



American Sociological Association
Department of Research & Development

SOCIOLOGY MASTER'S GRADUATES JOIN THE WORKFORCE

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BACKGROUND

Over the last decade, there has been a growth in professional master's degrees, especially in the sciences and engineering, with about 120,000 degrees awarded in 2007-08 (Council of Graduate Schools 2010). These degrees are expected to prepare students for professional jobs in the science workforce outside of the academy. In recent years, more sociology departments have been developing programs to prepare students for this type of career. By 2011, according to the most recent American Sociological Association (ASA) survey of directors of graduate studies, almost 50 percent of master's programs offer terminal master's degrees that are labeled as applied, professional, or clinical degrees (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2011). As with other disciplines, such programs are not consolation prizes for those who are considered unable to complete a PhD. Rather, they are designed to prepare students for professional employment in which they can use research experiences and analytical skills to pursue employment in non-profit, for-profit, or government organizations (Council of Graduate Schools 2010; Glazer Raymo 2004; National Academy of Science 2008; Stewart 2011). For sociology, training for a master's degree should help graduates obtain jobs that make use of their sociological skills and provide them with job satisfaction. This research brief explores whether graduates of terminal master's programs in sociology succeed in accomplishing these goals.

An ASA-appointed Task Force on the Master's Degree in Sociology (American Sociological Association 2009) was unable to find answers to questions concerning program satisfaction and career outcomes for master's graduates. The

Task Force recommended that the ASA Research Department conduct a longitudinal study of master's programs in sociology and their outcomes. The recommendation was approved by ASA's elected Council. This is the third in a series of research briefs that details student outcomes. It focuses on those who have completed terminal master's degrees and especially the factors that lead to increased job satisfaction. It also examines the adequacy of what respondents indicate that they learned in their master's programs, and what they wished they had learned. Finally, it examines the value added of the master's degree in sociology.

To evaluate program outcomes, the brief provides some comparisons with data from earlier waves of the survey, with those in PhD programs, and with those still completing their master's degrees. We hope that this final brief will aid sociology departments in structuring or restructuring their master's programs, especially if they are interested in increasing the percentage of students finding satisfactory jobs that incorporate their sociological skills.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The national longitudinal survey of master's students was conducted with the help of members of the Task Force.¹ The survey was administered by the ASA Research Department and the Indiana University Center for Survey Research. We surveyed 224 departments that awarded at least one Master's degree in sociology in AY 2006-07. The graduate directors of these programs were asked about the characteristics of their programs and asked to send a list of their master's students and their email addresses. More than half (122)

¹ We are particularly indebted to Robert Shelly of Ohio University who took charge of gaining IRB approval as well as help with the survey questionnaires and to Mellisa Holtzman of Ball State University for her help with survey questionnaires.

completed the graduate directors survey and provided email addresses for their students. With the aid of the Task Force, the Research Department developed and administered three surveys over a three-year period to provide students with career information and to provide sociology departments with base-line data for program reviews, assessments, and evaluations.

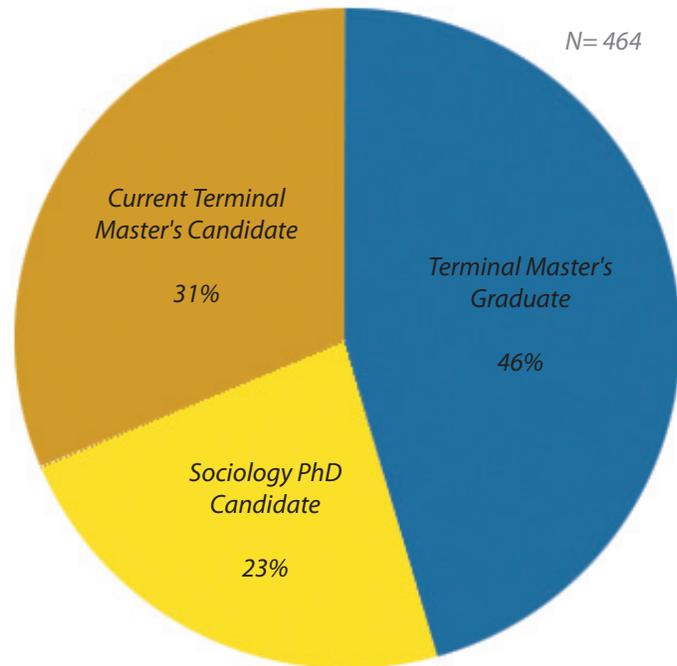
The first wave of the student survey, conducted in spring of 2009, asked students about their graduate school experiences and their future plans (see Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2009). In the second wave, conducted in the winter of 2009-10, respondents were asked about their current status. Those respondents who had completed their master's degrees were asked what sociological skills they used on the job and what skills they wished they had learned as part of their studies (see Van Vooren, Spalter-Roth, and Scelza 2010). The third wave of the longitudinal survey was conducted in the spring of 2010 and asked additional questions about program satisfaction, job characteristics, and job satisfaction (all of these surveys can be found at <http://www.asanet.org/research/masters.cfm>).

The first on-line survey was sent to about 1600 students. To obtain high response rates we sent introductory letters, and follow-up emails and post cards for each wave of the survey. The response rate for the first survey was 55 percent (872 respondents). There were 564 respondents to the second survey and 454 respondents to the third survey. To analyze the survey findings we created indexes, ran cross-tabulations, and regression models. The decline in the number of respondents in the third survey results in small cell sizes for some of the analyses, especially when we cross-tabulated terminal master's graduates with other variables.

FINDINGS

Of those respondents who were enrolled in sociology master's programs in 2008, about 45 percent had graduated with a terminal master's degree by 2010, 23 percent were enrolled in PhD programs, and 31 percent were still pursuing their master's degree (see Figure 1). The relatively low completion rate is most likely due to the fact that 77 percent of those still working towards their master's degree were also in the labor force, and about 67 percent of them were working in full time positions.

Figure 1. Nearly Half of the 2009 Master's Survey Respondents Graduated by 2011
(Percentage of 2011 Respondents)



Source: ASA Research and Development Department. *What Can I Do with a Master's in Sociology, Wave III.*

MEETING PROGRAM GOALS: RESULTS FROM THE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

If the purpose of a terminal master's degree is to train graduates to obtain professional-level jobs that provide them with job satisfaction, what factors are related to reaching this goal? We included all respondents who had either completed or were still working towards a terminal master's degree in a logistic regression analysis to answer this question. The dependent variable (job satisfaction) is measured using a Likert scale that ranges from "very dissatisfied" to "very satisfied." The scale was reduced to a bi-variate one in which the two categories were "very satisfied" or "less than very satisfied."

We find only two factors are statistically significant in explaining job satisfaction (see Figure 2). The first is adequacy of research training. The second is whether or not the job they held is closely related to sociology. These

Figure 2. Factors Related to Job Satisfaction¹

¹ Based on a regression model. Gray text indicates variables in the model that are not significant at the 0.05 level. Source: ASA Research and Development Department. *What Can I Do with a Master's in Sociology, Wave III*.

findings suggest that job satisfaction is the result of in-school activities and job market activities. The first occurs during the master's program. The second occurs after graduation. There was a third variable, working in research positions, that was positively associated with job satisfaction in the descriptive analysis, but due to its high correlation with closeness to sociology, we could not test its effect in the multivariate analysis. This high correlation suggests that respondents working in research positions consider these jobs closely related to their sociological training, and these are the jobs leading to greater job satisfaction. The more adequate their research training was, the more satisfied they are in these jobs.

DURING THE PROGRAM

We created a scale of research skills that students learn as part of master's degree training. This scale included research design, survey methods, statistics, qualitative methods, program evaluation, computer applications, data management, grant writing, visual presentations, policy analysis, and research ethics. If graduates are satisfied with their overall training in research skills then their satisfaction with their employment increases significantly. We will see that contrary to their aspirations while still in school, more graduates are engaging in the science workforce as researchers. We will see also that taken individually, graduates are differentially satisfied with the adequacy of their training in each of these skills. A scale of what we refer to as analytical skills is not significant in the model. These include analyzing ideas, applying sociological literature to social problems, and formulating pertinent comments.

When these analytical skills are examined individually, however, one does contribute to job satisfaction.

AFTER THE JOB SEARCH

Finding a job that is "close to sociology," and that therefore affords job satisfaction, happens after a successful job search. Finding a job that is closely related to sociology has a significant impact on their job satisfaction. The regression shows that job satisfaction more than doubles for those who work in a job they consider to be close to sociology. When we compare the satisfaction level of those terminal master's graduates whose jobs are closely related to sociology we find that 39 percent are very satisfied compared to only 9 percent who are very satisfied with jobs that are only slightly or not at all related to sociology.

OTHER FACTORS

Other factors included in the regression analysis that were not significant included primary job activities (although specific job activities lead to greater job satisfaction in the descriptive analysis), gender, race or ethnicity, and parents' educational background.

To our surprise, salaries were not significantly related to job satisfaction. Given the relatively low salaries of master's graduates (about \$35,000), we would have expected significant dissatisfaction. This lack of significant dissatisfaction in the regression analysis may be because sociology students major in the field for other than financial reasons (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006).

We were also surprised that participating in activities such as internships, service learning, career fairs, and attendance at sociology regional meetings did not significantly affect the likelihood of more satisfying jobs. Nor did participating in these activities appear to lead to a position that is viewed as close to sociology, although, as we will see, more than one-third of terminal master's graduates wished they had such activities available to them in graduate school. This lack of significance was surprising, given our previous analysis of the importance of these activities for bachelor's graduates in obtaining careers that were close to sociology (see Spalter-Roth, Van Vooren, and Senter 2009). Although terminal master's graduates do indicate the desire for internships, the findings suggest that concentration on research methods and statistics, will have the strongest effect on graduates' obtaining satisfactory jobs.

RESULTS FROM DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

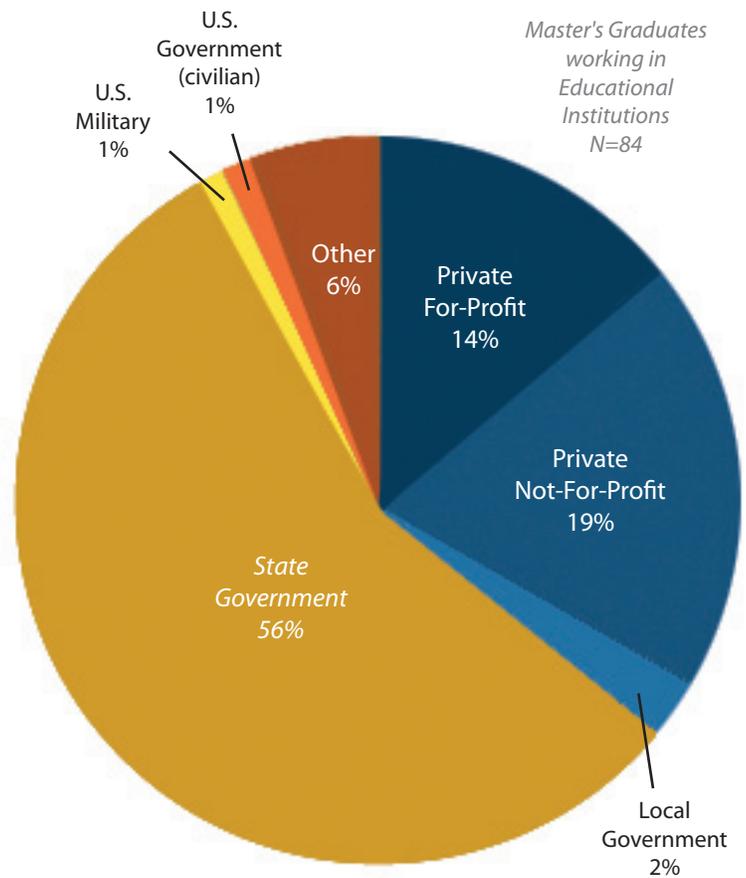
Although we do not control for a variety of factors in the following descriptive analysis as we did in the regression, this section does allow us to drill down into specific aspects of terminal master's experiences.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND JOB ACTIVITIES

Employment Status. There is a moderately high rate of unemployment for those who completed their master's programs and are not pursuing PhDs (17 percent), although most had been looking for a job for fewer than four months. Those respondents who were unemployed were most likely to report that they were unable to find jobs because of their desire not to relocate. Almost half (48 percent) of employed respondents who completed a terminal master's degree were employed in educational institutions, the majority of these institutions are public (state). They were employed in positions such as teachers in two-year colleges and as researchers in institutional research offices at colleges and universities. In fact, there are programs that specifically prepare students for jobs in institutional research offices and those that have community college teaching tracks. Of those not employed in educational institutions, an equal percentage are employed in not-for-profit and for-profit institutions (32 percent in each). Only 13 percent are employed by state governments (see Figure 3). These respondents may be health or aging researchers or those working for community organizations.

Job Activities. The survey findings suggest that as a result of completing a sociology terminal master's degree, respondents are more likely to use research skills than they originally anticipated. In an earlier research brief when all of the respondents were still students we asked those who planned to go directly into the workforce, what kind of jobs they desired (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2009). The findings showed that a higher percentage of respondents wanted what might be described as professional service and management jobs (such as managing non-profit organizations or providing direct services to clients) than wanted research or teaching jobs. It was the PhD students that wanted the research and teaching jobs. One year later, more terminal master's graduates were part of the science workforce employed in research occupations as research assistants, associates and

Figure 3. What Types of Educational Institutions are Master's Graduates Working In?
(percentage of those working in educational institutions)



Source: ASA Research and Development Department. What Can I Do with a Master's in Sociology, Wave III.

directors (Van Vooren, Spalter-Roth and Scelza 2010). In this latest wave of the survey we asked respondents to tell us which activities took up the greatest amount of their work hours. Almost one-third (30 percent) of those with terminal master's degrees spent most of their working hours doing applied or basic research activities compared to 20 percent of those who had not completed their terminal degree (see

Table 1). In comparison to their initial job expectations, only 7 percent are engaged in direct professional services such as health care and counseling. This change may be the result of the likelihood that their sociology graduate training emphasized research skills rather than social service work.

ASPECTS OF JOB SATISFACTION

The largest share of respondents (73 percent) who completed terminal master's degrees reported that they were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their jobs, with 26 percent being very satisfied. There is a significant difference between those who completed their terminal master's degree and those who have not as to whether their jobs were very closely related to what they learned in their sociology program (34 percent compared to 24 percent). As we have seen in the regression analysis, there is a significant relationship between the closeness of a job to sociology with job satisfaction and as Table 2 shows, only 5 percent of those with jobs that are close to sociology are dissatisfied with their jobs in contrast to 35 percent of those whose jobs are not close to sociology.

Next, we see the relationship between job satisfaction and the adequacy of skills training while in the master's program and the time spent at research activities on the job.

Adequacy of Job Training and Job Satisfaction. We saw that a scale of research skills were significantly related to job satisfaction in the regression analysis. Here we find that adequate training in specific research skills are related to job satisfaction, although these individual relationships are not significant (see Figure 4). Of those who report that they are adequately trained in the use of computer skills, about 30 percent are very satisfied with their jobs compared to 18 percent who felt they were not adequately trained. We find a similar relationship between adequate training in data management skills, research design, qualitative methods, statistical analysis and job satisfaction (see Table #). Adequate training in other skills, which include program evaluation, grant writing, presentation, and survey methodology did not affect job satisfaction. It may be that terminal master's graduates recognize the importance of these skills when they are on the job market or in a job. Some of these are skills in which respondents wished they had more adequate training.

Core Analytic Skills. Although a scale of critical analytic skills is not significantly related to job satisfaction in the regression analysis, at least one of these skills is significantly related in the descriptive analysis.

Table 1. Types of Job Activities Differ Between Terminal Master's Graduates and Current Students (in percents)

<i>Primary work activities</i>	<i>Terminal Master's Graduate</i>	<i>Current Terminal Master's Student</i>	<i>Total</i>
Accounting and finance	3.5	2.7	3.2
Applied or basic research	30.4	12.8	20.2
Computer programming	4.1	7.2	5.3
Employee relations	4.7	0.0	2.8
Managing or supervising	3.5	12.6	7.1
Professional services	6.4	12.6	8.9
Sales and marketing	10.5	9.0	9.9
Teaching	15.8	14.4	15.2
Working with diverse groups	9.4	5.4	7.8
Other	11.7	16.2	13.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
(N)	171	111	282

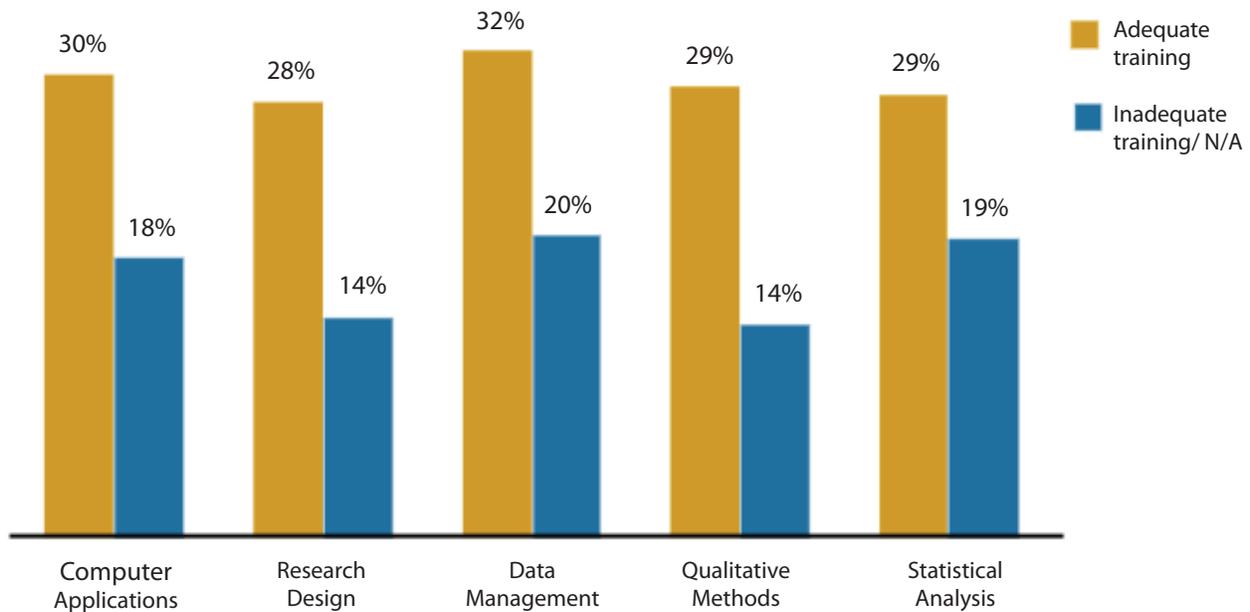
Source: ASA Research and Development Department. *What Can I Do with a Master's in Sociology, Wave III.*

Table 2. Master's Graduates Working in Jobs Closely Related to Sociology are More Satisfied (in percents)

<i>Closeness of Job to Sociology</i>	<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</i>	<i>Dissatisfied</i>	<i>Total</i>
Close	84.5	10.3	5.2	100.0
Not very close	50.0	14.3	35.7	100.0
Total	67.5	12.3	20.2	100.0
(N)	77	14	23	114

Source: ASA Research and Development Department. *What Can I Do with a Master's in Sociology, Wave III.*

Figure 4. Adequate Skills Training is Related to Greater Job Satisfaction
(percentage of terminal master's graduates)



Source: ASA Research and Development Department. *What Can I do with a Master's in Sociology, Wave III.*

Applying sociological literature in solving problems on the job is related to increased satisfaction (33 percent of those who apply this literature are very satisfied with their jobs in contrast to 23 percent who do not apply this literature).

Application of Research Skills. Based on the regression analysis findings, the scale composed of research skills generally taught in master's programs is significantly related to job satisfaction when other factors are held constant. As noted, we asked respondents to check off which activities they spent the most hours doing on the job. In this descriptive analysis we examine the statistical significance of the relation between spending time at specific job activities and job satisfaction. Time spent applying research and teaching skills results in greater job satisfaction than spending time applying non-research skills. One third or more of those who spend the most time at applied research, basic research, computer applications, and teaching are very satisfied with their jobs. Half of the small number of terminal master's graduates who spent the most time at management was very satisfied with their jobs, likely because directing others is probably more satisfying than being directed. Ten percent or fewer were very satisfied with their jobs when they spend the most hours at accounting, finance, budgets, or contracts; sales marketing, customer services, and public relations; or employee relations including recruiting, personnel development, and training.

We know that training master's students in research skills is important for job satisfaction. Guiding students into the kinds of jobs in which they can apply these skills is important as well.

Salaries. During periods when students have large debts from financing their undergraduate education, it is not surprising that salaries were related to job satisfaction, although, as with the regression analysis, the relationship was not statistically significant. The largest percent of graduates (44 percent) was making less than \$30,000. Fully 80 percent of this group reported lower job satisfaction than those making more than \$30,000.

THE BRIDGE TO SATISFACTION

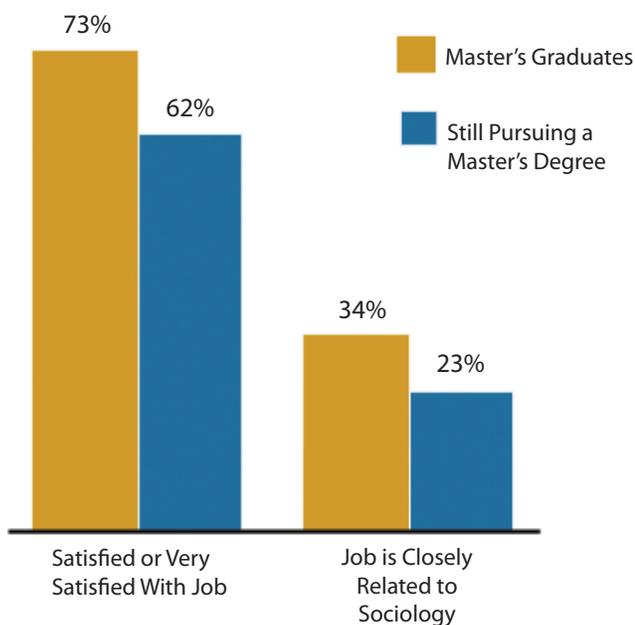
Only about one third of terminal master's graduates (35 percent) report receiving adequate preparation for their post-graduation job search, and therefore may not have had help that would have guided them into jobs where they applied their research and other sociological skills. However, if respondents did perceive the preparation as adequate, then they were somewhat more likely to be very satisfied with the job that they found (32 percent of those with adequate preparation were very satisfied with their jobs compared to 22 percent who report inadequate preparation).

POST-EMPLOYMENT REFLECTIONS: DESIRE FOR ADDITIONAL TRAINING

As terminal master's students spend time on the job, they should gain a better understanding of the kinds of skills that would help them reach their goals, and, consequently, which skills they would have liked more or better preparation. In this section we compare those with terminal master's degrees to those who are in PhD programs. Almost half (48 percent) of those who obtained terminal master's degrees wished that they had better training in grant-writing skills, but nearly 66 percent of those in PhD programs wish they had a better grasp of this skill. It could be that terminal master's programs provide better training in grant writing than PhD programs, or, alternatively, early career sociologists do not see the importance of this skill until they are working on their PhDs and may wish to pursue dissertation grants.

Upon reflection, about one-third (31 percent) of terminal master's wish they had a better grasp of statistical packages compared to only 17 percent of PhD candidates. In a previous research brief we learned that there was a statistically significant difference in the number of research methods taken by each group with those in PhD programs more likely to take more courses than those in terminal master's programs (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2009).

Figure 5. Job Satisfaction: Terminal Master's Graduate Versus Those Still Pursuing Their Master's Degree (in percents)



Source: ASA Research and Development Department. *What Can I Do with a Master's in Sociology, Wave III.*

It may be that in a competitive job market the need for these skills is particularly important, and master's-only programs do not offer enough courses or students do not avail themselves of these courses because it does not fit their vision of sociology. In a previous study we found that undergraduates became sociology majors because of their interest in sociological concepts, the desire to understand the relationship between social forces and individual life stories, and aspirations to change society (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006). Students did not suggest that they went into sociology to learn research methodology or statistics, although they may wish they had learned these skills in order to find jobs that are close to their sociological training.

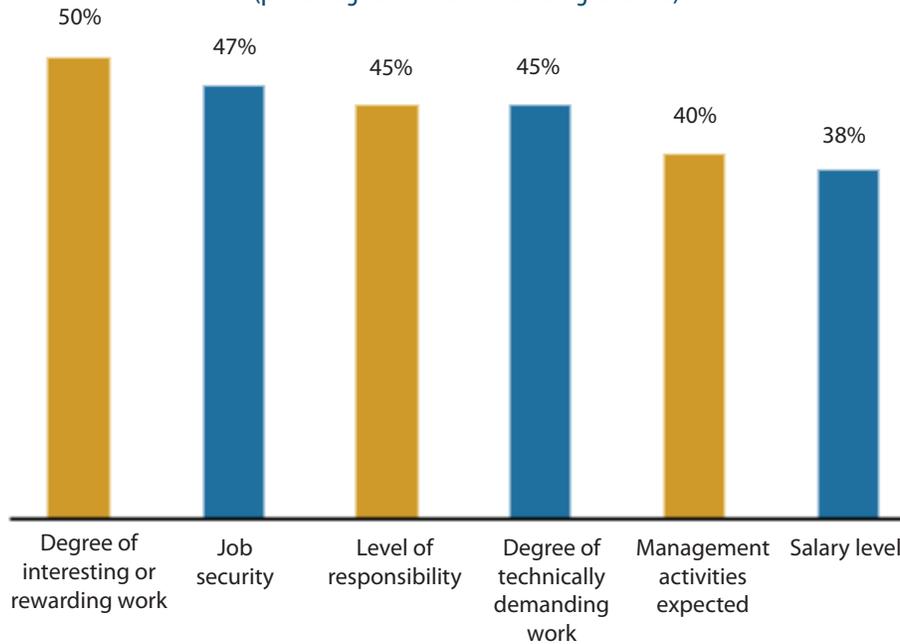
As noted above, about 40 percent of those who completed their master's programs wished they had access to internship programs, although this activity was not significant in the regression analysis while controlling for other factors. To our surprise, a similar percentage of PhD students wish they had access to internship programs as well.

VALUE ADDED OF COMPLETING A TERMINAL MASTER'S DEGREE

We have seen the factors that increase job satisfaction, but what, specifically, do those who obtained terminal master's degrees report that they gain from this experience? One measure of "value added" compares the statistically significant differences between those who graduated with their terminal master's degree and those who are still pursuing this degree (excluding those on a PhD track). As Figure 5 illustrates, we find that those who completed master's degrees are significantly more likely to be very satisfied or satisfied with their jobs than those that are still pursuing their degree (73 percent versus 62 percent). About 34 percent of those who completed their degrees report that their jobs are very close to sociology compared to 23 percent of those who are still in school, while just 14 percent of those who had completed their degrees reported that their jobs were not at all related to sociology, compared to 22 percent of those who had not yet completed their degrees.

Since many of those in master's programs hope to gain a better work situation on jobs they held while working on their master's degrees, a second measure of the value of a terminal degree that we use is the changes in job conditions and job status experienced after they complete their degree. We find that about 50 percent report being assigned more interesting or rewarding work, 47 percent report more job security, and equally 45 percent report that they both gained more responsibility and were assigned more technologically demanding work as a result of completing their master's degree (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Master's Degree Improves Job Conditions
(percentage of terminal master's graduates)



Source: ASA Research and Development Department. *What Can I Do with a Master's in Sociology, Wave III.*

CONCLUSIONS

The results from the third wave of the master's survey finds that overall, terminal master's programs of all kinds (professional, applied, clinical, or traditional) have done relatively well in producing graduates who report that they are working in somewhat or very satisfying jobs that are somewhat or very closely related to what they learned in their sociology programs. Further, they experienced improved status and conditions in jobs they already had. More students joined the science workforce and spent the majority of their time doing research than had expected. The study results show that job satisfaction is the result of training in research skills during the program and obtaining a job that is close to sociology after the program is completed. If employment and job satisfaction is a desired outcome of terminal master's programs, then a key aspect of these programs should be intentionally training students in research skills. The need for rigorous research methodological and statistical training appear to be necessary to gain jobs that are close to sociology and that lead to former students' fulfilling their goals and aspirations.

Helping students make the transition to paid employment may be the bridge between training in research skills and obtaining jobs that provide satisfaction through the use of

these skills. Given that a major reason for unemployment are factors that keep graduates tied to local labor markets, faculty members might try to gain awareness of the local labor market, or be able to connect students with those who might have this awareness, perhaps through internship programs. Job preparation may show students how research skills are linked to aspirations to understand and change aspects of society, their original reasons for pursuing sociology degrees. Although critical analytical skills appear less important in producing job satisfaction, students may be less likely to recognize their importance on the job. Making students aware of the analytical skills as well as the research and statistical skills that they have and how they might use them on the job may be an important part of job preparation. The ASA Research Department published a faculty handbook designed to help launch sociology baccalaureates into the job market (Spalter-Roth, Van Vooren, and Senter 2010), and many of these suggestions can be helpful for master's as well as baccalaureate graduates in sociology. Further research can tell faculty members which kinds of job preparation are most helpful for job satisfaction.

In the face of possible closure of some master's programs (see Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2011), we hope that this analysis will help to strengthen these programs.

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