

Data Brief: 2011 Directors of Graduate Studies Survey

Are Master's Programs Closing? What Makes for Success in Staying Open?

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This data brief investigates whether Master's programs in sociology are facing cancellations or closings, given the current cutback efforts at colleges and universities. Based on a survey of departmental directors of graduate studies, the brief focuses on the characteristics of successful programs that are most likely to stay open. It also examines the differences in curriculum and activities between different types of Master's programs; those that can be labeled as professional, applied, or clinical programs oriented to the job market and those that can be labeled traditional programs oriented to prepare students for a PhD in sociology.

Background

In 2004, an informal group of chairs of Master's degree-only programs called on the American Sociological Association (ASA) to work with them in developing strategies to make the Master's degree a meaningful final degree rather than a "consolation prize" or a "cash cow." As it turned out, these comments were

prescient. In response to the informal group, the ASA Council appointed a Task Force on the Professional Master's Degree to produce a report that would be useful to departments that desired, or were under pressure, to start an applied, professional, clinical or other terminal Master's program. The Task Force found that among the various post-secondary degree types nationwide, the number of Master's degrees awarded has seen the most substantial growth over the past four decades. Although Master's education has grown faster than the increase associated with both Bachelor's and PhD degrees, the discipline of sociology has not been a strong participant in that growth (Task Force on the Master's Degree 2009).

By 2009, *Inside Higher Education* reported that an increased number of major research universities had been decreasing the size of their PhD programs especially in the social sciences (Jaschik 2009). The declining size of programs is a response to falling endowments and worries about the job market for new PhDs.



In contrast to decreasing the size of PhD programs, many universities attempted to increase the enrollments of professional schools and at the Master's level because neither have a model of supporting students financially throughout most of their graduate education. As a result, professional or applied programs have been seen increasingly as "cash cows." Within this context, more sociology programs may begin to focus on applied or professional master's programs that prepare students for research, policy, management, and service occupations rather than as a stepping stone to a PhD.

In January 2009 ASA, following the Task Force's recommendation, invited directors of graduate studies in 224 departments to participate in an online survey about their Master's program as the first part of a new study on Master's candidates. According to the IPEDS data set, these departments awarded at least one Master's degree in sociology in AY 2006/07 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2009). Of these departments, 56 said they did not offer a terminal Master's degree. Of the remaining 168 departments, 73 percent (122 departments) completed the survey. More than half (53%) of these programs reported having a professional, applied, or clinical track (Spalter-Roth and Scelza, 2009).

The Issue

At recent meetings of sociology department chairs in 2010 and 2011, ASA staff sociologists heard accounts of professional, applied, or clinical Master's programs being downsized or closed. To find out if these accounts reflected a wider reality of what is happening to sociology Master's programs, the ASA Research and Development Department re-surveyed all 122 departments. We found that 104 still had master's programs in the late spring of 2011. The difference in these numbers suggests that some of these programs have in fact closed. Of the 104 departments, 91 (88%) responded to the short survey. The survey focused on two questions. First was whether or not programs were facing the threat of cancellation, and, if so, what factors were related to such threats. The second question was to see if the balance between applied and traditional Master's programs, and the characteristics that distinguished them, had shifted in the two years since the previous survey.

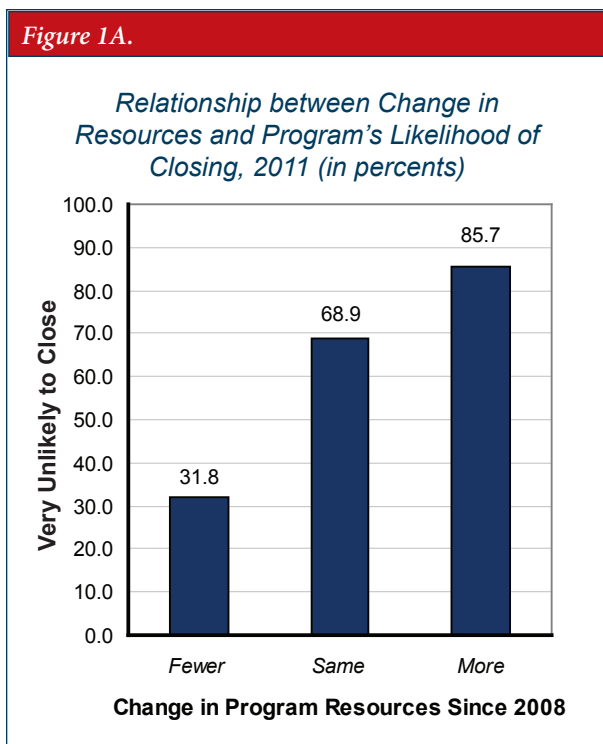
What are the Characteristics of Successful Programs?

In the 2011 survey we asked directors of graduate studies whether it was very or somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, or

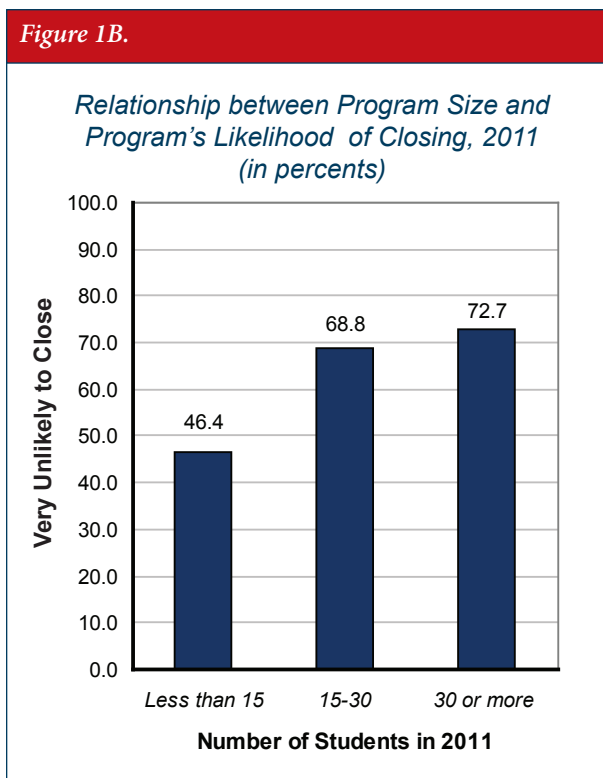
very unlikely that their department's Master's programs would be cancelled or closed in the next 3 years. About 62 percent of those who responded to the question reported that their department's program was very unlikely to close. Another 21 percent placed their programs in the middle of the scale and reported that the program was somewhat unlikely to close. About 17 percent did report that their programs were very or somewhat likely to be cancelled or closed. These findings suggest that while a notable share of Master's programs may be under some threat, the threat was not as great as we had feared. More than half of the programs appear to have no fear of closure. With that in mind, what factors appear to be related to programs very likely to stay open or very or somewhat likely to close?

Resources. More than half (56%) of directors of graduate studies report that the level of resources available to their departments has stayed the same as it was in 2008. Yet, the level of resources is significantly related to the likelihood of program closing or staying open. Nearly 86 percent of Master's programs that had received more resources than in 2008 were reported as being very unlikely to be slated for closing. Similarly, more than two-thirds (70%) of graduate directors who reported that their program's resource level was the same as in 2008 also reported that the program was very unlikely to be closed. In stark contrast, less than one-third of programs in which graduate directors reported receiving fewer resources than in 2008 were seen as very unlikely to close while 41 percent saw their programs as very or somewhat likely to close. In a regression analysis, resources trumped all other factors in its relationship to the likelihood of a program being closed or cancelled. This relationship may not be causal however, but may be mutually reinforcing. Programs that are likely to be slated for closing may receive a gradual diminution of resources. Alternatively the lack of resources may make it too difficult for a program to continue.

Other Factors: Number of Students, Level of Degree, and Type of Program. There are other significant or close to significant relationships between a program's likelihood of closing and several other factors. The recruitment and retention of students is a problem for some programs. We found a significant relationship between the number of students in a program and its likelihood of staying open or being cancelled or closing. The median number of students in all programs is about 20. This is similar to the median number in 2008, suggesting that, on average, program size has neither increased nor declined. Less than half (46%) of the programs with fewer than 15 students reported that they are very unlikely to close, while more than one-third (36%) of these smaller programs report that they are very or



Source: ASA Survey of Graduate Directors, 2011



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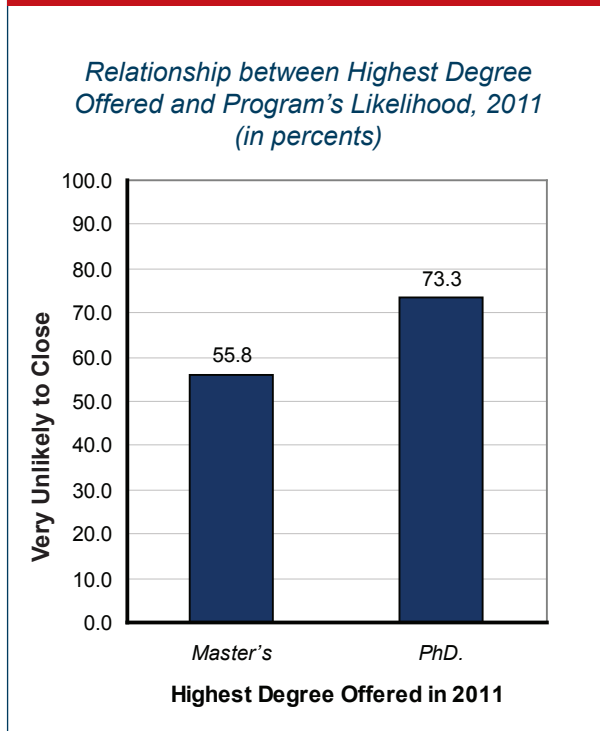
somewhat likely to close. In more than two-thirds (69%) of programs with approximately the median number of students (15 to 30), graduate directors report that they are very unlikely to close. The largest programs (30 or more) are reported as being the most likely to avoid cancellation or closing.

Two other factors are noteworthy in their relationship to the likelihood of Master's programs closing or staying open. The first is whether Master's programs are situated in departments that award PhDs as their highest degree versus programs that award Master's degrees as the terminal or highest degree. Graduate directors are more likely to report that programs in PhD-granting departments are very unlikely to close compared to those with Master's degrees as the highest degree (73% compared to 56%), although the difference is not statistically significant. We would expect the PhD programs to have more students, since the number of students in a program is related to likelihood of closure. This is not the case, however. The number of Master's students in a PhD-granting program is smaller than in Master's-only programs with 53 percent of the programs offering PhDs having fewer than 15 master's students compared to 23 percent of the Master's-only programs. This finding suggests that smaller-sized programs appear to be under threat especially if they are housed in Master's only departments.

The second factor is the type of Master's program, that is, whether programs are described as professional or applied programs or if they are described as traditional programs that are expected to lead to a PhD in sociology and the academic workplace. Close to half (45%) of graduate directors report that their Master's programs offer an applied, professional, or clinical track. However, there appears to be a decline in the percentage of this type of program since 2008 when 53 percent of Master's programs offered this kind of track. We might expect that professional or applied Master's programs might be under greater threat of closing. In contrast to closing down a professional Master's program, canceling a traditional Master's programs in a PhD-granting department could mean closing down the entire PhD program, which universities may be more reluctant to do since these programs are the long-established training model for an academic career trajectory.

This relationship between the type of program and the threat of program closure is not statistically significant however, and there is no evidence that either type of program has been more likely to close since 2008. Two-thirds of programs (66%) that offer professional or applied Master's degrees reported being very unlikely to close, in contrast with 60 percent of programs without such degrees. In fact, professional and applied programs are significantly larger than traditional programs

Figure 1C.



Source: ASA Survey of Graduate Directors, 2011

(with 46 percent of professional and applied programs having more than 30 students compared to 21 percent of traditional Master's programs), and, as we have seen, there is a relationship between the size of the program and its likelihood of staying open. These findings suggest the relative success of professional Master's programs, especially those that are larger in size.

What are the Differences Between Professional and Traditional Programs?

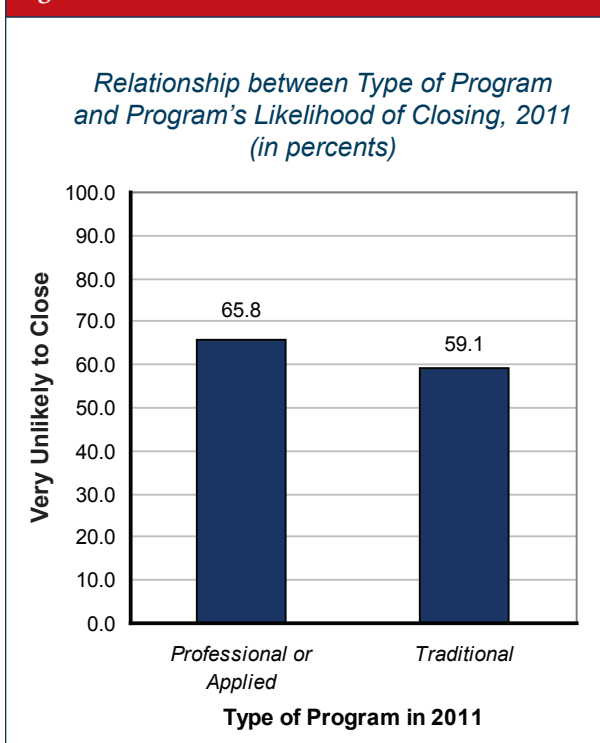
The previous findings suggest that professional or applied Master's programs are not significantly more likely to be slated for closing and may be more likely to stay open than traditional Master's programs, especially traditional programs in Master's-only departments. Are the characteristics of these two types of programs significantly different from one another?

The answer is that there are some significant differences. Programs that graduate directors label as professional or applied are more likely to offer what might be viewed as "practice" activities for the non-academic workforce. These programs are nearly four times as likely as traditional Master's programs to offer or require internships that students can use to learn job skills or make professional contacts (80% compared to 21%). They are significantly more likely to offer or require participation in community activities (58% compared to 34%), almost twice as likely to offer or require group projects that model workplace production and teamwork patterns, and close to, but not quite, significantly more likely to offer or require career preparation (69% compared to 50%). There are no significant differences between programs that required or offered Master's theses or comprehensive exams, with less than 40 percent of either type of program requiring comprehensive exams (or having them available) and almost all programs requiring the writing of a thesis or having this option available. These latter two aspects seem to be a universal aspect across both types of Master's programs.

Conclusions

The effort to create professional or applied Master's tracks appears to have been relatively successful, as these programs are more likely to stay open than traditional Master's programs that lead to a PhD (66.9% compared to 59%). Those traditional programs in Master's-only departments with relatively few students may be the most likely programs to close. Both the professional or applied programs that have

Figure 1D.



Source: ASA Survey of Graduate Directors, 2011

Table 1.*Availability of Program Activities by Type of Program (in percents)¹*

<i>Program activity available or required</i>	<i>Professional or Applied Master's</i>	<i>Traditional Master's</i>
Community Activities*	58.3	34.1
Internship *	78.9	31.8
Career Preparation	69.4	50.0
Group Project*	22.2	4.7
Comprehensive Exam	30.6	36.4
Thesis Option	97.4	88.6

¹ Row totals do not add to 100%.

* Indicates statistical significance at the $p < 0.5$ level.

Source: ASA Survey of Graduate Directors, 2011

more students, on average, than the traditional programs and those larger programs appear more likely to survive. Resources are important for survival, and receiving fewer resources over time is a harbinger of programs likelihood of closing. It may be that these programs have developed strategies to make the Master's degree a meaningful final degree rather than a "consolation prize" or a "cash cow." Future research should include in-depth analyses of what these two types of programs look like on the ground in terms of their goals and activities to ensure that we are truly comparing apples and apples.

As we have learned in the first wave of the corresponding Master's degree candidate survey, a major reason for entering Master's programs in sociology is a strong interest in the discipline. Yet, for those pursuing terminal degrees, interest alone does not result in satisfactory jobs. Cash cow or not, we need to investigate further the factors that lead to student success in the job market, which we define as obtaining jobs that reflects what they have learned in their sociology Master's programs. In an upcoming research brief containing the results of the final wave of the Master's degree candidate survey, we find out what program characteristics result in such positions and the level of student satisfaction with them.

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