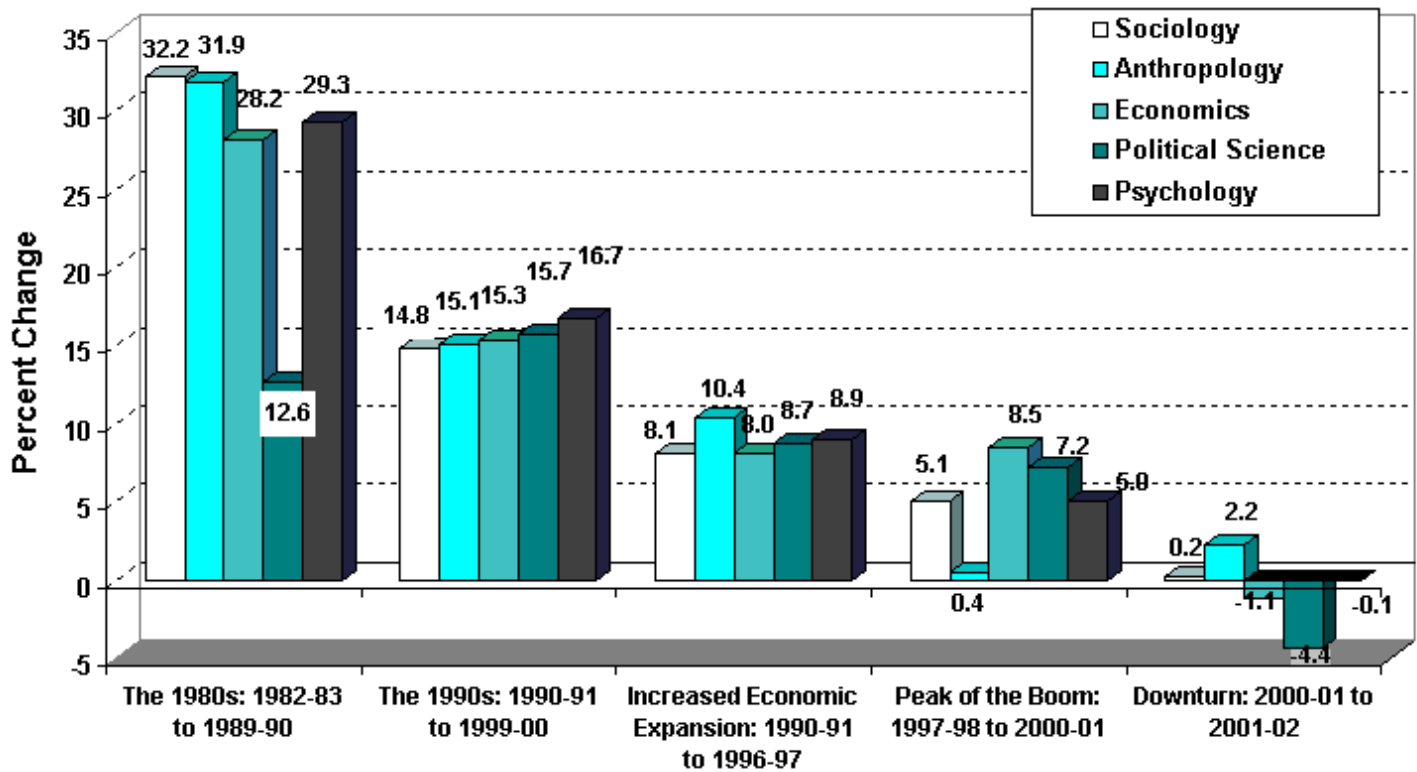


Figure 2: Percent Change in Salaries (in Constant 2001 Dollars) for Five Social Science Disciplines from 1982-2002

Source: Compiled by ASA using data from the National Faculty Salary Survey. Selected Years. Washington, DC: College and University Personnel Association for Human Resources.

Note: Constant dollars based on the average 2001 Consumer Price Index – All Urban Consumers, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S

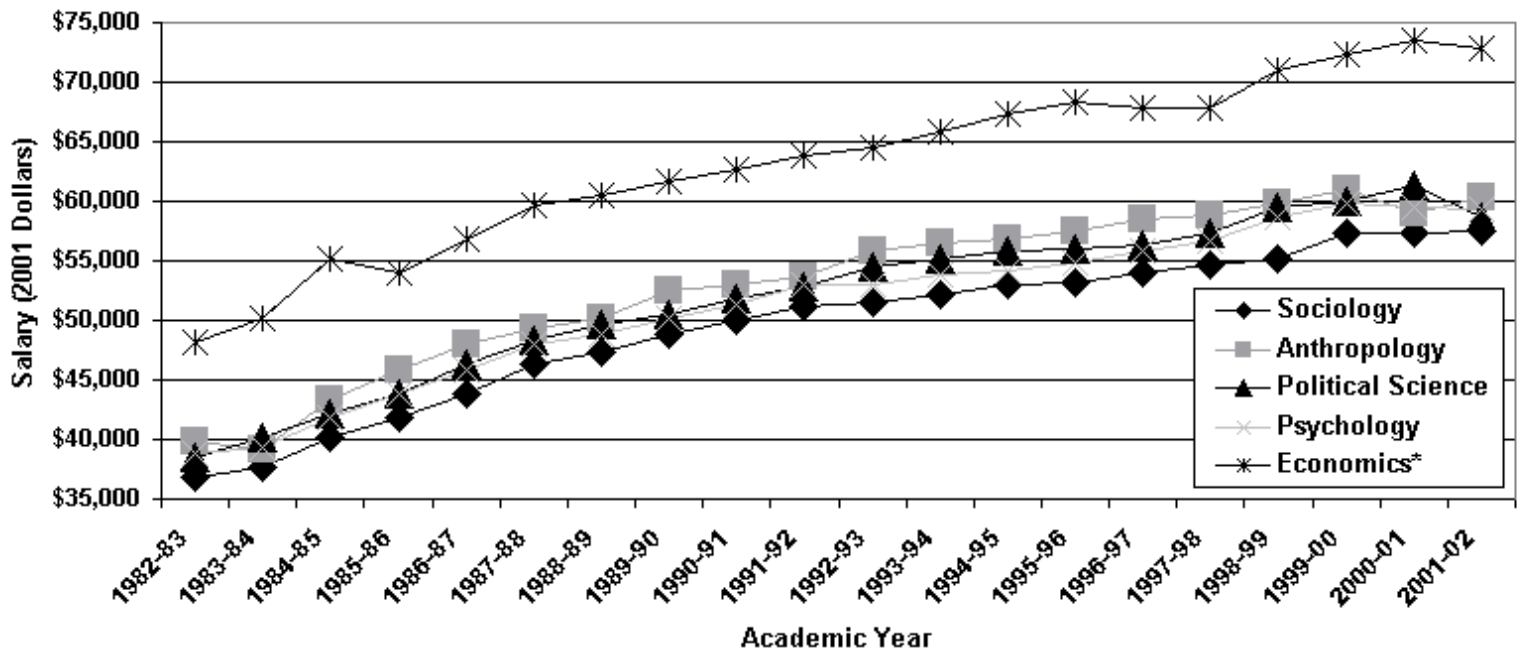


Figure 3: Average Faculty Salaries for All Ranks (in 2001 Constant Dollars) for Selected Social Science Disciplines, Academic Years 1982-83 to 2001-02

Source: Compiled by ASA using data from the National Faculty Survey.

Selected Years. Washington, DC: College and University Personnel Association for Human Resources.

* 1982-83 to 1988-89 values are for business economics.

Note: Constant dollars based on the average 2001 Consumer Price Index – All Urban Consumers, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

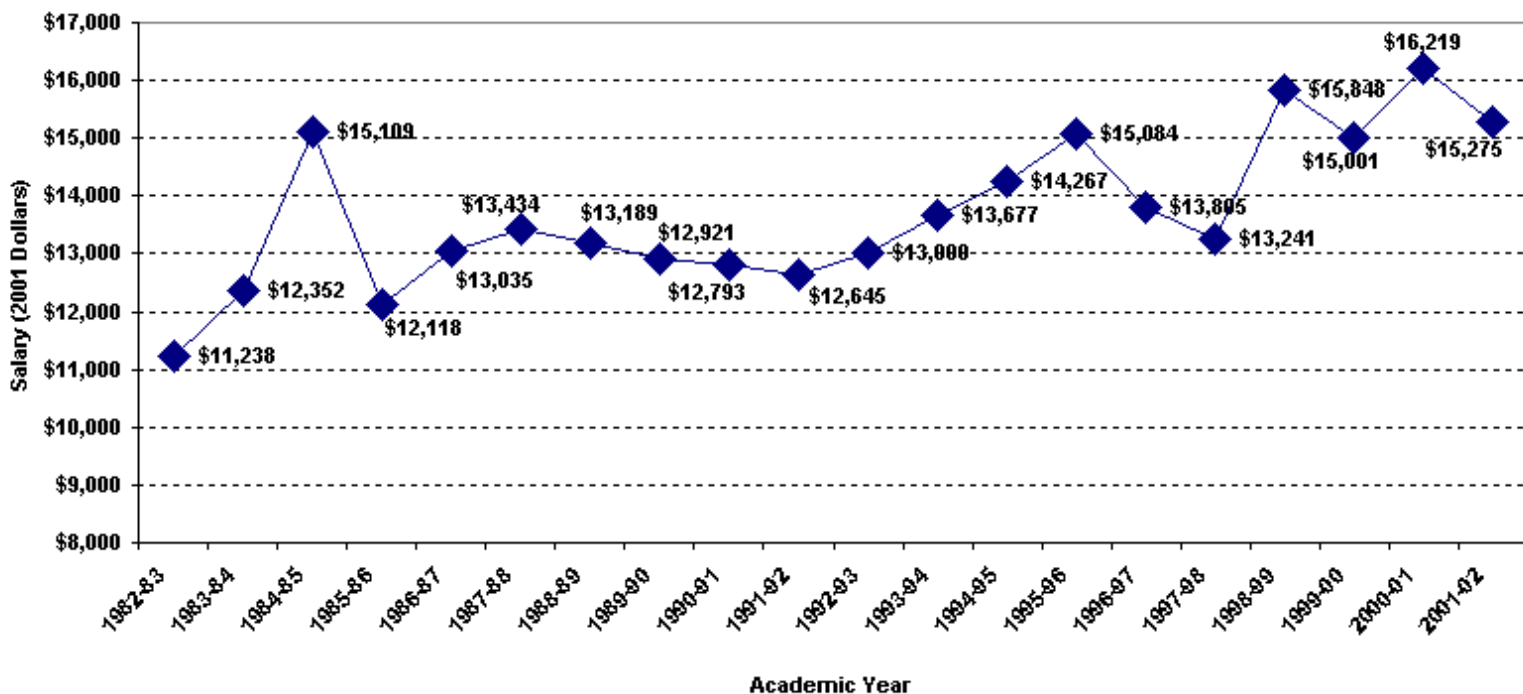


Figure 4: Differences Between Salaries (in Constant 2001 Dollars) in Economics and Sociology, Academic Years 1982-83 to 2001-02

Source: Compiled by ASA using data from the National Faculty Salary Survey. Selected Years. Washington, DC: College and University Personnel Association for Human Resources.

Note: Constant dollars based on the average 2001 Consumer Price Index – All Urban Consumers, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S