



# WHAT LEADS TO STUDENT SATISFACTION WITH SOCIOLOGY PROGRAMS? †

AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## Main Findings

- ▷ Respondents who majored in sociology for “substantive” rather than “convenience” reasons reported higher levels of satisfaction with their study of sociology than those who chose the major for convenience.
- ▷ Respondents who reported higher levels of learning and skills development reported higher levels of satisfaction with their major than those who reported less learning.
- ▷ Respondents who reported participating in more out-of-class activities reported higher satisfaction than students who participated in fewer activities.
- ▷ Mastering concepts and skills increases satisfaction with the sociology major.
- ▷ Sociology students and faculty should be encouraged to interact outside of the classroom setting to promote students’ engagement in their academic future.
- ▷ Similarly, sociology undergraduates should be encouraged to pursue activities that help prepare them for life after graduation.

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## ~WHY CARE ABOUT SATISFACTION?~

This brief explores the factors that can increase student satisfaction, so that sociology departments can reflect on actions they might take to improve student recruitment and retention. The brief examines the following factors that are related to satisfaction: reasons for choosing the major, participation in co-curricular and classroom activities, and learning of sociological content and methodological skills. Why is it important to explore how these factors increase overall student satisfaction?

Faculty critics of the changes affecting higher education have expressed concern about the ways in which administrators have embraced “the business model” (Newfield 2003; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Tuchman 2009). In this model, students become customers, learning is a product, and faculty are expected to become active participants in marketing and development efforts. The business model encourages faculty and departments to develop satisfied customers and to recruit more of them. But, should sociology faculty be concerned? Does satisfaction matter in a paradigm that does not depend on the higher-education-as-just-

another-business narrative?

Student satisfaction should concern sociology faculty members for three reasons—two of which do not result from business model logic. First, satisfaction is a positive good in and of itself. The literature on social indicators sees satisfaction as a key indicator of the well-being of both individuals and aggregate units such as countries (OECD 2012; Veenhoven 1996; Veenhoven 2012). In a decade characterized by the high unemployment and underemployment of recent college graduates and mounting levels of student debt, satisfaction with the collegiate experience may be a welcome reward *sui generis* of gaining employment or paying off debt (Schreiner 2009).

Second, while there are renewed calls for institutions of higher education for departments to provide data to their “customers,” for example, graduation rates and the career success of their graduates (so that “customers”—i.e., students—can make informed choices about college enrollment and the selection of majors), many students turn to their student colleagues for information on courses to take and departments to explore. In fact, the 2012 *Bachelor’s and Beyond* project finds that about one-half of senior so-

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ciology majors chose their majors because they had heard good things about the sociology department. Although “word of mouth” decreased as a very important or important reason for majoring (Spalter-Roth et al. 2012), it continues to be an important source of information on courses, faculty, and departments. Respondents who were satisfied with their experiences were probably more likely to encourage other students to follow in their chosen path.

Third, and more in keeping with the business model, data on satisfaction—especially in the case of sociology, where overall satisfaction tends to be high—can be used to satisfy demands from administrators for information to use for assessment, evaluation, and marketing.<sup>1</sup>

In short, this brief explores the factors that can increase student satisfaction, so that sociology departments can reflect on changes they might want to make in curriculum, job or graduate school counseling, and student/faculty relations.

## ~STUDY METHODS~

### SAMPLE SELECTION

The 104 departments that participated in the 2005 *Bachelor's and Beyond* study were invited to take part in the 2012 study. Included in the 2005 group of departments was the stratified sample of 80 departments (20 from PhD granting institutions, 20 from master's institutions, and 40 from baccalaureate institutions), as well as any other volunteer departments. Along with these departments, the 2012 invitation was also extended to any department that wished to have its students included in the study. Departments were notified of the study via email, ASA's member newsletter *Footnotes*, and *Chairlink*, an online newsletter used to disseminate information to all affiliated department chairs. The result was an additional 129 interested departments for a total of 233 departments. In order to participate, departments were asked to send a list of their senior sociology majors graduat-

ing between April and August 2012 and their email addresses. Departments that did not yet know who of their majors was graduating sent lists of all senior majors, and the response rate was later adjusted. Ultimately, 160 departments sent the ASA Research Department their lists after obtaining institutional review board (IRB) and/or any institutional approval necessary to disclose this information beyond the IRB approval granted to ASA by the Western Institutional Review Board.

### QUESTIONNAIRE AND RESPONSES

ASA's Research Department created the student survey, with the help of the study's Advisory Committee,<sup>2</sup> replicating many questions from the 2005 questionnaire while adding new questions about the social networks that students used or plan to use in pursuing jobs. Questions focused on students' experiences as sociology majors, including why they majored, skills and concepts they learned, activities they participated in, their job and graduate school aspirations, and the contacts used in finding appropriate jobs and graduate schools.<sup>3</sup> The online version was created by Indiana University's Center for Survey Research and was pretested in November 2011 by the Advisory Committee members' undergraduate students. The final version of the survey was launched with an invitational email to students in March 2012, which was followed up with four reminder emails before the survey closed in early May. By the time it closed, 2,695 students had participated in the survey, for an average departmental response rate of about 40 percent (36.8 percent).

### WEIGHTING

In this study we weighted the data so that they were more reliable. We compared demographic and institutional characteristics of respondents with those of recent baccalaureates in sociology, based on the National Center for Educational Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). These characteristics included gender, race and ethnicity,

<sup>1</sup>Of course, departments engaged in program assessment that remains under faculty control may also argue that a key program objective is the development of students who are satisfied with the experiences they enjoy in sociology departments.

<sup>2</sup>The Advisory Committee consisted of John Kennedy, Indiana University; Margaret (Peggy) Nelson, Middlebury College; Mary S. Senter, Central Michigan University; and Pamela Stone and Michael Wood, Hunter College, City University of New York.

<sup>3</sup>See complete questionnaire at [www.asanet.org/documents/research/pdfs/student\\_social\\_cap\\_web.pdf](http://www.asanet.org/documents/research/pdfs/student_social_cap_web.pdf).

and type of institution of higher education. We had weighted the 2005 data by institutional type. In 2012, there were only small differences by race or ethnicity and by institution type compared to the IPEDS data. However, there was a significant disparity between the percentage of male graduates and the percentage of male respondents. Therefore, we weighted the respondents by gender, although the findings between the weighted and unweighted data were not significantly different in most cases. The largest underrepresentation was seen among Black/African American respondents. To adjust for this in the 2012 data only, we coded anyone who selected black into Black/African American, even if they also selected another racial category.<sup>4</sup>

### ~FINDINGS ABOUT SATISFACTION FROM THE 2012 BACHELOR'S AND BEYOND SURVEY~

In 2012, students were asked nine questions about their levels of satisfaction with aspects of their undergraduate experience as sociology majors. Factor analysis of these items suggests two components: one consisting of three items focused on advising and one developed from six items focused on other aspects of their program—in particular, ease of getting the courses needed to graduate, ease of contacting faculty outside of class, opportunity to interact with peers, out-of-class activities, quality of teaching, and sociology experiences overall. The interitem correlations among these latter six items range from a low of .26 to

a high of .54; Cronbach's alpha of .78 suggests the utility of creating a summative Satisfaction Scale from the six items. Table 1 provides the percentage distribution for the Satisfaction Scale that ranges from zero to 12, coded so that high numbers represent high satisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

The table shows that senior majors in sociology programs were highly satisfied with them, although they were less satisfied with advising than with other items. The mean satisfaction score is 9.64, and the modal satisfaction score is, in fact, the highest possible, comprised of students who report being "very satisfied" with each of the program components under analysis here. In fact, the low satisfaction tail of the distribution has been collapsed in the table and for subsequent analyses, given how few students express extremely negative views about their programs.<sup>6</sup>

### SATISFACTION AND REASONS FOR CHOOSING THE SOCIOLOGY MAJOR

What factors lead to higher rather than lower levels of satisfaction? Do recruitment strategies themselves affect overall satisfaction levels with sociology programs? Survey respondents were asked whether each of 10 factors was "important" to them as a reason for majoring in sociology. Table 2 provides the mean scores on the Satisfaction Scale for students who indicated that each factor was or was not important to them. The table is organized so that the reasons that lead to the highest satisfaction appear first.

The table shows that the reasons students choose to

**Table 1. Satisfaction Scale: Percentage Distribution**

|  | Percent of Total Sample (N=2,197) |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Lowest Satisfaction (scale score = 0-5)</b> | 5.3                               |
| 6  | 6.3                               |
| 7  | 7.5                               |
| 8  | 8.3                               |
| 9  | 12.1                              |
| 10   | 15.4                              |
| 11   | 19.1                              |
| <b>Highest Satisfaction (scale score = 12)</b> | 26.1                              |

**Source:** American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates*, 2012.

<sup>4</sup>This is also adjusted for the fact that NCES data do not have a multiracial category as our data do.

<sup>5</sup>Each of the six satisfaction items was recoded so that "very satisfied" is coded "2" and "not at all satisfied" is coded "0."

<sup>6</sup>The mean of the recoded scale is 9.68.



major in sociology have a significant impact on their eventual satisfaction levels. Respondents who majored because they heard good things about the department and enjoyed the first course were more satisfied than those who report that each of these is not a reason for majoring. Similarly, students who report majoring because of their substantive interests in the discipline's concepts (e.g., "the concepts interested me") were more satisfied than students who do not list each of these factors as important. Students who thought that the major would prepare them for the job that they wanted are equally satisfied compared to those who majored because the concepts interested them, suggesting once again that students major for both career and conceptual reasons (Spalter-Roth et al. 2012). In contrast, respondents who majored for convenience reasons (e.g., because they could add the major easily or because the major required fewer credit hours) were *less* satisfied with their experiences than students for whom these factors were not important in their choice of major.

### **SATISFACTION AND ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION**

Departments can organize a variety of experiences for students as part of their curricular and co-curricular offerings. Students were asked whether they

had participated in each of 15 out-of-class activities, and Table 3 compares the satisfaction levels of respondents who did and did not take part in each of them. The table is organized by mean satisfaction scores, with the activities associated with higher satisfaction appearing before those associated with lower satisfaction.

The kinds of experiences respondents had as undergraduates did affect their satisfaction with their sociology program. Activity participation significantly increases satisfaction for 14 of the 15 items under analysis here. Respondents who received mentoring advice from a faculty member were highly satisfied and were much more satisfied with their sociology major than students who did not have this experience. Similarly, students who were part of study groups for a class or who participated in group or team projects were much more satisfied with their program than students without these class experiences. In contrast, students who studied abroad are no more satisfied with their sociology program than students who did not have this experience; notably, study abroad experiences are often organized by units within the university other than sociology departments. These findings suggest that increasing students' satisfaction—by developing out-of-classroom activities—is probably

**Table 2: Satisfaction Levels by Reason for Majoring in Sociology: Mean Scores (t-tests).**

| Why did you major in sociology?  | Mean Satisfaction Scores |               |
|--|--------------------------|---------------|
|  | Important                | Not Important |
| I heard good things about the sociology department at this school.   | 10.06                    | 9.31*         |
| I thought it would prepare me for graduate or professional school.   | 9.86                     | 9.48*         |
| I thought it would prepare me to do different kinds of research.   | 9.83                     | 9.47*         |
| I enjoyed the first course I had in sociology.   | 9.79                     | 8.90*         |
| I thought it would help me understand my life.   | 9.78                     | 9.35*         |
| I thought it would prepare me to understand how individuals function in different socio-economic situations. | 9.77                     | 9.04*         |
| I thought it would prepare me to help me to change society.  | 9.75                     | 9.49**        |
| I thought it would prepare me for the job I want.  | 9.73                     | 9.61          |
| I found that the concepts interested me.   | 9.73                     | 8.10*         |
| I found that I could add it without adding many more credit hours.   | 9.53                     | 9.75**        |
| I found that the major required fewer credit hours than others I could have chosen.                          | 9.46                     | 9.75**        |

Note: \*p < .001; \*\*p < .05.

Source: American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates*, 2012.

**Table 3: Satisfaction Levels by Participation in Activities: Mean Scores (t-tests).**

| As part of your undergraduate experience, did you participate in the following activities?                       | Mean Satisfaction Scores |       |
|--|--------------------------|-------|
|  | Yes                      | No    |
| Attended local, state, or national sociology meeting   | 10.26                    | 9.57* |
| Independent study  | 10.15                    | 9.43* |
| AKD or Sociology Club  | 10.11                    | 9.53* |
| Leadership development program or seminar  | 10.04                    | 9.51* |
| Received mentoring advice from a faculty member  | 10.04                    | 8.78* |
| Service learning project, where you worked in an agency or in the community as part of a class                   | 9.98                     | 9.40* |
| Honors program associated with your department   | 9.99                     | 9.60* |
| Work with a group advocating some cause  | 9.94                     | 9.39* |
| Jobs fairs, on-campus interviews by firms, career-related mentorship programs, or other networking opportunities | 9.93                     | 9.39* |
| Saw a career advisor   | 9.88                     | 9.41* |
| Community/volunteer activity (other than internship)   | 9.87                     | 9.35* |
| Internship   | 9.85                     | 9.53* |
| Study groups for a class   | 9.85                     | 8.93* |
| Study abroad   | 9.81                     | 9.65  |
| Group or team projects for one or more classes   | 9.77                     | 8.57* |

Note: \* $p < .001$ .

Source: American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates*, 2012.

within the control of the sociology department.

A Participation Index was created by summing the number of “yes” responses to the 15 questions about activity participation. The index ranges from zero to 15 with a mean of 6.48. The correlation with the Satisfaction Scale is .28; this suggests that the more activity participation the more satisfaction for student respondents.

### **SATISFACTION AND LEARNING**

How does learning affect satisfaction? Were students who acquired the knowledge and skills expected of sociology graduates more satisfied with their sociology program than students who had less well-developed knowledge and skill levels? Sociology graduates were asked to self-report on the extent to which they had learned six types of knowledge viewed as central to sociology majors and whether they had mastered 15 types of methodological skills. Tables 4 and 5 report mean satisfaction scores for respondents with differing levels of reported knowledge and skill,

respectively.

Table 4 indicates that students who reported that they “definitely” learned sociological concepts were more likely to report satisfaction than those who were less confident about their knowledge acquisition. Similarly, respondents who reported that they have developed methodological skills “a great deal” (Table 5) were more satisfied than those who report less skill development. In each case, perceptions of learning translate into higher levels of satisfaction with sociology programs.

Two composite measures were developed based on responses to the banks of items focused on knowledge and skills. The Knowledge Scale was developed by summing responses to the six items ( $\alpha = .83$ , with interitem correlations ranging from .38 to .60). These items are the same as appear in Table 4 and include whether respondents thought that they could do the following: 1. Present sociological explanations about current social issues such as crime, racism, poverty, family formation, or religion; 2. Discuss what is meant

**Table 4: Satisfaction Levels by Knowledge Acquisition: Mean Scores (ANOVA).**

| As part of your sociology major, to what extent did you learn to:   | Mean Satisfaction Scores |               |          |            |
|---|--------------------------|---------------|----------|------------|
|   | Yes, definitely          | Yes, somewhat | Not much | Not at all |
| Present sociological explanations about current social issues such as crime, racism, poverty, family formation, or religion                       | 9.99                     | 8.50          | 7.76     | 7.25*      |
| Discuss what is meant by a social institution and give examples of their impact on individuals  | 10.00                    | 8.59          | 8.42     | 6.17*      |
| Discuss basic sociological theories or theoretical orientations   | 10.03                    | 8.48          | 7.65     | 10.33*     |
| Explain basic concepts in sociology (including culture, socialization, institutions, or stratification)   | 9.93                     | 8.12          | 7.39     | 8.00*      |
| Explain important differences in the life experiences of people as they vary by race, class, gender, age, disability, and other ascribed statuses | 9.93                     | 8.19          | 8.02     | 5.50*      |
| Identify the impact and consequences of social policy   | 10.06                    | 9.16          | 8.68     | 7.01*      |

Note: \* $p < .001$ .

Source: American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates*, 2012.

by a social institution and give examples of their impact on individuals; 3. Discuss basic sociological theories or theoretical orientations; 4. Explain basic concepts in sociology (including culture, socialization, institutions, or stratification); 5. Explain important differences in the life experiences of people as they vary by race, class, gender, age, disability, and other ascribed statuses; and 6. Identify the impact and consequences of social policy.

The Knowledge Scale ranged from 2 to 18, with high scores representing higher levels of learning.<sup>7</sup> The mean of the scale is 16.55. The correlation with the Satisfaction Scale is .37; greater learning of knowledge content leads to higher levels of sociology program satisfaction.<sup>8</sup> The Skills Index was created by counting the number of “a great deal” responses over the 15 methodological items.<sup>9</sup> The index ranges from 0 to 15, with a mean score of 6.69. Respondents who report higher levels of skill development are more satisfied with their sociology program, with the correlation with the Satisfaction Scale equaling .39.

### MULTIVARIATE MODELS

Finally, in Table 6, we use multiple regression analysis to assess the relative impact of activity participation and the learning of knowledge and skills on overall sociology program satisfaction. The regression model shows that participation, knowledge, and skills each have an independent effect on satisfaction. The three-variable model explains 23 percent of the variance in overall satisfaction.<sup>10</sup> Future research will examine what other variables influence satisfaction, such as race/ethnicity, gender, parents’ education, and type of school.

### ~DISCUSSION~

The data on student satisfaction from the 2012 *Bachelor's and Beyond* project should be encouraging to sociology faculty and their departments for a number of reasons. First, students, by and large, expressed high levels of satisfaction with their undergraduate sociology experience. And as we saw in the Spalter-Roth et al. (2012) brief, satisfaction lev-

<sup>7</sup>Each of the six knowledge items was recoded so that “yes, definitely” is coded “3” and “not at all” is coded “0.”

<sup>8</sup>The lower tail of the scale was collapsed so that scores 2-11 form the lowest category.

<sup>9</sup>The “not applicable” response option was available for the questions focused on skill development. Consequently, a summative scale from these 15 items would depress the overall sample N considerably.

<sup>10</sup>Given the skew of the dependent variable—the Satisfaction Scale—these models were run in two additional ways. Comparable results to those presented here are found when using a Satisfaction Index as the dependent variable. The index was created by counting the number of “very satisfied” responses over the six items. Similarly, comparable results are achieved when creating a dichotomous satisfaction variable by collapsing the index and running logistic regression.

**Table 5: Satisfaction Levels by Skills Acquisition: Mean Scores (ANOVA).**

| As part of your major, to what extent did you learn to:   | Mean Satisfaction Scores |      |             |
|---|--------------------------|------|-------------|
|   | A Great Deal             | Some | Very Little |
| Create a hypothesis with independent and dependent variables  | 10.12                    | 9.21 | 8.35*       |
| Use computers to find information to develop a bibliography or a list of references   | 10.04                    | 9.19 | 8.88*       |
| Use standard software packages, such as SPSS, SAS, and STATA, to analyze data   | 10.22                    | 9.59 | 9.08*       |
| Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different research methods (e.g., surveys, in-depth interviews, participant observation) for answering specific research questions | 10.15                    | 8.98 | 8.44*       |
| Gather information to make an argument based on evidence  | 10.07                    | 8.84 | 7.88*       |
| Describe percentages and statistics in a two-variable table   | 10.27                    | 9.56 | 8.88*       |
| Interpret the results of different types of data gathering such as surveys, experiments, case studies, or other qualitative studies   | 10.17                    | 9.14 | 8.32*       |
| Identify ethical issues in sociological research  | 10.01                    | 8.93 | 8.69*       |
| Write a report that can be understood by non-sociologists   | 10.07                    | 9.09 | 8.43*       |
| Graphically display data  | 10.36                    | 9.60 | 8.97*       |
| Work with people who differ in race, ethnicity, gender, or class  | 9.99                     | 9.11 | 8.85*       |
| Use qualitative data analysis packages, such as NVivo, Atlas.ti, or Ethnography   | 10.37                    | 9.70 | 9.53*       |
| Write research or grant proposals   | 10.36                    | 9.63 | 9.41*       |
| Write a résumé  | 10.44                    | 9.80 | 9.24*       |
| Make presentations using software such as PowerPoint  | 10.15                    | 9.37 | 9.16*       |

Note: \* $p < .001$ .

Source: American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates*, 2012.

**Table 6: Multiple Regression of Satisfaction on Participation and Learning: Coefficients and t-statistics.**

| Model 1         |             |             |      |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|------|
|                 | b           | t-statistic | sig. |
| Constant        | 3.559       | 9.761       | .000 |
| Participation   | .125        | 8.875       | .000 |
| Knowledge       | .254        | 10.977      | .000 |
| Skills          | .136        | 11.837      | .000 |
|                 |             |             |      |
| <b>R-square</b> | <b>.234</b> |             |      |

Source: American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates*, 2012.

els increased since the last *Bachelor's and Beyond* survey in 2005. These satisfied respondents appear to be reaping a positive reward for their tuition dollars and the time they spent as undergraduates. Further, these satisfied respondents may be well positioned to encourage their peers to follow in their footsteps as sociology majors or as students who enroll in sociology courses as electives or components of their general education experience.

Second, these data belie the cynical argument that students are satisfied when they follow the easiest and least rigorous of pathways to a college degree. Instead, we found that students who majored in sociology for substantive reasons were more satisfied with their experiences than students who majored for convenience reasons—because they could add the major easily or because the major requires fewer credit hours. Further, students who reported higher levels of learning were more satisfied than students who reported less learning. The development of both sociological conceptual learning and methodological skill were associated with heightened satisfaction.

Similarly, departments need to recognize that a satisfying sociology major needs to incorporate a range of experiences that expand the traditional classroom with a “sage on the stage.” Student satisfaction increased when students interacted with faculty in a variety of ways beyond the classroom, when they were given opportunities to interact with their fellow students on substantive projects, and when they could envision themselves as professionals by taking part in activities that provide for transitions to the next stage of their lives—be that graduate school or employment. Unfortunately for faculty, the creation and implementation of these activities takes time in an era where faculty are already overburdened. These data do suggest, however, that these activities are not just departmental window-dressing, but instead enhance the satisfaction of our student majors.

Departments should consider using these positive findings on student satisfaction in a variety of ways:

- Departments should highlight that students who major in sociology are satisfied with their experiences. Such data can be useful for recruiting new

majors to programs.

- Departments should stress in their recruitment efforts the ways in which the sociological imagination and its methodological toolkit can enhance one's understanding of a diverse and globalizing world. Departments interested in satisfaction should not feel a need to stress the easy ways of completing the major.
- Departments should stress that students who master the conceptual knowledge and methodological skills associated with the major are more likely than others to be satisfied with their experiences. Such data should promote high standards and course rigor as faculty design courses and should motivate students to do their best in courses.
- Departments should publicize and encourage students to take part in the co-curricular activities associated with the sociology major and should augment the ways in which students can work together on academic projects.
- Departments might effectively use data showing links between student satisfaction and activity participation to secure additional resources from deans and provosts for activities that provide these expanded opportunities for students.
- Departments might consider ways in which data on student satisfaction can be used to satisfy administrators who request information for purposes of accountability, program review, and assessment.





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