

Main Findings

- ▷ The largest cluster of reasons for majoring in 2012 includes conceptual understanding of the social world, bringing about social change, and being prepared for careers.
- ▷ Minority students and first-generation students are particularly interested in the sociology major preparing them for careers.
- ▷ Respondents are somewhat more satisfied with their major in 2012 than they were in 2005, although they are less likely to respond that a series of reasons for majoring are very important or important. In other words, retention is easier but recruitment is harder.
- ▷ Two-thirds of respondents are very satisfied with the quality of teaching by sociology faculty in 2012, a small increase from 2005.
- ▷ Close to three-quarters of respondents are very satisfied with their overall experiences in their sociology program, an increase from 2005.
- ▷ The racial and ethnic diversity of sociology majors continued to grow during the recession years. Minority students appear to be more positive about reasons for majoring than white students.
- ▷ Over half of survey respondents' mothers and fathers have less than a college education, with little change since 2005.

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Introduction: Sociology Versus  
More Vocationally-Oriented  
Majors

This research brief, based on the first set of findings from the 2012 *Bachelor's and Beyond* survey, focuses on changes in patterns of recruitment and retention of sociology majors before and after the Great Recession. It concludes by offering some strategies for increasing the likelihood of bringing new majors in the door and retaining them in the department.

A recent article titled "Why a Sociology Major?" (Little 2012) quoted University of Michigan sociologist Alford Young's description of reasons for students to major in sociology:

*...sociology students learn some of the organized and rigorous methods that contemporary sociologists use to understand the contemporary social world. They learn about statistical reasoning, qualitative research, and sociological theory, and these skills provide them with a foundation for understanding the social world around them throughout their lives. Sociology is the discipline that gives the great-*

*est attention to social difference — social hierarchy, the relevance of social power in everyday life. ... the contemporary social world is one in which patterns of power and hierarchy are constantly changing, and it is very important for well educated young people to have the tools to piece together their own understandings of how these social forces work.*

Although these reasons point to the value of sociology for a scientific understanding of the world, they cannot be described as strictly vocational or strictly conceptual, but rather a combination of potential career skills, a better understanding of the globalizing world, and how to change it.

Does this vision of sociology bring students through the door? Students and institutions of higher education have become more oriented to "market signals," the "practical arts," such as communications, public policy, health care, computer science, social work, and criminology, are growing (Brint 2002; Brint et al. 2012). In contrast, disciplines that give primacy to conceptual understanding of the social world appear not to be experiencing the same level of

†We are grateful to the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation for supporting both the 2005 and 2012 surveys of senior sociology majors.

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growth. Tuchman (2009) argues that education has become more skill oriented and does not put learning in a social context. Although data from the National Science Foundation suggest that sociology did grow, albeit slowly, during the Great Recession of the 2008-2009 years (see [www.asanet.org/research/stats/degrees/degrees\\_level.cfm](http://www.asanet.org/research/stats/degrees/degrees_level.cfm) for data on the changes in the number of sociology baccalaureates), the move to vocational fields is not surprising given the impact of this economic downturn on students. A 2010 poll of freshmen found that students were more likely than previous freshmen to have a parent who was unemployed, to be concerned about their ability to pay for their education, and to take loans (Zernike 2010). Other survey data show that students pay for a larger share of their education now than prior to the recession (Sallie Mae 2012).

If students fail to major in sociology because they or their parents are not convinced that graduates will find professional-level jobs or will not be able to pay off their student loans, we would expect declining numbers of majors. To avoid this contingency, how can departments successfully recruit new majors and retain them? Should departments emphasize vocational reasons for majoring, or should they emphasize the concepts that result in the ability to understand a changing world? Or should they emphasize both?

This research brief does not answer questions about recruitment and retention fully, but it does present students' views of why they major, what experiences satisfy them, and how these views have changed since the recession (i.e., between 2005 and 2012). Recruitment is measured by positive reasons for majoring in sociology. Given a continuing demographic shift in the racial and ethnic composition of senior majors—in contrast to the lack of shift in gender, age, and parent's education—the brief examines differences in reasons for majoring by race and ethnicity. Retention is measured here by high levels of satisfaction with departmental experiences. This measure assumes that those who are satisfied with their experiences will not walk out the door. As with recruitment, we measure changes in satisfaction levels between 2005 and 2012. In addition, the brief examines the relationship among three clusters of reasons for majoring—conceptual, social change, and vocational reasons. We first examine the answers from all respondents to the survey and the differences in their responses

from 2005 and 2012. We go on to examine a narrower group—respondents whose departments participated in both years. We find that the differences between these two types of comparisons are minimal.

In short, this research brief presents findings on what brings students in the door, and how satisfied they are with their experiences once they are through the door. It shows the differences between 2005, before the Great Recession and 2012—a period of continued economic downturn. The results may lead to a better understanding of strategies that could aid in recruitment as well as those that help in retention. Several strategies are offered, based on the study findings.

## ~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, so that we would have a matched sample of departments. Included in the 2005 group of departments was a 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 that wished to participate. In addition to matched 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 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 graduating 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. Of the 104 departments that participated in 2005, 64 (62 %) also participated in 2012. In this brief, the responding senior majors from the 160



departments are referred to as “the overall sample,” while the responding majors from the 64 departments are referred to as the “matched sample.” We present data for both.

### QUESTIONNAIRE AND RESPONSES

ASA’s research department created the student survey, along with the help of the study’s Advisory Committee,<sup>1</sup> replicating many questions from the 2005 questionnaire with additional questions about the social networks that students used or planned to use in pursuing jobs or admission into graduate school. Questions focused on students’ experiences as sociology majors, including why they majored, skills and concepts they learned, activities they participated in, job and graduate school aspirations, and the contacts used in finding appropriate jobs and graduate schools.<sup>2</sup> The online version was created by Indiana University’s Center for Survey Research and pretested in November 2011 by the advisory committee members’ 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% (36.8%).

### WEIGHTING

In this study we weighted the 2012 data so that it is 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, and type of institution of higher education. We had weighted the 2005 data by institution type. In 2012, there were only small differences by race or ethnicity and by institution type compared to the IPEDS data. 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>3</sup> In addition, there was a disparity between the percentage of male graduates and the percentage of male respondents. Therefore, we weighted the responses by gender. However, when we present comparison findings from 2005 with 2012 we use unweighted data since the comparative data is placed in a single data set in which the 2005 and the 2012 weights cannot both be applied. The differences between the unweighted and the weighted data are relatively small.

## ~FINDINGS~

### WHO ARE THE SOCIOLOGY MAJORS? DID THEIR CHARACTERISTICS CHANGE?

In this section we examine findings from the overall sample and compare them to the matched sample. We found few significant differences between the two samples. However, we did find one significant difference in 2012 between the overall and the matched sample in terms of what institution type respondents were from. There were similarities in the percentage of respondents in institutions that offered doctoral degrees (57.1% of the full sample and 58.3% of the matched sample) and respondents in schools that offered master’s degrees only (32.6% of the full sample and 34.4% of the matched sample). There was some difference in the numbers of respondents in baccalaureate schools (10.3% of those in the full sample and 7.3% in the matched sample).

### Parent’s Education: Full Sample

Given the economic downturn that occurred between 2005 and 2012, with more jobless parents and more students needing to pay a higher share of tuition, we might expect a decrease in the percentage of students who have parents’ with low levels of education, since these parents are the most likely to experience job loss and are the most likely to have limited savings. Yet, we found no significant differences in parents’ education between 2005 and 2012, although there was a slight dip in the percentage of

<sup>1</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>2</sup>See complete questionnaire at [www.asanet.org/research/bacc\\_survey/jobs\\_for\\_sociology\\_majors.cfm](http://www.asanet.org/research/bacc_survey/jobs_for_sociology_majors.cfm).

<sup>3</sup>This is also adjusted for the fact that NCES data do not have a multiracial category as our data do.

mothers with less than a college degree. In 2012, over one-quarter of mothers (28.6%) and a higher percentage of fathers (33.6%) had only a high school degree or less. Another 27.1% of mothers and 21.3% of fathers had at least a high school degree but less than a college degree. Thus, over half of mothers and fathers had less than a college degree. These findings suggest that many students are likely to need the social capital of contacts and resources in order to have successful job searches or to successfully apply to graduate school. In a future research brief we will examine the kind of capital that they do have and how it varies by gender, race/ethnicity, and parents' education. Looking at other demographic characteristics, we find that there was an increase of about six months in the average age of senior majors (from 23.6 years to 24.4 years).

### Parent's Education: Matched Sample

In the matched sample we did find some significant differences between parents' education in 2005 and in 2012. While respondents' mothers were less likely to have only a high school degree in 2012 than in 2005, they were more likely to be college graduates or to have obtained a graduate degree (48.1% and 42.4%, respectively). Among fathers the percentage with a college degree rose from 21.1% in 2005 to 26.5% in 2012, though the percentage with a graduate degree declined. Yet, despite the increase in college and graduate school degrees, it was still the case that the majority of mothers and fathers of respondents in the matched sample have less than a college degree (51.9% and 53.5%, respectively), as was the case with the overall sample. Thus, for many in the matched sample as well as in the overall sample, social capital beyond what their parents can provide may be a key to successful career trajectories.

### Overall Sample: Race and Ethnicity

We expected a decline in the percentage of African-American and Hispanic students compared to white students, as a result of the economic crises,

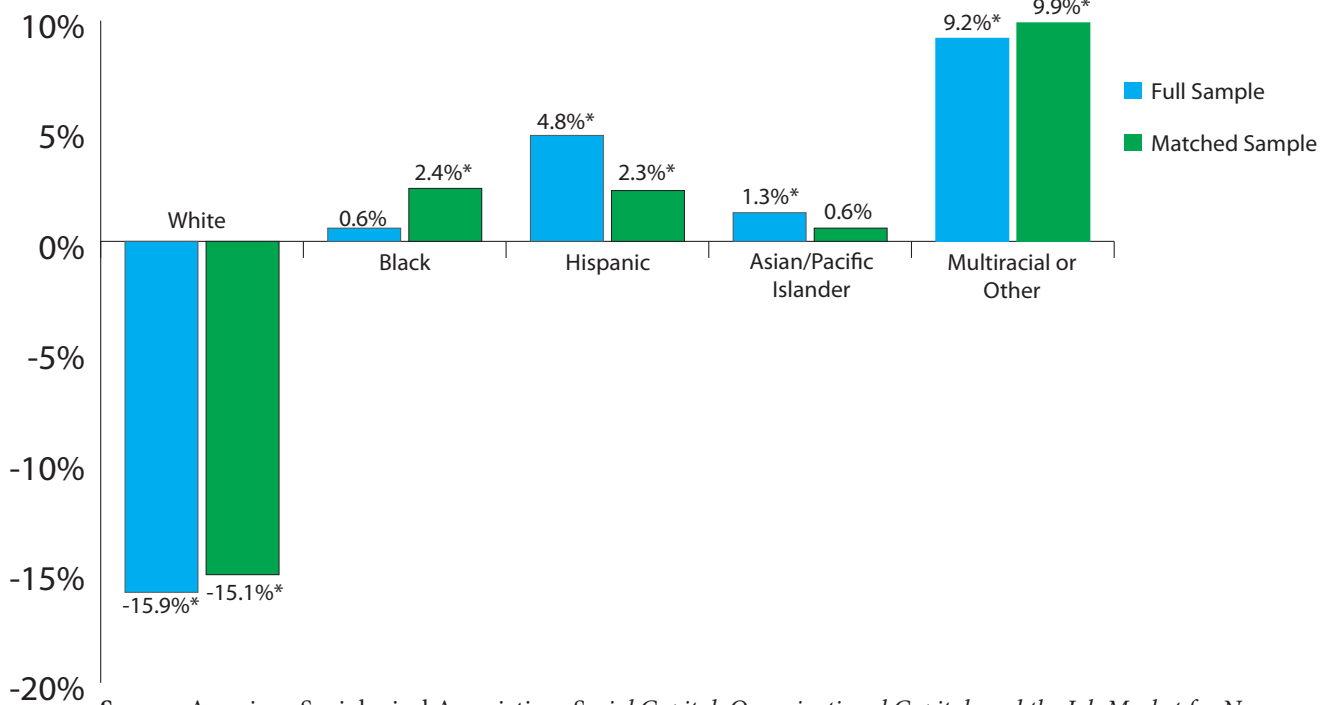
since the former group was more likely to be first-generation college graduates than white students. This assumption turned out to be false. Sociology appears to have become the home of a diverse body of majors, based on the self-identification of respondents to this survey. Between 2005 and 2012, the percentage of senior majors responding to the survey from different racial or ethnic backgrounds other than white grew from about 25% to about 40% (see Figure 1). The largest increase (9.2%) was in the number of respondents who identified themselves as "other" or selected more than one racial/ethnic category, which we categorize as "multiracial," possibly reflecting new realities in racial identification. The percentage of self-identifying Hispanics and Asian/Pacific Islanders each grew by somewhat less than five percent, whereas the percentage of African-Americans senior majors remained stable.<sup>4</sup> The growth of minority majors may reflect the centrality of issues of racial and ethnic inequality in the discipline, just as the high percentage women (75% in 2012) may reflect the centrality of gender inequality issues. In contrast to the growth of minority majors, the percentage of self-identified white respondents decreased by 15.9%. This loss may reflect the movement of white students out of sociology because of opportunities elsewhere, including the more vocationally-oriented disciplines. However, the size of some of these changes may reflect differential unweighted response rates in the two years. The percentage of white students represented a higher than average response rate, whereas the percentage of minority students represents a lower than average response rate when compared to data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; see [www.asanet.org/research/stats/race\\_ethnicity/bachelors\\_degrees\\_number.cfm](http://www.asanet.org/research/stats/race_ethnicity/bachelors_degrees_number.cfm)).

### Matched Sample: Race and Ethnicity

The decline in the percentage of white survey respondents in matched department was similar to the decline among white respondents in the overall sample. In both cases about 60% of all majors were white in 2012, a drop of about 15% since 2005. In contrast, the percentage of minority respondents

<sup>4</sup>Although we removed African Americans from the multi-ethnic category in order to determine whether the 2012 responses by African Americans required weighting, we had not done this in 2005, so we used the responses by African Americans and "multiracial" respondents as we found it, without weighting when comparing findings between the 2005 and 2012 data.

**Figure 1. Racial Composition of Survey Respondents between Full and Matched Samples: Percent Change Between 2005 and 2012.**



**Source:** American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates* (2012), and *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?: Wave I* (2005).

**Note:** \* $p < 0.05$ .

increased in both samples. There were some differences between the changes in the percent of minority respondents in the full sample and in the matched sample. The percent of African-Americans was somewhat higher and the percentage of Hispanics was somewhat lower in the matched sample than in the full sample.

### WHAT ARE THE TOP REASONS FOR MAJORING?

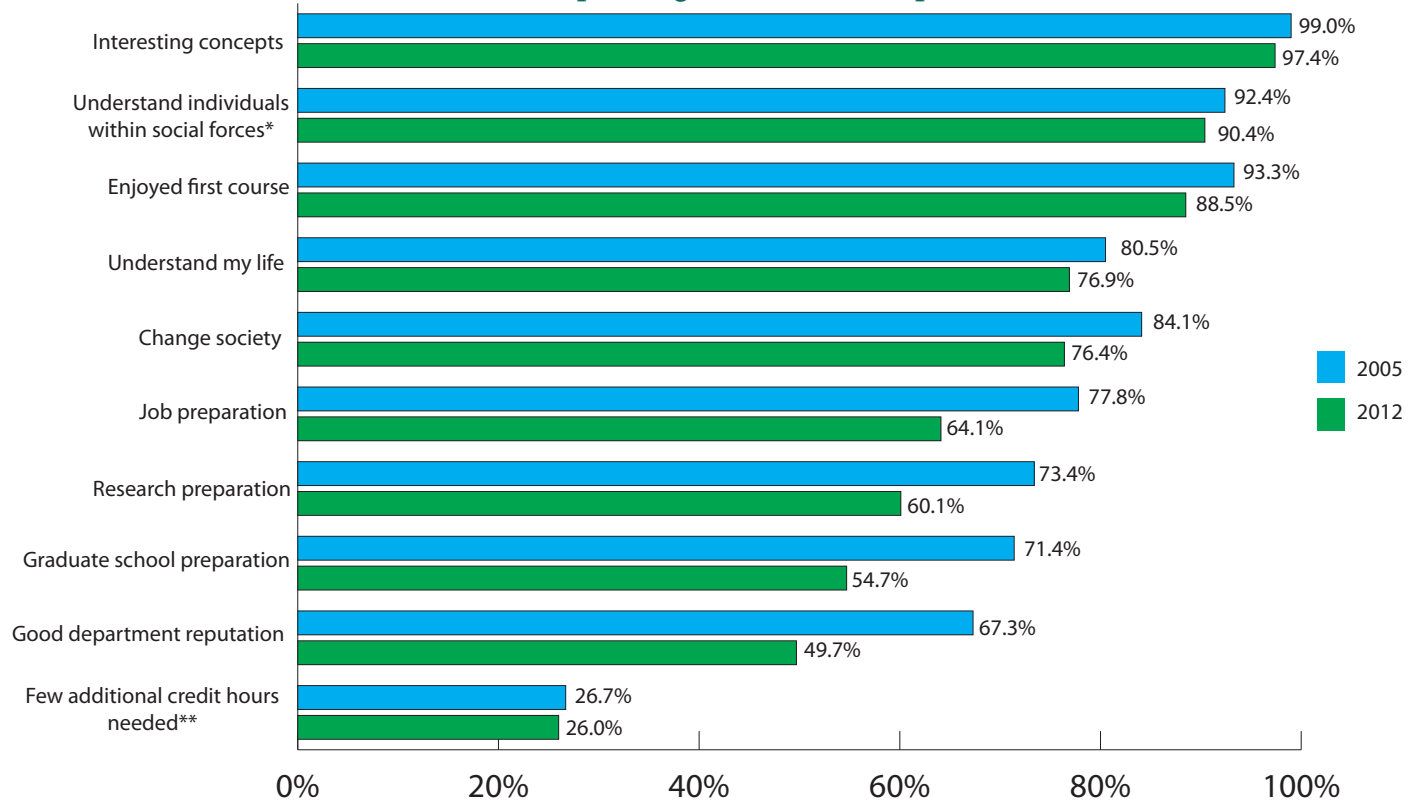
#### Full Sample: Reasons for Majoring

The survey requested that students respond to each of 11 reasons for majoring, either by selecting that it was an “important” reason for their choosing sociology as a major or that it was “not an important” reason. What were the top reasons for majoring by student respondents (see Figure 2)? In 2012, 97.2% of majors responding to the survey answered that the concepts taught in sociology classes were an important reason for majoring, making it the number one reason among respondents. The second-most impor-

tant reason was to learn how individuals were affected by social forces (90.0%). The third-most important reason was that they enjoyed the first course that they took (88.0%); the fourth was that a sociology major would help them to understand their life (76.8%); and fifth was that a sociology major could help them to change society (75.7%). These five top reasons can all be described as conceptual or change-oriented reasons. Although non-vocational in their orientation, they do turn out to be useful for future jobs. Two years after the 2005 survey began, when respondents were in the job market, we examined the relationship between sociological concepts and job satisfaction. Numbers of former majors filled out open-ended responses on this topic. For example:

*I work with a very diverse group of people from people that are just very very poor, African American, Hispanic, white ... a lot of my sociology classes focused on what challenges and barriers are faced by those individuals and having taken those classes, it really gave me a better understanding of what I'd be dealing with when*

**Figure 2. Changes in Top 10 Reasons for Majoring in Sociology: 2005 and 2012.**  
(Percent Responding Reason Was “Important”)



**Source:** American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates* (2012), and *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?: Wave I* (2005).

**Note:** \*Response category text varies slightly from 2005 to 2012; \*\*difference is not statistically significant.

*I began working with them.*

*I like that I am able to refer back to some of the skills that I learned through fulfilling my sociology degree to applications of some of the socio-economic differences and their effects on the law.*

We expect that the 2012 class of seniors will be equally likely to call on the sociological knowledge that they have gained while on the job.

In 2012, the reasons for majoring that ranked at numbers six, seven, and eight were vocationally-oriented reasons. Over six out of 10 respondents reported important reasons for majoring in sociology were that it would prepare them for the job that they wanted (63.7%) or would prepare them to do different kinds of research (60.2%). Over half responded that it is important that the major prepare them for graduate

or professional school (54.2%; see Figure 2). Relatively few respondents majored for what we might call reasons of convenience—that they could add the major without additional course work or that the major required fewer credit hours than other majors (25.9% and 18.8%, respectively). When asked whether their primary goal was entering the job market or going to graduate school, respondents are divided at 50% versus 50%.

### Matched Sample: What Are the Reasons for Majoring?

The top reasons that were important among the matched sample were similar to the reasons for the overall sample. These were all conceptual or change reason that included the following: interesting concepts, understanding of how individuals are affected by social forces, enjoyment of the first course,



**Table 1. Differences in Reasons for Majoring in Sociology by Race and Ethnicity: 2012.**  
(Percent Responding that Reason Was “Important”)

	<i>Good Department Reputation</i>	<i>Job Preparation</i>	<i>Graduate School Preparation</i>	<i>Change Society</i>	<i>Understand Individuals within Social Forces</i>	<i>Research Preparation</i>	<i>Understand My Life</i>
White/Caucasian	*48.0%	**59.9%	**49.9%	**71.3%	**87.4%	**55.2%	**73.8%
Minority	*52.8%	**69.5%	**61.1%	**82.7%	**93.7%	**67.8%	**82.0%
Black/African-American	*58.0%	**75.5%	**68.7%	**85.1%	**95.0%	**67.5%	**83.1%
Hispanic/Latino	*52.3%	**73.8%	**60.7%	**80.6%	**94.4%	**69.4%	**81.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	*50.0%	**63.3%	**52.3%	**85.2%	**93.0%	**70.1%	**86.7%
Multiracial	*47.2%	**58.2%	**58.2%	**80.6%	**90.7%	**64.3%	**79.0%

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

Note: \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ .

understanding their own lives, and changing society. As with the full-sample, vocational reasons for majoring were not in the top five. Yet, as will be seen, a cluster analysis of reasons for majoring found that the largest cluster includes all three types of reasons for majoring—conceptual, change, and vocational.

### WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES ON REASONS FOR MAJORING?

Understanding the demographic makeup of students may help in the recruitment process. Therefore, we examined whether there were differences in specific reasons for majoring among racial and ethnic groups. First, we aggregated respondents into two racial/ethnic categories: whites and minorities. We find—in general—that minority respondents, when taken as a group, are significantly more likely than whites to have a more positive view of why it is important to major in sociology. A higher percentage of minorities than whites majored because they heard good things about the department (although only half reported that this is an important reason for majoring). This finding suggests the possibility of tighter networks among minority students who may trust one another’s evaluations. A higher percentage of minorities than whites majored for careerist reasons, either to get the job they want (69.5% versus 59.9%,

respectively); to be prepared for graduate or professional school (61.1% versus 49.9%), or to learn about different methods of research (67.8% versus 55.2%). Despite this vocational turn, minorities are also more likely than whites to respond positively about conceptual understandings as a reason for majoring. Specifically, minorities are significantly more likely than whites to want to understand how individuals function in different socioeconomic conditions (93.7% versus 87.4%, respectively) and to be able to understand their lives within social contexts (82.0% versus 73.8%). Finally, they were more likely than whites to major because they want to change society (82.7% versus 71.3%). Although there are both vocational and conceptual differences between minorities and whites in terms of why they choose to major in sociology, there are also strong commonalities. Liking sociological concepts and thinking that this is an important reason for majoring was selected by whites and minorities, as did liking their first sociology course.

Second, we disaggregated minority groups. We found that there were significant differences in reasons for majoring when we view minority groups separately than when we aggregate them (see Table 1). In general, African-Americans had the most positive reasons for majoring. Often, they were followed by Hispanics. In some cases Asian/Pacific Islanders’s<sup>5</sup> views of

<sup>5</sup>We do not know the proportion of Asian-Pacific Islanders who are U.S.-born and the portion that is foreign born, although we assume that the majority are U.S.-born.

the importance of varying reasons for majoring were closer to whites, whereas sometimes they were closer to other minorities. An example of the former was that Asian/Pacific Islanders did not major to prepare them for the job that one wanted (63.3% of Asian/Pacific Islanders and 59.9% of whites versus 75.5% of African-Americans). An example of the latter is that Asian/Pacific Islanders were as likely as African-Americans to want to change society (85.2% and 85.1%, respectively), versus 71.3% of whites. Hispanic majors' views of important reasons for majoring tended to fall closer to those of African-Americans rather than either whites or Asians. Still, there are no significant differences among minority groups in their views of the importance of majoring because they liked the concepts and because they wanted to be prepared to do different kinds of research. Therefore, among minorities

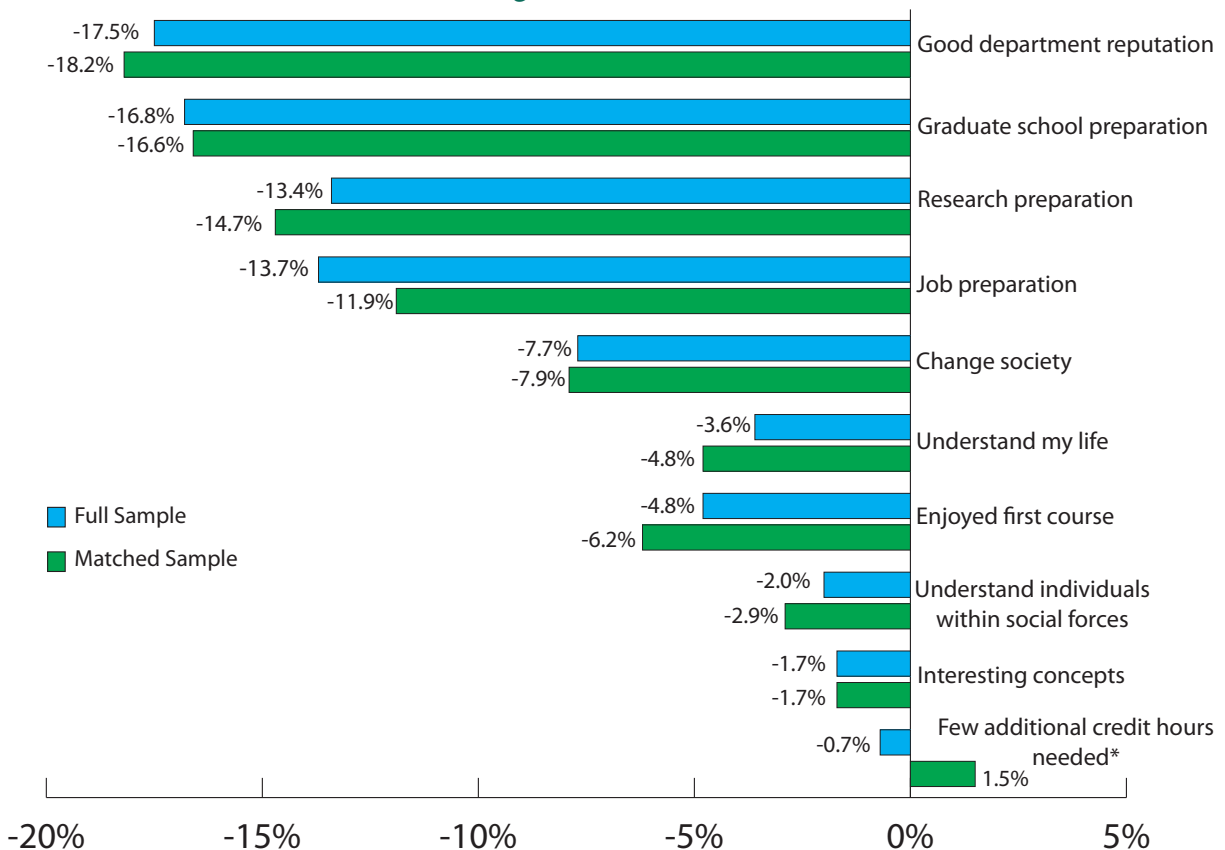
both conceptual and careerist reasons affected their views of what is important about the major.

### Are There Changes in Reasons for Majoring over Time?

#### Full Sample: Changes in Reasons for Majoring

Did the Great Recession affect the reasons that respondents thought were important for majoring in sociology? We contrast the reasons that seniors reported in 2005 with what students reported in 2012 (see Figure 3). In all cases, there was a drop in the percentage of students who listed their reasons for majoring as important.<sup>6</sup> The biggest drop was whether or not respondents heard good things about the sociology department and that this second-

**Figure 3. Changes in Top 10 Reasons for Majoring Between Full and Matched Samples. (Percent Change Between 2005 and 2012)**



**Source:** American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates* (2012), and *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?: Wave I* (2005).

**Note:** \*Not statistically significant.

<sup>6</sup>In 2005, respondents chose from Very Important, Somewhat Important or Not Important, whereas the 2012 survey respondents chose from Important or Not Important. For this comparison, the response categories Very Important and Somewhat Important from 2005 were collapsed to match the 2012 data.



any information was important to them in choosing sociology as a major (there was a 17.5% drop in this reason from 67.3% in 2005 to 49.7% in 2012). As noted, this finding suggests that reputation alone may be no longer enough to bring as many students through the door. We saw that the five most-important reasons for majoring in sociology in 2012 were oriented toward a conceptual understanding of the impact of social structure and the need to bring about social change. This set of reasons decreased by fewer than 10 percentage points since 2005. Specifically, the smallest decrease was the importance of interesting concepts (with a less than two percent decline). There was about a five percent decrease in the percentage of respondents majoring as a result of having an enjoyable first course. In contrast to these non-vocational reasons for majoring, there was at least a 10% dip in vocational reasons for majoring with the largest dip (16.8% in those who major in order to be prepared for graduate school, followed by a 13.7% drop in respondents' views of the importance of job preparation). These findings suggest that vocational reasons by themselves have not increased as a reason for majoring in sociology, despite the Great Recession. Sociology majors may be a paradigmatic case of choosing a major for reasons of gaining knowledge and understanding. However, as will be seen, when clustered with conceptual and change reasons, vocational reasons are part of the package of reasons that respondents give for majoring.

Yet, it was the respondents whose parents may be most affected by the recession that were most likely to respond that it is important that the major prepare them for the job that they want. Fully 70.8% of those whose mothers were high school graduates or less responded that they majored in sociology because they hoped that the discipline would train them for the job that they wanted, in contrast to 53.1% of those whose mothers went to graduate school or held a graduate degree. The percentages for fathers resembled that of mothers.

## Matched Sample: Changes in Reasons for Majoring

As with the full sample, the percent of respondents that thought it was important to major for a series of reasons declined over the recession years. The largest drop was whether respondents had heard good things about the department. The decrease in respondents from matched departments was 18.0%, the same as was the case for the full sample. Here again, department reputation was less important as a reason for recruitment into sociology departments. Just under half of the matched sample (49.7%) listed this reason compared to 67.2% in 2005. The smallest decrease was the importance of interesting concepts and gaining an understanding of the influence of social forces on individual lives. In contrast to these non-vocational reasons for majoring, there was at least a 10% dip in vocational reasons, as there was in the full sample. Respondents were less likely to think it was important to major in sociology because they expect the discipline to prepare them for graduate or professional school, prepare them for the jobs that they want, or prepare them to do different types of research. These findings provide further evidence that current sociology majors have fewer expectations that the major will prepare them for successful career trajectories.

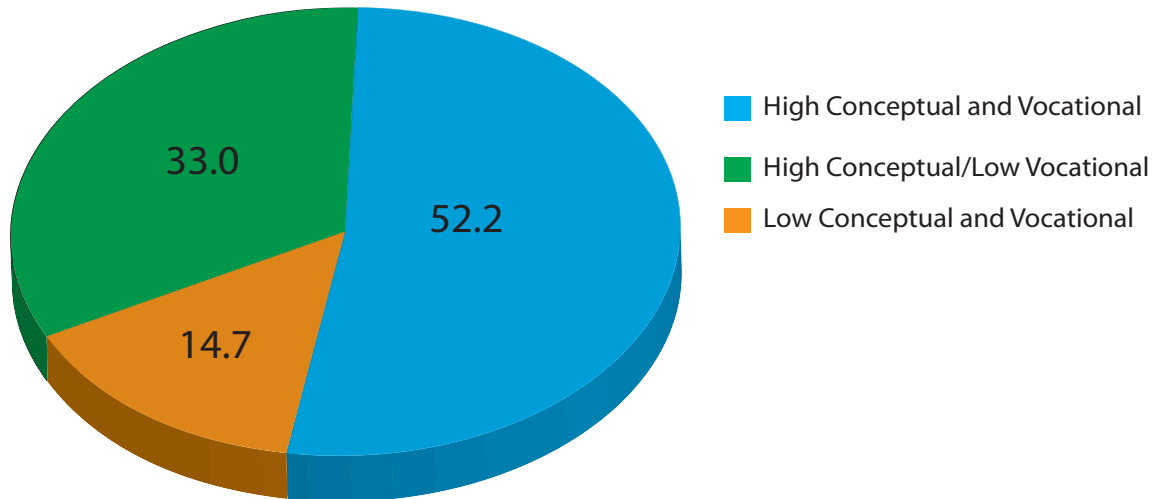
## CLUSTERS OF REASONS FOR MAJORING

### Full Sample: Clusters

We have seen differences in specific conceptual and vocational reasons for majoring. But, do any of these reasons scale or cluster together? In other words, can we assign the reasons for majoring into categories? The answer was yes in 2012. Through optimal scaling analysis, three scales emerged, one that included what we have been referring to as the “conceptual” reasons, another with the “vocational” reasons, and the third with “convenience” reasons.<sup>7</sup> Then, using cluster analysis we discovered three clusters formed from these scaled reasons for majoring (see Figure 4). The largest cluster of reasons for ma-

<sup>7</sup>The clusters are made up of two scales. The “Conceptual” scale is made up of the following variables: how individuals operate within different socioeconomic situations, do different types of research, and understand their lives. The “Careerist” scale includes preparation for jobs, preparation for graduate school, and heard good things about the department. All of the reason variables were included in the scaling procedure, but only those that showed significant differences were included in the scales.

**Figure 4. Breakdown of Conceptual and Vocational Reasons for Majoring.**  
(Percent within Each Cluster)



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

joring combines reasons including gaining a conceptual understanding of the social structure and their effects on individuals, as well as gaining vocational skills for future careers (see Figure 4). About half of all respondents (52.2%) majored for this combination of reasons. This finding suggests that there was not a dualism between conceptual and careerist reasons for majoring, but rather a combination of types of reasons. The second largest group, about one-third of total respondents, did not major because of vocational reasons, but were more likely to do so for conceptual reasons alone. The smallest group majored for neither set of reasons. These are the respondents who majored for reasons of convenience (e.g., fewer courses required). Thus, as Little (2012) suggests, sociology is a major that can provide students with intellectual understanding of current social realities as well as scientific skills that can be used for career advancement. The majority of respondents appear to agree that both types of reasons are important for majoring.

### Matched Sample: Clusters

Thus far, reasons for majoring have been similar among the overall and the matched sample. Yet, we found some significant differences in the clusters of reasons for majoring between the matched and the overall sample. These differences might be explained by the way in which we developed clusters based on whether the variables fell above rather than below the

mean. This basic method may have been too rigid because it did not capture shifts of respondents moving between categories. Despite the differences between samples, the biggest cluster of reasons for majoring remained a combination of high scores on the vocational reason scale and high scores on conceptual reason scale, although there was a 10% difference between the overall and the matched sample with more than 50% of the full sample that fell into this cluster compared to 43.1% of the matched sample. As with the full sample, the second largest cluster (35.9%) included those respondents that were more likely to major for conceptual reasons rather than a combination of conceptual and vocational reasons. However, the third cluster of reasons was different for the two samples. Among the matched group, 20.9% fell into a cluster that emphasized vocational rather than conceptual reasons. In the matched sample, the third cluster emphasized neither conceptual nor vocational reasons, but rather convenience reasons.

### DOES RACE AND ETHNICITY EFFECT DIFFERENCES IN THE CLUSTERS?

#### Full Sample

There were significant racial and ethnic differences among the clusters of reasons for majoring in the overall sample. Blacks and Hispanics were more

likely to fall into clusters that emphasized vocational reasons for majoring. Although the cluster that combines conceptual, change, and vocational reasons for majoring was the most frequent choice for all racial and ethnic groups of respondents, white, Asian-Pacific Islanders, and multiracial respondents were significantly less likely to major for this combination of reasons than were African-Americans and Hispanics (see Table 2). About half of the former groups of respondents choose the combination of conceptual, change, and vocational reasons as important for majoring, in contrast to 67.6% of African-Americans and 63.0% of Hispanics who did. In contrast, Whites, Asian-Pacific Islanders, and multiracial respondents were significantly more likely to choose conceptual reasons alone than are African-Americans or Hispanics. White respondents are the most likely to think that none of these reasons were important for majoring.

**Matched Sample**

Here again, there are significant racial and ethnic differences among respondents in each of the clusters. The groups cluster somewhat differently than those in the overall sample. In the case of the matched sample, Asians were even less like to say that preparation for graduate school or the job market is very important or important while African Americans and Hispanics were more likely to select vocational categories in the matched than in the overall sample.

**Are There Changes in Reasons for Retention?**

We have seen a statistically significant decline in the percentage of respondents that majored for a variety of reasons. This finding suggests that recruitment of majors may be somewhat more difficult now than it was in 2005. In contrast, we will see that the ability to recruit majors who liked their first sociology course may be easier, especially if department faculty pay attention to the factors that increase student satisfaction (see Figure 5).

**Full Sample: Changes in Satisfaction**

Recall that we measured retention in terms of strong satisfaction with experiences as a sociology major. Once this 2012 cohort of students was recruited and was through the door, were the students more satisfied with particular experiences than in the 2005 cohort? The answer is yes. In 2012, about three-quarters (74.3%) of respondents were very satisfied with their overall experiences as sociology majors. This was a 5% increase since 2005 (see Figure 5). The largest increase in satisfaction was with the opportunity to interact with peers. This gain may be the result of increased group activities in the classroom or increased “communities of learning.” The next largest increase was with the quality of career advising, although this is still the least satisfactory experience for majors (only 22.2% were very satisfied in 2012). The growth

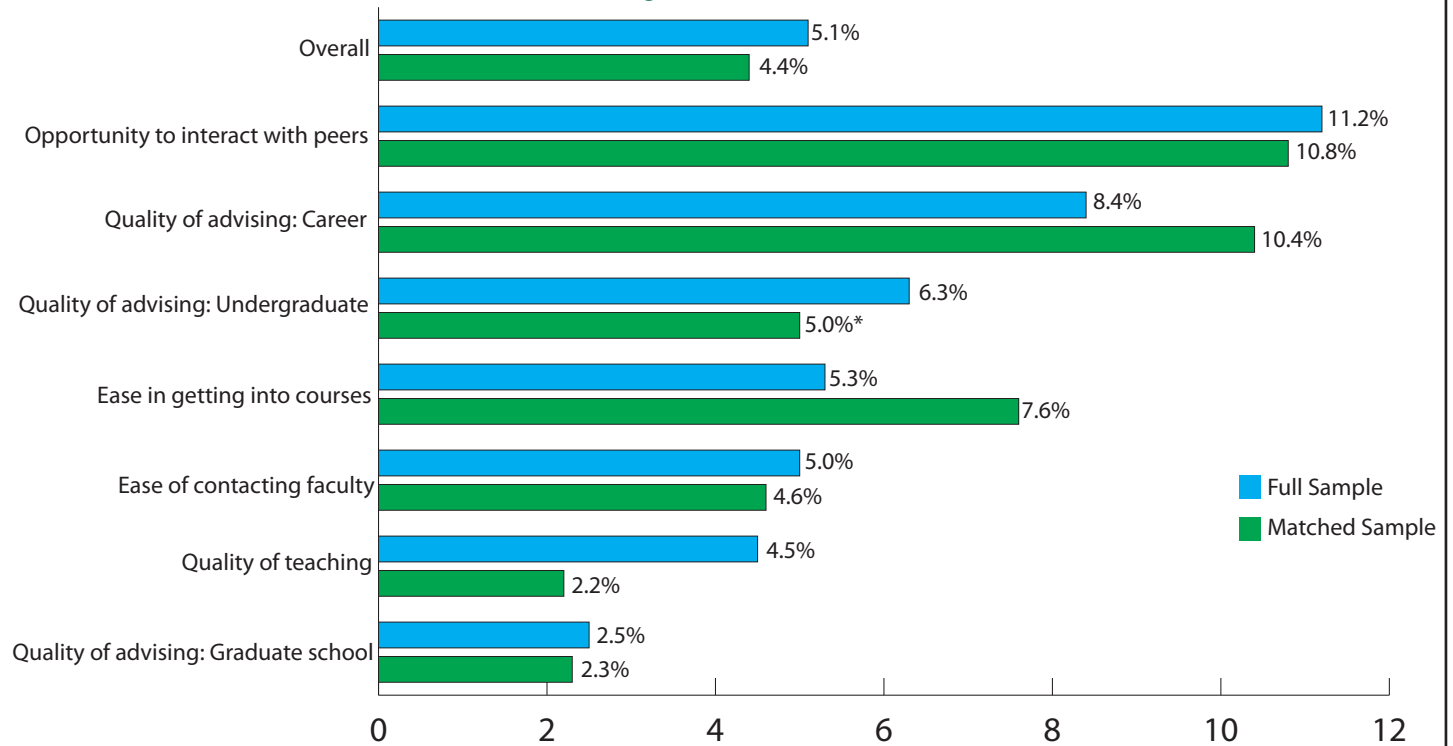
**Table 2. Race Differences in Vocational and Conceptual Reasons for Majoring: 2012.**

	<i>High Conceptual/ Low Vocational</i>	<i>High Conceptual/ Vocational</i>	<i>Low Conceptual/ Vocational</i>	<i>Total</i>
White/Caucasian	35.1%	47.0%	17.9%	100.0%
Black/African-American	23.3%	67.6%	9.1%	100.0%
Hispanic/Latino	24.9%	63.0%	12.1%	100.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	39.7%	52.4%	7.9%	100.0%
Multiracial or Other	39.8%	50.0%	10.2%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>33.0%</b>	<b>52.3%</b>	<b>14.8%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

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

**Note:** Chi-square= .000.

**Figure 5. Changes in Satisfaction Between Full and Matched Samples.  
(Percent Change Between 2005 and 2012)**



**Source:** American Sociological Association. *Social Capital, Organizational Capital, and the Job Market for New Sociology Graduates* (2012), and *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?: Wave I* (2005).

**Note:** \*Not statistically significant.

in the percentage of respondents who were very satisfied with career counseling suggests that more faculty members are learning about labor markets for sociologists with baccalaureate degrees, in order to counsel students. There was a 5% increase in satisfaction with the ease of contacting faculty outside of class, which speaks positively about the commitment of sociology faculty to their students. Likewise, there was a 5% increase in satisfaction with the ease of getting into courses needed to graduate. There was a 5% increase with the quality of teaching. Over two-thirds of respondents reported being very satisfied with their teachers. Overall, sociology faculty appear to have improved the quality of undergraduate majors' experiences since 2005, despite the emphasis on vocational factors that may have made college a narrower experience—one that may emphasize skills without social context (Tuchman 2009). A second research brief, *What Leads to Satisfaction with Sociology*, presents additional 2012 findings on this topic (Senter, Van Vooren, Kisielewski, and Spalter-Roth 2012).

### Matched Sample

The overall satisfaction with their experiences was similar for the matched compared to the overall sample. About 73% of the matched sample respondents were very satisfied with their overall experiences with the major in 2012. This was a small but significant increase (4.4%) since 2005, similar to the increase in the overall sample. As with the overall sample, the largest increase was satisfaction with peer interaction (10.8%). The next largest increase, slightly larger than the overall sample, was with satisfaction with the quality of career advising, although this is still the least satisfactory experience for majors. As with the overall sample, there were three additional increases in high satisfaction for the matched sample: the ease of getting courses that they needed to graduate, the ease of contacting faculty outside of class, and the quality of teaching. There was a 2.3% increase in satisfaction with the quality of teaching, with about two-thirds agreeing that they were very satisfied, similar to the percent who responded that they were



very satisfied in the overall sample. Given that the responses were limited to very satisfied, agreement by two-thirds of all respondents and two-thirds of the matched respondents seems like high praise for sociology faculty.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

In this final section we summarize findings about recruitment and retention. In addition we suggest strategies for improving both.

### Recruitment

Alford Young appears to be right in his suggested reasons for “Why a Sociology Major?” Core sociological concepts were very important to student majors. Respondents wanted to understand changing social forces, how different classes and races of individuals behave, and how they can use sociological concepts to better understand their lives. Although somewhat less salient in 2012 than in 2005, those were still the important reasons for majoring. The results were similar for the overall and the matched sample. In addition, there was a decline in thinking that what Morris calls “rigorous methods that sociologists use to understand the contemporary world” and what we labeled as “research preparation” was an important reason for majoring, although it was still an important reason. The continuing demographic shift in sociology—so that it is now 40% minority—appeared to have a positive effect on reasons for majoring. Minority students, especially African-Americans, were especially positive about why they majored. However, during this period of economic crises, conceptual reasons alone were not the motivation to major for the majority of respondents. Preparation for a career—either in the workforce or in graduate school—is part of the cluster of reasons that students major, including learning the “rigorous methods” that sociologists employ. Preparation for careers is especially important for minority majors and for students whose parents have less education.

### Retention

There was an increase in program satisfaction between 2005 and 2012, despite the Great Recession, the difficulty of finding jobs, and the increase in debt burden. About three-quarters of the overall and the matched sample was very satisfied with their overall experiences in their sociology programs, and two-thirds were very satisfied with the quality of their teachers in both years. There were also increases in satisfaction in graduate school and career preparation, although percentages of respondents who were very satisfied with these were relatively low. This improvement may suggest that faculty members are becoming more aware of the competition with vocationally-oriented majors, and are trying to help their students with their career trajectories.

### Strategies

These findings suggest some strategies for bringing majors through the door, as well as for retaining them.

- Emphasize all three types of reasons for majoring in the classroom. These are (1) how concepts can help students to understand the changing social world and their own experiences within it; (2) how conceptual understanding can help to bring about social change, and (3) how the sociology major can prepare students for careers (including learning research skills). Faculty should not limit their teaching to only one area, despite the specific subject area that they are teaching.
- If it makes sense in particular departments, emphasize sociology as the locus of diversity given that 40% of responding majors in 2012 do not label themselves as “white.” Explain to students how diversity can broaden sociological theory and methods.
- Learn something about the background of majors, perhaps through in-class surveys, so that recruitment messages can speak most directly to student concerns. For example, students whose parents have less than a college education are more inclined to emphasize vocational reasons for majoring.

- Continue to make improvements in career counseling. There was still relative dissatisfaction with job and graduate school counseling. See *Launching Majors into Satisfying Careers* (Spalter-Roth, Van Vooren, and Senter 2012) for suggestions on how faculty members can effectively prepare students for careers without becoming career counselors themselves.
- Highlight the ways in which the conceptual and methodological skills that students learn as majors can be used effectively on résumés, in job interviews, and in the job market (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2009).
- Emphasize the importance of teaching within all types of departments, given particular attention to the strength of the first sociology course—a pathway for recruitment of majors.

The next research brief will emphasize the social capital that students employ for job and graduate school search. In addition, we have just begun a follow-up survey that will report about what happens to majors after they graduate and which contacts social capital was particularly helpful for them.

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