

American Sociological Association

Data·Brief

BA Growth Trend: Sociology Overtakes Economics

The number of Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees awarded in sociology is an indicator of the health and well being of the academic profession. Sociology is more dependent on undergraduate students as its material base than some other comparable social science disciplines. As Figure 1 shows more than nine out of 10 of the degrees awarded in 1997 were Bachelor's degrees.¹ This ratio has remained constant since the mid-1960s, during years of decline and growth in the number of BAs awarded. The number of new BAs awarded in sociology peaked in 1973, with a high of 35,996 and bottomed in 1985 with a low of 12,165. The number of new BAs rebounded slowly during the remainder of the 1980s. In the 1990s the growth rate became more dramatic.

As Table 1 shows, from 1991 through 1997, the number of sociology BAs grew from 17,632 to 24,750, for an increase of 40 percent. During the same time period, the number of BAs awarded in political science and economics fell. Political science, which awarded the most BAs of the three disciplines, experienced a 15 percent drop, and economics experienced a 30 percent drop. In fact, the number of BAs awarded in economics and in sociology reversed almost exactly over the seven-year period. By 1997 almost 25,000 BAs were awarded in sociology in contrast to only 17,700 in economics.

Some pundits suggest that, under current circumstances of academic restructuring, the growth in sociology BAs will result in an increased hiring of adjunct faculty or a decrease in PhD selectivity in order to have enough teachers for undergraduates. Although this scenario is possible, our own prior research suggests that BA growth in sociology during the 1990s has stimulated additional growth. Data show a moderate increase in applicants to graduate sociology departments, a greater selectivity in graduate school acceptances, a higher share of graduate students receiving funding, a modest increase in the number of new PhDs, an increase in Employment Bulletin job listings for new PhDs, and an increased share of academic departments hiring new faculty.² The increase in sociology BAs appears to be a sign of increased vigor at all stages of the academic pipeline.

¹ Sociology awarded a higher percentage of its degrees to Bachelor's of Arts or Sciences than did either economics (81percent) or political science (only 70 percent because fully 25 percent of political science degrees are awarded as Masters Degrees mostly in Public Policy or Public Administration).

² Some of these data can be seen in "After the Fall" in the February 1998 issue of Footnotes, some are unpublished data from the 1997-98 Graduate Department Survey presented at Chairs conferences and Graduate Director's meetings at ASA annual meetings.

2 BA Growth Trend

Table 1. Number of Bachelor's Degrees Awarded in Selected Social Sciences and Percentage Change: 1991-1997

	Sociology	Economics	Political Science
1991	17,632	25,302	44,257
1992	19,644	24,976	47,214
1993	21,007	22,973	47,936
1994	22,468	20,945	45,610
1995	22,974	19,083	41,978
1996	24,169	17,896	39,928
1997	24,750	17,701	37,807
<i>Percentage Change 1991-1997</i>	+40.4%	-30.0%	-14.6%

Source: National Science Foundation/Division of Science Resource Studies, *Science and Engineering Degrees: 1966-97* (NSF00-310), Tables 52,53,54. Data from Department of Education/NCES: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Completions Survey.

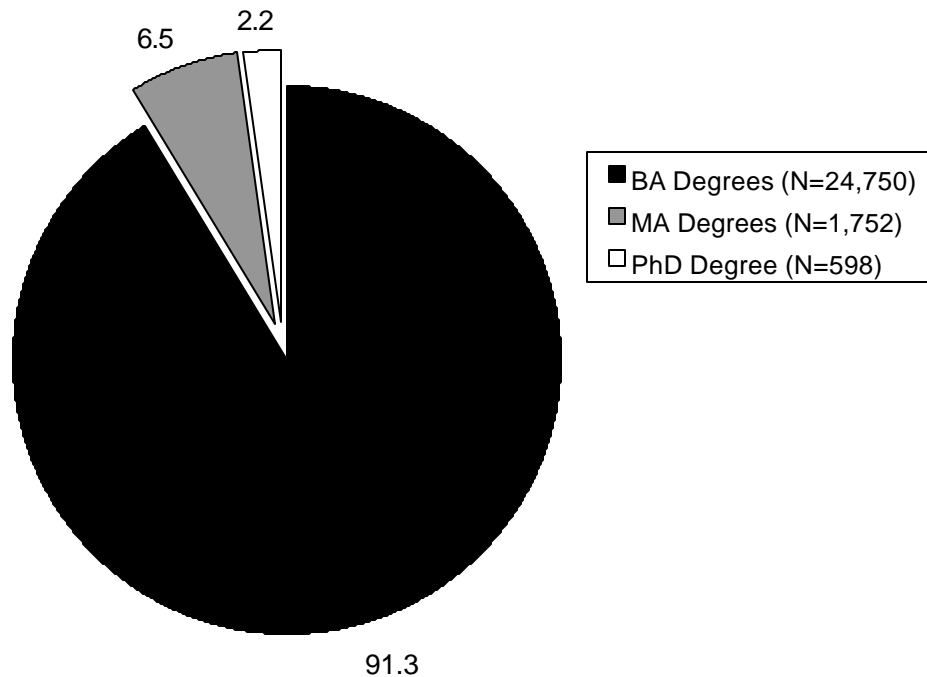


Figure 1. Percentage of Sociology Degrees Awarded by Type of Degree: 1997

Source: Tabulated by National Science Foundation/Division of Science Resource Studies; data from Department of Education/National Center for Education Statistics: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Completions Survey; and NSF/SRS, Survey of Earned Doctorates.

Reference: NSF/SRS, *Science and Engineering Degrees: 1966-67* (NSF 00-310). Table 54.

By Roberta Spalter-Roth, Director ASA Research Program. Graphics prepared by Andrew Sutter, ASA Research Program