



IDEALISTS VS. CAREERISTS: Graduate School Choices of Sociology Majors¹

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INTRODUCTION

This research brief suggests that sociology can attract both idealists and careerists, and that both types of students find a place in graduate school. Sociological skills and concepts are beneficial both to students who go on to graduate school in applied and professional fields and to those who continue on in sociology.

BACKGROUND: THE GROWTH OF OCCUPATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEGREES

The decline of arts and sciences as core disciplines and the corresponding growth of professional programs are important developments in higher education over the last 30 years, according to sociologist Steven Brint and his colleagues (2002; 2005). Occupational or professional degree programs are viewed as providing students with knowledge and skills acquisition that prepares them for the labor market (Council of Graduate Schools 2006;

Glazer-Raymo 2004; National Academy of Science 2008). Currently about 60 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded are in occupational/professional fields, including allied health professions, criminology, information systems, human resources, business, and recreation—fields often housed outside schools of arts and sciences (Brint et al. 2005). During this 30-year period, the master's degree, and especially career-oriented, applied, and professional master's degrees became the fastest growing degree among all offered by universities (American Sociological Association, Task Force on the Master's Degree 2009; Council of Graduate Schools, 2006; Strauss 2006). As of 2006, about 85 percent of all graduate degrees awarded were master's degrees.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIOLOGY PROGRAMS

One result of the shift to the professional programs is that sociology undergraduate programs are sending the majority of majors

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either directly into the workforce or to master's programs in applied sociology or in neighboring or break-away disciplines directly linked to specific careers. We find that the students who enroll in graduate programs, rather than going directly into the labor market, tend to be "careerists" who majored in sociology because it would prepare them for graduate or professional school. Alternatively, those students who enroll in sociology master's programs in sociology tend to be "idealists." However, even those students enrolled in sociology graduate programs are more likely to be in master's programs rather than in PhD programs. The small percentages of those who intend to obtain a PhD also agree strongly that they majored in sociology to prepare them for a graduate or professional degree.

THE STUDY

In spring 2005 the American Sociological Association's Research and Development Department sent an on-line questionnaire to a sample of 1,777 seniors to survey their experiences and satisfaction with the sociology major as well as their future plans for work, graduate school, or both. Early in 2007 we re-surveyed the class of 2005 to learn what they had been doing since graduation. The response rate for the second wave of the survey was 44 percent or 778 graduates.

SECOND-WAVE DATA

In the second wave of the survey we asked about labor market activities and graduate school studies. As part of the labor market information, we asked about job searches, job descriptions, job satisfaction, and closeness of

employment to sociological training. Those former sociology majors who were either in graduate school or had completed a post-graduate degree were asked about their discipline and degree level. Thus, we can determine whether or not they entered a sociology program or a more career-oriented program.

In addition, we asked everybody about the skills and concepts they used on the job or in graduate school. Skills included the following: forming a causal hypothesis; using computer resources; using statistical software; evaluating research methods; developing evidence-based arguments; using tests of significance; interpreting the results of data gathering; identifying ethical issues in research; writing reports; and working in diverse groups with others. Concepts included: current sociological explanations about a variety of social issues; social institutions and their impact on individuals; basic theoretical perspectives or paradigms in sociology; basic concepts in sociology (including culture, socialization, institutions, or stratification); important differences in the life experiences of people as they vary by race, class, gender, age, disability and other ascribed statuses; and views of society from alternative or critical perspectives.

PRIOR DATA

In the first wave of the study we had asked about reasons for majoring in sociology. Most students major in sociology because they enjoyed their first course in the subject. The second most frequent reason for majoring is labeled as idealist—students who major because they thought sociology would prepare

them to change society, to understand social forces or their own place in society. The third reason for majoring is careerist—students who thought that sociology would prepare them for the job that they wanted or for a professional or graduate degree.

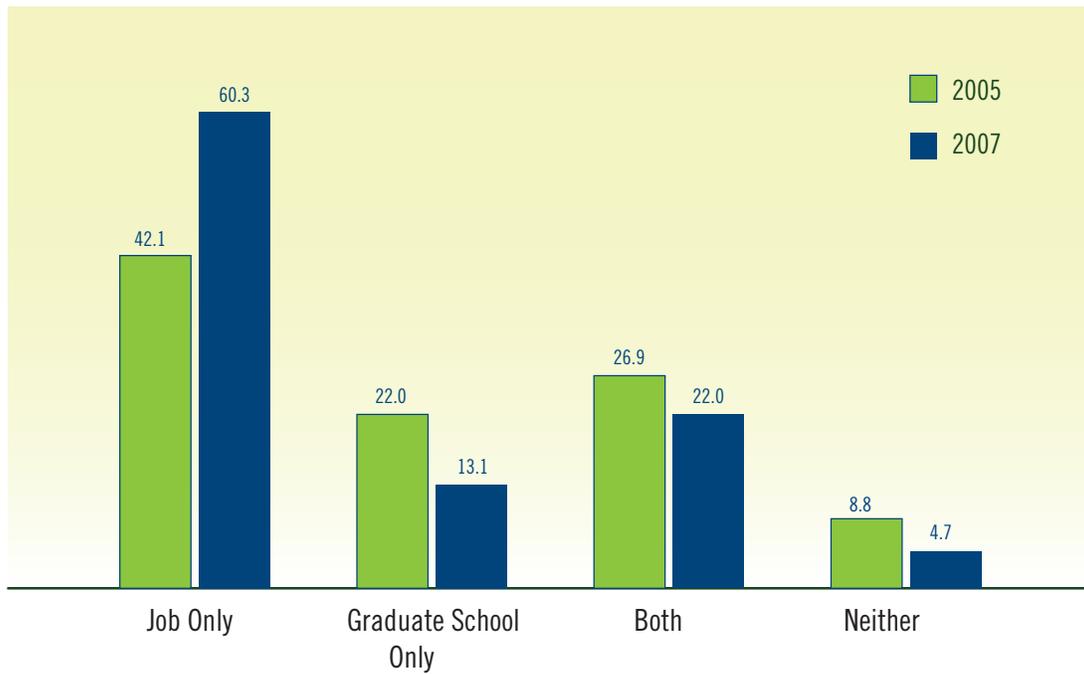
We used SPSS scaling procedures to determine whether the answers to a series of questions about out-of-classroom activities, asked in the first wave, would cluster together into distinctive indexes, each representing a type of social or cultural capital. We found that the activities formed three distinct clusters. These were: (1) Scholarly socialization including membership in a sociology club, participating in the sociological honorary society Alpha Kappa Delta, and attending state, regional, or

national sociological meetings; (2) Mentoring activities including student participation in mentoring programs and in faculty research and (3) On-the-job training and job networks including leadership training, participating in internships, engaging in community activities, taking part in service learning programs, and attending job fairs. (The distribution of sociology majors participating in these activities can be seen in *Decreasing the Leak from the Sociology Pipeline: Social and Cultural Capital to Enhance the Post-Baccalaureate Sociology Career* at <http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/ASASocPipeBrief.pdf>.)

MATCHING THE FIRST AND SECOND WAVE

We were able to match the answers from the first wave of the survey, including

Figure 1. More Sociology Bachelor's Recipients are in the Labor Market
Plans for the Future in 2005 versus Status in 2007



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

demographic characteristics, skills and concepts learned, reasons for majoring in sociology, and participation in a range of out-of-classroom activities with the work and graduate school experiences described in the second wave. As a result of this matching, we are able to determine what factors significantly increase the likelihood that sociology majors will enter graduate school, generally, and what factors increase the likelihood that sociology majors will enter graduate school in sociology programs, in particular.

FINDINGS

WHO GOES TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?

Before graduation, we had asked the class of 2005 about their future plans (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006). The largest group (42.1 percent) said they intended to find a job. Figure 1 shows that, in fact, by 2007, 60.3 percent were working, 20 percentage points more than initially projected. Although 22 percent planned to go to graduate school and not seek employment in 2005, only 13.1 percent did so in 2007. Finally, 26.9 percent planned to both attend graduate school and seek employment. By 2007, about 22 percent were both in the labor market and in graduate school.

How do the demographic characteristics of those who enrolled in graduate school compare to those who did not? Table 1 compares the characteristics of those former majors who go on to graduate school with those who do not. The table also compares type of undergraduate institution attended, parents' level of education, participation in extra-classroom activities, skills and concepts learned, type of combination majors with

sociology, reasons for majoring in sociology, and Grade Point Average (GPA).

We find that the demographic characteristics of sociology majors who went on to graduate school are not significantly different than those who did not. In other words, relatively similar percentages of women, African Americans, Hispanics, and former majors whose parents have less than a college degree enrolled in graduate school and joined the labor force. Although the differences were not significant, a somewhat greater percentage of African Americans and Hispanics were enrolled in graduate school as compared with their percentage in the population of former majors as a whole. Parents' education and the type of institution of higher education that former majors attended were not significantly different for those who enrolled in graduate school and those who did not.

Type of combined major was significant, however, for those who combined psychology and sociology, but not for those who combined sociology and criminal justice. The former were significantly more likely to attend graduate school than were those with other combined degrees or with stand-alone sociology majors, while the latter were not. In other words, joint psychology and sociology majors were significantly more likely to go to graduate school, in contrast with joint criminology and sociology majors, who were more likely to enter the labor force upon graduation.

The GPA of those who enrolled in graduate school was significantly higher than those who did not attend. By contrast, there is no relationship between mastery of skills and

Table 1: Characteristics of Sociology Undergraduate Majors Who Go to Graduate School Compared to those Who Do Not

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Gender | ∅ |
| Race | ∅ |
| Type of Undergraduate Institution | ∅ |
| Mother's level of education | ∅ |
| Father's level of education | ∅ |
| <i>Combination Majors</i> | |
| Criminal Justice | ∅ |
| Psychology | ★ |
| Sociology GPA | ★ |
| <i>Skills and Concepts</i> | |
| Research | ∅ |
| Communication | ∅ |
| Conceptual | ∅ |
| <i>Extra Classroom Activities</i> | |
| On the Job Training & Networking | ∅ |
| Mentoring | ★ |
| Scholarly Socialization | ★ |
| <i>Reasons for Majoring</i> | |
| Idealist | ★ |
| Careerist | ★ |

★ Statistically significant difference Chi-square or T-test (p < 0.05)

∅ Not statistically significant

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

the likelihood of continuing one’s education beyond the bachelor’s level. However, Table 1 does show that those students who participate in some extra-classroom activities, such as mentoring or scholarly socialization activities, are significantly more likely to go on to graduate school. Finally, idealists and careerists are more likely to enter graduate school than those who did not enroll, and these differences are statistically significant.

What happens when we compare these characteristics relative to one another? We used bi-variate logistic regression analysis to answer this question. The independent variables in the model are the following: race and ethnicity, overall GPA, GPA in sociology courses, type of major (joint or single), research skills learned, participation in

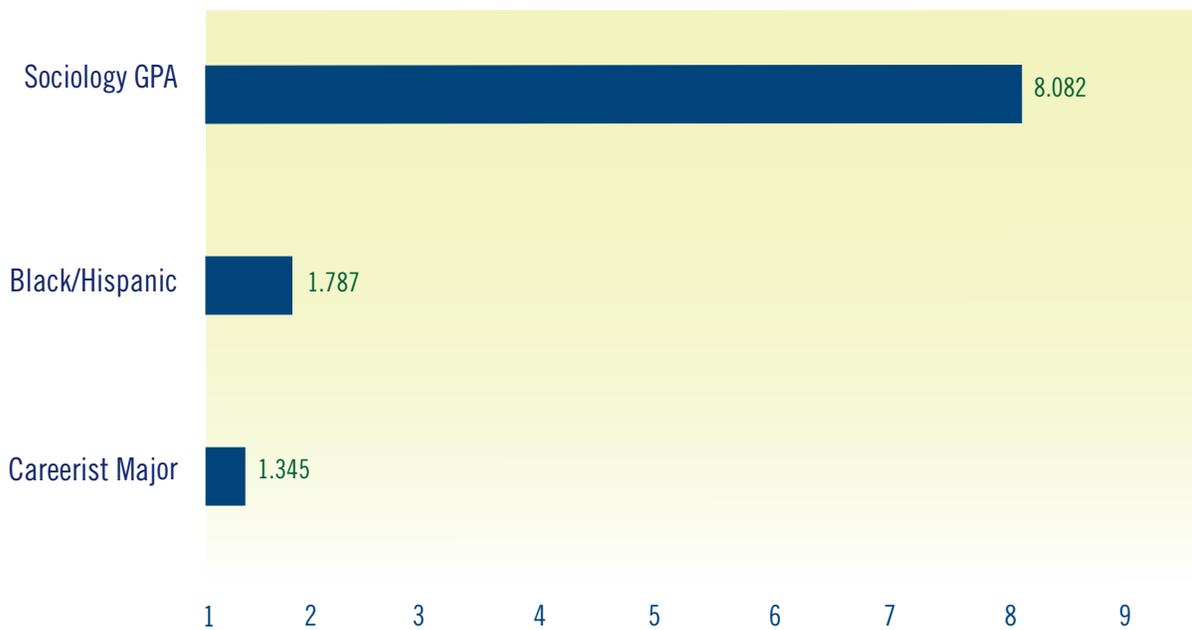
“...those students who participate in some extra-classroom activities, such as mentoring or scholarly socialization activities, are significantly more likely to go on to graduate school...”

mentoring, scholarly socialization, or on-the-job-training and networking activities, and whether or not they were careerists or idealists. The dependent variable was whether or not the former sociology major enrolled in graduate school (see Figure 2).

Sociology majors who enroll in graduate school have much higher GPAs in sociology than their peers who do not enroll in graduate school. When GPA in sociology is included in

Figure 2. Factors Predicting Which Sociology Undergraduate Majors Attend Graduate School, 2007

Odds Ratio



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

the model, overall GPA loses significance and drops out of the model. However, Figure 2 shows that a higher sociology GPA increased the likelihood of going to graduate school more than eightfold. The skills and concepts learned as sociology majors are not significant predictors of graduate school enrollment. This lack of significance of skills or concepts learned is probably because those who learned these skills received higher GPA's than those who did not.

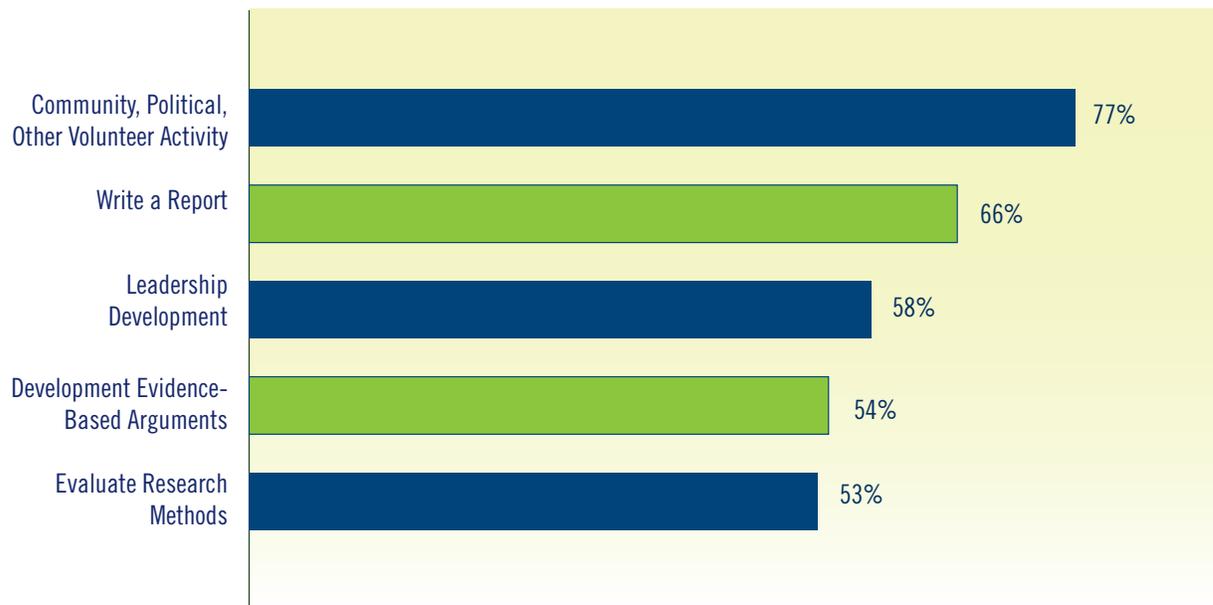
Extra-classroom activities available to majors, including on-the-job training and networking activities; mentoring; and sociology socialization, were not significant in predicting who goes to graduate school, despite their significance in the descriptive analysis.

The relative small numbers of Blacks and

Hispanics who answered the second wave of the survey were almost twice as likely to enroll in graduate school as are other racial and ethnic groups (namely, whites, Native Americans, and Asians). And, finally, those who go on to enroll in graduate school are significantly more likely to be careerists than those who do not enroll. They major because they think sociology will prepare them for graduate or professional school or perhaps a career. Although majoring for idealistic reasons was significant in the descriptive analysis, it was not significant in the regression model.

In short, GPA in sociology, identifying as African-American or Hispanic, and majoring in sociology for careerist motives significantly increase the odds of sociology majors enrolling in graduate school.

Figure 3. Skills Listed on Graduate School Applications, 2007
Percentage of sociology undergraduate majors reporting listing skills



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

Figure 4. Concepts Used in Graduate Programs, 2007
 Percentage of sociology undergraduate majors reporting concepts as being
 “very useful” in graduate school



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

**USING SKILLS AND CONCEPTS
 IN GRADUATE SCHOOL**

The second wave of the survey asked former sociology majors about the skills listed on their applications to graduate school and their ongoing use of skills learned during their graduate programs. Figure 3 shows the skills that at least 50 percent of majors mentioned when applying to graduate school.

Community and political activities were the most frequently listed on graduate school applications, perhaps because the majority went into applied fields oriented toward working with clients in particular communities (See *What are They Doing with a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?* at http://www.asanet.org/galleries/Research/ASAResearchBrief_revised.pdf). Second was

the ability to write reports. Third was leadership development. Finally, about half of all majors mentioned research and statistical skills, including developing evidence-based arguments and evaluating the appropriate research method for embarking on a study.

Although survey respondents mentioned the *skills* that they learned as majors in applying for graduate school, it is the *concepts* learned that they reported using on a daily basis in graduate school. In contrast to Figure 3, Figure 4 shows that at least 70 percent of those enrolled in graduate school said that sociological theories and concepts were “very useful” in their graduate coursework. These included understanding the differences in the life experiences of people as they vary by race, class, gender, age, disability, and other ascribed

statuses; viewing society from alternative or critical perspectives; knowledge of sociological explanations about current social issues such as crime, racism, poverty, family formation, or religion; and understanding basic concepts in sociology including culture, socialization, institutions, and stratification. The results suggest that these concepts can be used in a wide variety of degree fields in which sociology majors enroll.

CHOICE OF DEGREE FIELDS

About three-quarters of those in graduate school were pursuing master’s degrees, about 13 percent were pursuing professional degrees, and about 11 percent were pursuing degrees that would lead to a PhD. Table 2 shows the field of graduate study in which 2005 sociology majors were enrolled in 2007. The largest group was pursuing degrees in sociology (22.4 percent), yet the majority was in other fields (77.6 percent). These fields included social work, education, law, psychology/counseling, other social sciences, business, public policy, and engineering. About 70 percent of undergraduate sociology majors were pursuing degrees in what can be characterized as applied, vocational, or professional-oriented fields.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THOSE WHO CHOOSE SOCIOLOGY IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

Are there differences between those sociology majors who enroll in graduate sociology programs and the much larger number who enroll in the other programs? Table 3 shows that few differences achieve statistical significance. There are no significant differences by type of undergraduate

Table 2: Graduate Fields of Study of 2005 Sociology Graduates, 2007
(in percents)

| FIELD OF STUDY | |
|-----------------------|-------------|
| Sociology | 22.4% |
| Social Work | 16.9% |
| Education | 11.4% |
| Law | 10.5% |
| Other Social Sciences | 9.4% |
| Psychology/Counseling | 8.6% |
| Engineering | 7.3% |
| Business/Management | 4.5% |
| Public Policy/Affairs | 3.8% |
| Other | 5.1% |
| TOTAL | 100% |

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

institution, gender, race or ethnicity, or parents’ level of education. These two groups are also not distinguished by GPA.

The first set of significant differences (or the lack of them) relates to participation in extra-classroom activities. Majors who go on to enroll in graduate sociology programs are significantly more likely to participate in activities that socialize them into the sociological field. They are more likely than their peers to be selected for sociology honors programs, to participate in Alpha Kappa Delta, and to attend state, regional, or national sociology meetings usually at the instigation of their professors. They are significantly less likely to be joint psychology/ sociology majors than regular sociology majors.

The table also shows that those enrolled in sociology programs are significantly more likely to strongly agree that they learned

research and statistical skills as undergraduates, including developing evidence-based arguments, evaluating the appropriate research methods for embarking on a study, and mastering statistical computer packages, than those enrolled in other programs. Finally, those enrolled in sociology graduate programs were significantly more likely to have majored in sociology because they were idealists rather than careerists.

In contrast, there are no significant differences in mentoring activities and on-the-job training and networking activities. In other words, sociology faculty members seem equally likely to mentor and include majors who go on to enroll in other graduate fields of study in their research projects as they are those who go on to sociology graduate programs. Sociology majors who enrolled in other graduate programs were as likely to participate in community activities, internships and other on-the-job training and networking activities as those who enrolled in sociology programs. As noted, community activities are the most likely activity to be listed on graduate school applications, and both groups headed to graduate school took advantage of these out-of-the-classroom events.

In what follows, we use bi-variate logistic regression analysis to determine which characteristics are still significant when compared to one another in predicting who goes to graduate school in sociology. As in the previous regression analysis, the independent variables in the model are those that were significant in the cross-tabulations shown in Table 3. These include whether or not they were joint psychology/sociology majors,

“...those who enroll in sociology graduate programs strongly agree that they have mastered research skills and are more likely to be idealists than careerists. Scholarly socialization, including participation in honors programs, sociology clubs, and sociology meetings... may be helpful in encouraging sociology majors to attend graduate school in their discipline.”

whether or not they participated in scholarly socialization activities, whether or not they are idealists, as well as the number of research skills they learned.

Figure 5 shows that all but one of these predictors continues to be significant in the regression model. The number of research skills that respondents strongly agreed that they learned as undergraduates increased the likelihood of going to graduate school in sociology rather than in another program by about 1.3 times. Being an idealist increases the probability of becoming a sociology graduate student by 1.5 times. In contrast, being a joint psychology/sociology major significantly **decreases** the likelihood of attending graduate school in sociology, as these joint majors are more likely to enroll in psychology programs. Scholarly socialization is not significant, however.

In sum, those who enroll in sociology graduate programs strongly agree that they

Table 3: Characteristics of Those Enrolled in Sociology Graduate Programs Compared to Those Enrolled in other Programs, 2007
(in percents)

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Gender | ∅ |
| Race | ∅ |
| Type of Undergraduate Institution | ∅ |
| Mother's level of education | ∅ |
| Father's level of education | ∅ |
| <i>Extra Classroom Activities</i> | |
| On the Job Training & Networking | ∅ |
| Mentoring | ∅ |
| Scholarly Socialization | ★ |
| <i>Skills and Concepts</i> | |
| Research | ★ |
| Communication | ∅ |
| Conceptual | ∅ |
| <i>Combination Majors</i> | |
| Criminal Justice | ∅ |
| Psychology | ★ |
| <i>Reasons for Majoring</i> | |
| Idealist | ★ |
| Careerist | ∅ |
| Sociology GPA | ∅ |

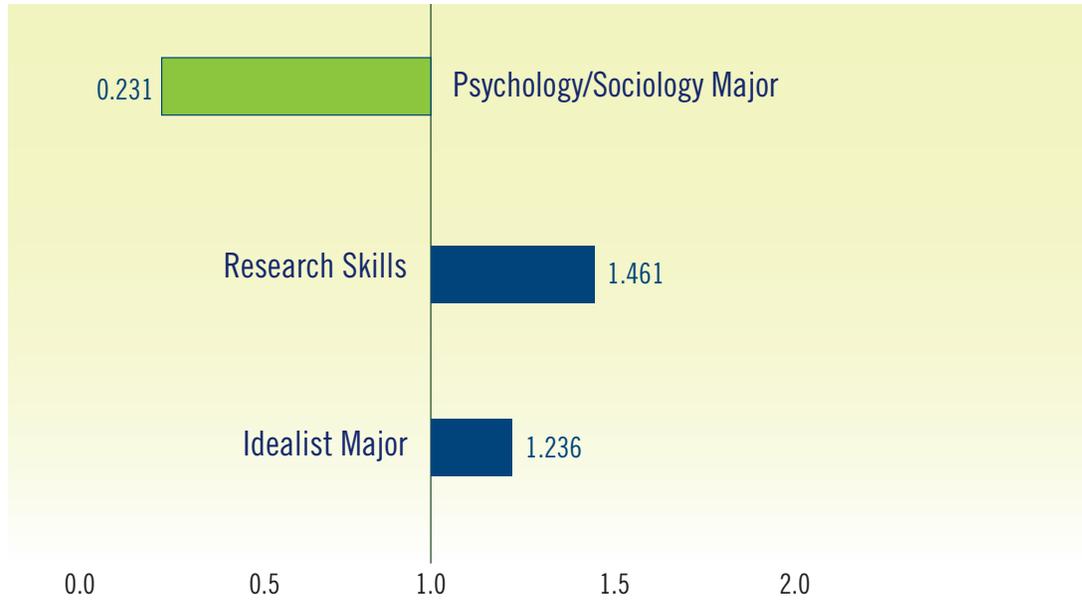
★ Statistically significant difference Chi-square or T-test (p < 0.05)

∅ Not statistically significant

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

Figure 5. Factors Predicting Which Sociology Undergraduate Majors Pursue Sociology in Graduate School, 2007

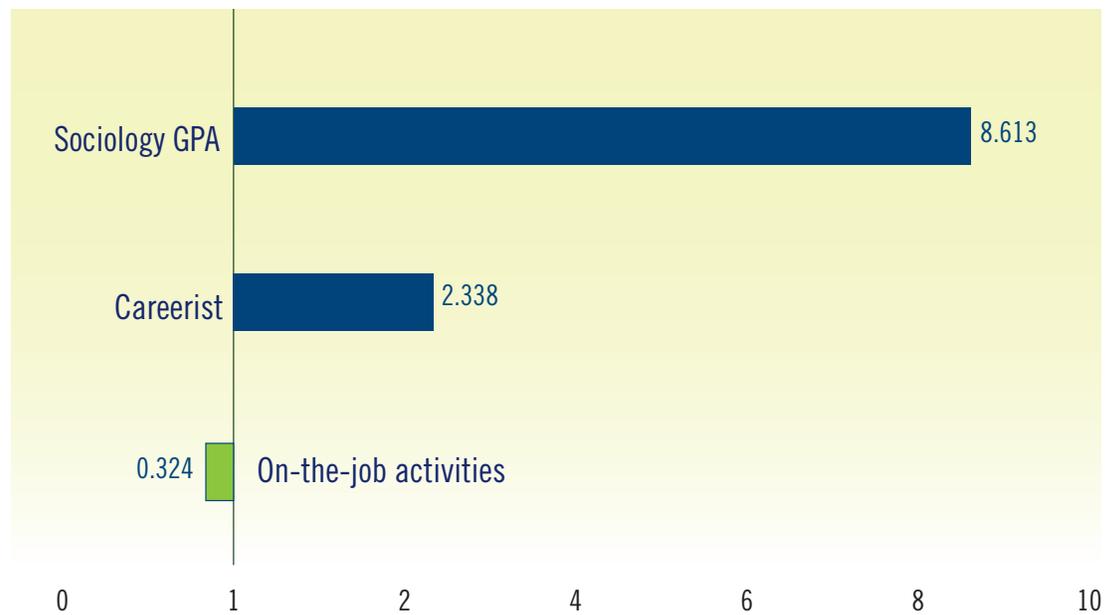
Odds Ratio



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

Figure 6. Factors Predicting Which Sociology Undergraduate Majors Enroll in PhD Programs, 2007

Odds Ratio



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

have mastered research skills and are more likely to be idealists than careerists. Scholarly socialization, including participation in honors programs, sociology clubs, and sociology meetings, though not significant in the regression analysis, may be helpful in encouraging sociology majors to attend graduate school in their discipline.

ON TO THE PHD

Although a PhD degree is considered the culmination of a sociological education, only 11 percent of this 2005 cohort enrolled in PhD programs. Those in sociology graduate programs are the most likely to be enrolled in a PhD program (29.6 percent), followed by those in psychology programs (22.7 percent), and other social science programs (21.7 percent). Students who enrolled in law school expect a professional degree, but for the remainder, virtually all students are enrolled in master's level programs.

What differences exist between those who enrolled in masters and those who enrolled in PhD programs? There are no significant differences between those who participated in scholarly socialization activities, but there are significant differences in those who participated in mentoring activities and on-the-job training activities. Participating in mentoring and research activities is important for encouraging sociology majors to pursue PhD degrees. On-the-job training activities are significant for those who enroll in master's programs.

When we examine the differences between those who enter a PhD program versus those who do not, we find a negative relationship between participation in on-the-

job and networking programs with working towards a PhD degree, in a bi-variate regression analysis (see Figure 6). Mentoring and scholarly socialization are not significant and fall out of the model. Here again, GPA in sociology is significant, while overall GPA drops out of the model. Those with higher undergraduate GPAs are more than eight times as likely to go into a PhD program. Last, PhD students are twice as likely as other respondents to strongly agree that the sociology major prepared them for graduate or professional school.

CONCLUSIONS

At times during its history, sociology has extolled its practical expertise (most recently with an initiative to create a public sociology). This research brief suggests that the sociology major is a gateway to graduate study in professional and applied programs as well as the liberal arts and sciences. Almost 8 out of 10 majors who go on to graduate school do so for degrees other than sociology. Those that enroll in social work, education, counseling, business, and public policy graduate programs believe that the undergraduate sociology major prepares them for their graduate or professional school careers. Half of them listed statistical and methodological skills they had learned on their graduate school applications. At least 70 percent of those who go on to graduate schools find sociology concepts and perspectives, such as social problems, race and gender inequalities, stratification, culture, and critical perspectives, to be very useful in their graduate schooling, regardless of the field. Students who go on to graduate school have

higher GPAs in sociology course work, a reflection of their greater mastery of sociological skills, theories, and concepts.

By advertising the sociology major as a coherent framework that results in entry into both practical and academic career pipelines, the student and alumni base should continue to grow. Many students enrolling in applied and professional degree programs already believe this, strongly agreeing that the sociology major is good preparation for graduate and professional school.

Those who do enroll in master's programs in sociology strongly agree that they have mastered research skills including using statistical software packages, interpreting the results of data gathering, and evaluating different research methods. They are likely to be idealists who majored in sociology because

they want to change society and to understand social institutions and the relation between social forces and individuals. They have been socialized in the field by belonging to sociology clubs such as Alpha Kappa Delta, and by attending state, regional, or national sociology meetings with their professors. Those enrolled in PhD programs are also likely to strongly agree that the sociology major is helpful for entering graduate or professional school.

In conclusion, sociology attracts majors with an exciting first course, appealing to both idealists and careerists. As noted, both types of students find a place in graduate school. Sociological skills and concepts, learned as undergraduates, are seen as beneficial for graduate school applications and for daily use in graduate school in applied and professional fields and in sociology.

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