

MIXED SUCCESS

Four Years of Experiences of 2005 Sociology Graduates¹

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OVERVIEW

Between the mid 1980's and 2007, the number of students earning a bachelor's degree in sociology increased by 139 percent (from a yearly total of 12,165 in 1985 to 29,050 in 2007). Only about one out of 18 of these graduates completes a master's degrees in sociology, and substantially fewer are awarded PhDs in the discipline (see http://www.asanet.org/research/stats/degrees/degrees_level.cfm). Although the number of undergraduate degree holders more than doubled over these three decades, little was known about why students become majors, what skills they learn, what fields they pursue in graduate school, and what kinds of jobs they find.

THE "WHAT CAN I DO WITH A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN SOCIOLOGY?" STUDY

In 2004, the American Sociological Association (ASA) was awarded the first of two grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF) Sociology

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Program to embark on a longitudinal study of sociology majors who were seniors in 2005 titled *What Can I Do with a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?* The second wave of the study was conducted in 2007 and the third wave in 2009. This research brief includes findings from all three waves of the study.

The NSF Sociology Program was particularly concerned with whether sociology majors learned skills or gained human capital allowing them to enter the science workforce. The ASA, in addition, hoped that the results of this study would aid sociology departments facing declines in majors, fears that the sociology major itself will be demoted to a series of service courses, and the parental worries that sociology's curriculum would not lead to a successful future.

STUDY FOCUS

The major purpose of the study, commonly know as Bachelor's and Beyond, was to examine the human and social capital gained by sociology majors during their undergraduate program and the impact of this capital on the next four years of their lives. The central concern of the first wave of the study was to find out why students majored in sociology and what human and social capital they acquired in their program.

For this project, human capital included both hard and soft skills (Moss and Tilley 2001). So, we asked: As a result of exposure to the sociology department curriculum, did students gain specific hard skills such as the computer, statistical, and research skills they need to go into the science workforce? Did students master the conceptual and problem-solving skills that sociology provides? Along with these hard skills, we asked: Did majors gain soft or people skills, such as the knowledge of how to work with social groups, how to collaborate, how to coach others, and how to work with and lead diverse groups?

In addition to these human capital skills, the Bachelor's and Beyond project explored the access to social capital—that is, the availability of resources inherent in social networks. In college, these networks include direct ties with faculty, fellow students, career counselors, and out-of-classroom activities, such as the mentoring, participation in internships or sociology clubs, and introduction to professional networks through participation in regional or annual sociology meetings. So, we asked: Did sociology majors gain access to social capital through their undergraduate programs? Did they develop the direct or indirect ties that result in desired jobs or graduate school programs (Lin 1999; Small 2009), or did they not participate in these types of networks?

While the acquisition of soft skills and social capital is not necessarily a required part of the formal curriculum, these features can result in more successful transitions, as we saw in a Wave II research brief (Spalter-Roth, Van Vooren, and Senter 2009). We found that little attention was paid by departments to the career transitions of those interested in going into the job market directly or to those who would continue with practice-oriented master's programs including applied sociology. In responding to interview questions, students said they felt ignored and left to fend for themselves without any faculty advice.

In this brief we continue with our examination of the use of human and social capital in careers. We find that the majority of former majors pursue additional hard and especially soft skills in their post baccalaureate lives, and former students move from non-professional jobs into professional ones as a result of this new skill development. However, respondents reported that they were more likely to use soft skills rather than hard skills on these jobs. In fact, the majority wished they had learned more of these soft skills and had gained more social capital as undergraduates. After reviewing the research design, the article will examine additional capital students gained after graduating, the characteristics and changes in their jobs, the skills and concepts they used on the job, the additional human and social capital they desired, and the satisfaction that they experienced.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The Questionnaire

The first wave of the survey began in April of 2005. Seniors majoring in sociology from institutions across the United States who agreed to take part in the survey were asked why they chose sociology as a major, what skills and concepts they learned while a major, what learning activities they participated in, and about their plans after graduation.² The questionnaire items were developed in concert with an advisory committee of sociology department chairpersons who pre-tested the items in their classes. Based on the pretest, the questions were reviewed and refined. The advisory committee as well as department chairs helped in

² A total of 96 schools participated in the first wave of the study. They were selected by one of two methods. First, 20 PhD-granting departments, 20 master's degree-granting departments, and 40 bachelor's degree-granting departments were selected randomly to reflect the share of graduating seniors from each type of institution of higher education. Second, if a randomly selected department declined to participate another school of the same type was substituted from a list of volunteer departments.

designing Wave II of the survey conducted in 2007. The Research Department along with a long-time consultant, and former member of the Advisory committee, helped design the Wave III survey. All of the questionnaires can be found on the ASA website at http://www.asanet.org/research/bacc_survey.cfm.

Field Procedures

Once IRB permission was secured, Wave I department chairs sent ASA lists of their senior majors (who graduated in December 2004, May 2005, or August 2005) along with their seniors' e-mail addresses. The on-line survey was conducted by the Indiana University Center for Survey Research (CSR). CSR sent an email to students inviting them to participate in the survey, followed by three additional follow ups signed by the chair of each major's department. Of the more than 5,000 students surveyed, 35 percent or 1,777 seniors responded to the on-line survey. These responses were weighted to correct for the over representation of students graduating from doctoral institutions and the under representation of students graduating from baccalaureate only institutions.³

Wave II. Early in 2007 we re-surveyed the class of 2005 to learn what they had been doing since graduation. Once again, CSR conducted the on-line survey sent to those students for whom we had working email addresses. Former majors were followed up through letters and emails to their last known address. Email addresses were then updated and the survey was sent. Of the 1,777 Wave I respondents, 778 responded to the second wave of the survey. The response rate for the second wave of

the survey was 44 percent. These responses were weighted by race/ethnicity and gender to match the weighted 2005 responses.

Wave III. CSR provided the Center for Applied Research and Rural Studies (CARRS) at Central Michigan University with contact information for 778 respondents who had completed or who had partially completed the Wave II surveys. In early 2009, several attempts through e-mail and through a postcard mailing were made to update respondent e-mail addresses. Invitations to complete the Wave III surveys were sent through e-mail to 633 respondents. Complete on-line questionnaires were submitted by 321 Wave II respondents, while an additional 33 respondents completed a portion of the survey. The results were weighted by race and type of institution to match Wave I.

In addition, the CARRS conducted a series of 42 qualitative interviews from the Wave III respondents. They started with 159 Wave III respondents who gave phone numbers and permission for the follow-up interview. Four categories of respondents were created: those who were employed as sociologists, those employed in applied fields, those who were graduate students in sociology, and those who were graduate students in applied fields. Categories were not mutually exclusive, and potential respondents were included in one category only. We will refer to these study participants as "interviewees" to distinguish them from the quantitative survey respondents.

FINDINGS

Do students pursue additional human capital and what do they gain?

Additional Degrees. About half of respondents pursue additional human capital after completing their major, but those who did not enter graduate school right after they completed their degree were the least

³ The results presented in this report were weighted to correct for modest under-representation of sociology graduates at institutions offering baccalaureate and masters degrees as their highest degrees. According to the 2003 NCES/IPEDS Completions survey, which includes data for 1,001 institutions granting a sociology baccalaureate degree, doctoral institutions granted about 51 percent of sociology baccalaureates, master's comprehensive schools granted 36 percent, and baccalaureate-only schools granted only 13 percent of all baccalaureate degrees.

likely to do so. By 2009, fully 51.9 percent of the class of 2005 had completed graduate degrees. Of the 60 percent of students that went into the workforce directly after graduation in 2005, and did not enter graduate school, only 26 percent obtained a graduate degree by 2009. We expected the highest completion rate among those who went to graduate school directly after graduation and were not employed. This was not the case. In fact, those who were in school and employed in 2007 were the most likely to have finished their degrees (75 percent). Perhaps the lack of completion by the graduate school-only respondents was because about 20 percent of those enrolled in graduate school were pursuing PhDs as of 2009.

Additional Human Capital. In what areas did they gain additional hard and soft skills? Table 1 shows that the largest group of respondents who went to graduate school—34.8 percent—were enrolled in professional fields with social work and human services being the largest (18.3 percent), followed by health and related services, and law, pre-law, or legal studies. Degrees in social work and human services fit with the kinds of jobs respondents held in 2007 (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2008). Degree programs in sociology are the second largest specific category (13 percent). The majority of these students were enrolled in applied sociology programs (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2009). Over one quarter (27.6 percent) did not choose any of the specific degree programs listed on the questionnaire but chose the “other” category, which included joint programs such as sociology and education, and social work and health services.

As we will see, a bachelor’s degree in sociology, as currently organized, does not appear to provide the human and social capital that graduates could translate directly into careers, therefore additional human capital was needed. However, some of the interviewees reported that they had always wanted to pursue other kinds of careers such as healthcare

Table 1: What Do They Study in Graduate School?
(in percents)

Professional Degree Fields	34.8
Social work/human services	18.3
Law, pre-law, or legal studies	8.4
Health professional and related sciences	8.1
Sociology	13.0
Other Degree Fields	24.6
Education	6.4
Psychology	5.0
Business	3.1
Criminology	2.7
Library science	1.9
Political Science	1.6
Visual and performing arts	1.6
Languages, linguistics, literature and letters	1.5
Area and Ethnic Studies	0.4
Urban and religious services	0.4
Other/Joint programs	27.6
TOTAL	100

Source: ASA Research and Development Department, *What Can I Do with a Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology?* Wave III

or legal work for non-profits. These former majors stated that they wanted to work with people. As one responded said, perhaps misguidedly, “Sociology is not a helping profession.”

Alternative Pathways: The results of the 2007 survey showed that two other types of pathways to careers, besides obtaining additional human capital, were available to sociology majors. First, if students were made aware of the skills that they did learn, placed them on their resumes, and discussed them in job interviews they were more likely to find jobs that were close to what they learned as sociology majors (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2008).

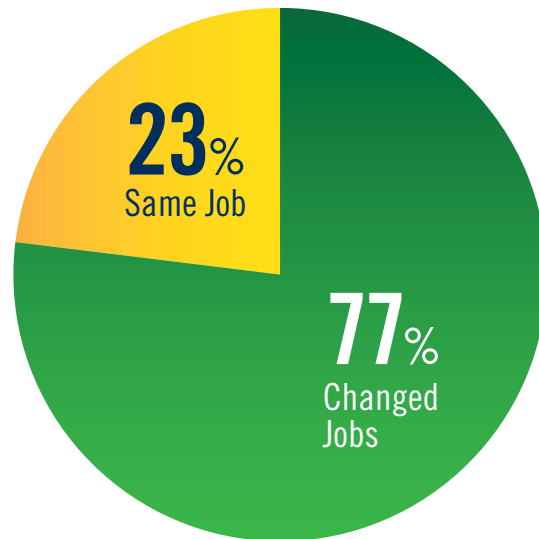
In addition, if students participated in at least one out-of-classroom applied activity that increased their human and social capital (through internships,

service learning projects, or attendance at job fairs) in 2005, they were likely to be highly satisfied with the jobs they held in 2009 (69.6 percent of Wave I respondents who answered in Wave III). Unfortunately, some interviewees bemoaned the fact that they had to seek out internships by themselves without any encouragement from their departments.

What's happened with jobs?

Additional human capital seems to help some former majors to move on to professional-level jobs. In 2007 we asked about the type of jobs they held (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2008). The largest job category was social services, counselors, and psychologists (26.8 percent). The remaining occupations, in descending order, were clerical and administrative support, managers, teachers and librarians, sales and marketing, and service work. A relatively small percent were employed as social science researchers (8.2 percent). Figure 1 shows that by 2009, 77 percent of respondents had changed jobs, although a majority of the respondents stayed in the same field. By 2009 a higher percentage of former majors were in

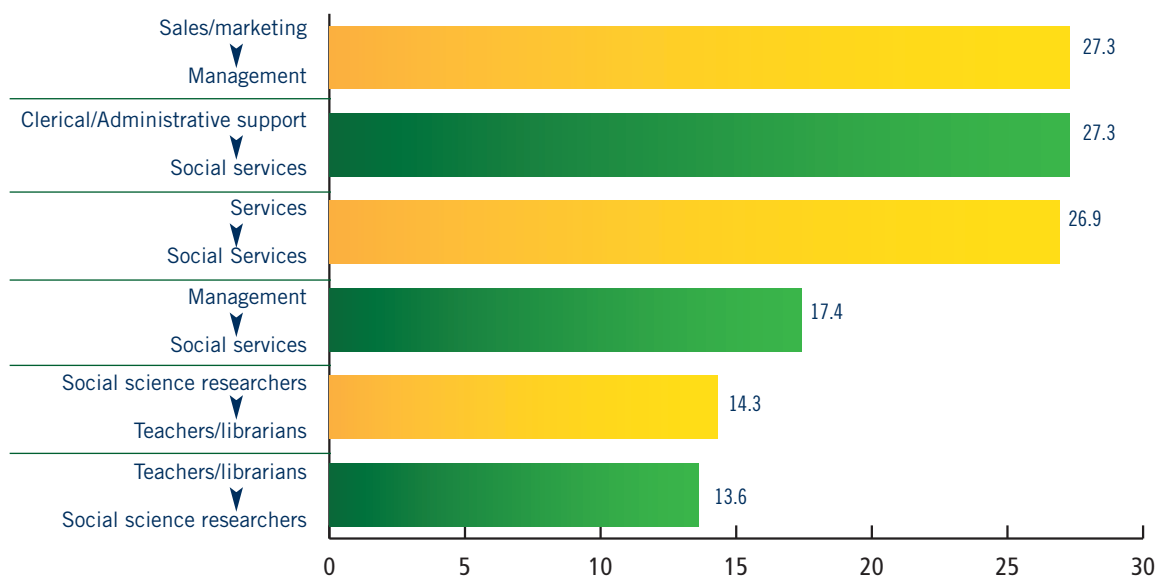
Figure 1. Percentage Who Have Changed Jobs Since Receiving Bachelor's Degree in 2005



Source: ASA Research and Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology? Wave III*

professional-level positions rather than non-professional ones. The largest occupational changes, seen in Figure 2, were from sales and marketing jobs to management positions, and from clerical and

Figure 2. Who Are Working in Different Fields in 2009? (in percents)



Source: ASA Research and Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology? Wave II and Wave III*

administrative support positions to social service support.

What skills and concepts did they use that reflected their sociological studies?

In 2009, respondents selected the skills they used on their jobs very often. Former majors were most enthusiastic about the soft skills they had learned, as well as a range of sociological concepts and perspective learned as majors. (See Figure 3).

Soft skills were among the top five skills selected perhaps because of the relatively large percentage that were employed as social workers. The most frequently used of these soft skills were working with people from other racial or ethnic groups and working on teams, with almost two thirds of respondents (63.2 percent) reporting that understanding race, class, and gender differences were very useful on the job. In the qualitative interviews most respondents confirmed that a sociological understanding of race, class, and gender stratification was important on their jobs. Two quotations exemplify this point of view. The first

Well one of our goals in recruiting is to recruit a diverse student body and so understanding the history and cause and effect of race in the United States, well in the world, is a big concept that I don't think I would have gotten necessarily in another major.

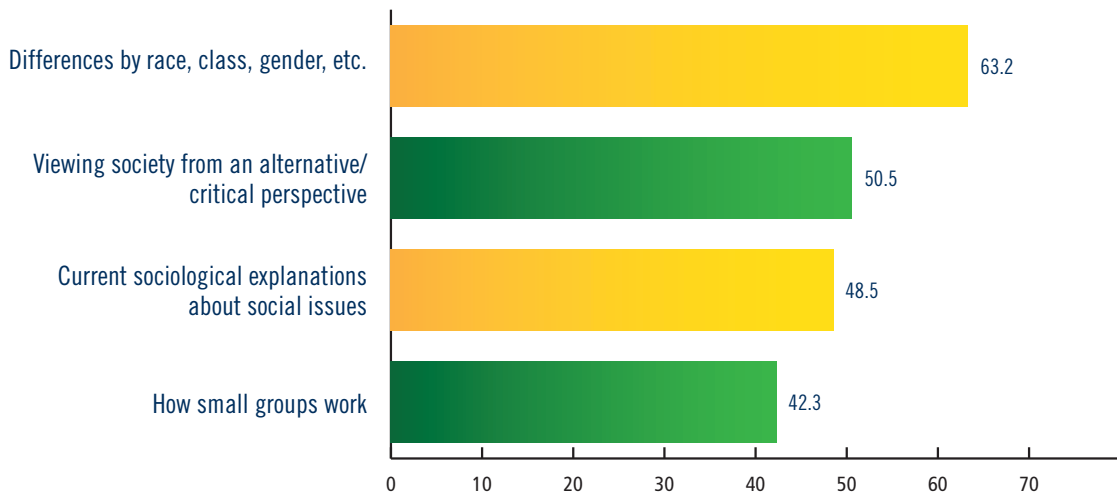
interviewee, who teaches parent education in a social service organization, responded:

Definitely working with diverse populations...I work with a very diverse group of people from people that are just very very poor, African American, Hispanic, white. I work with a huge variety of people and 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 I began working with them.

The second interviewee, a college recruiter, responded:

Well one of our goals in recruiting is to recruit a diverse student body and so understanding the history and cause and effect of race in the United States, well in the world,

Figure 3. Sociological Concepts Used on the Job
(percent responding 'very useful')



Source: ASA Research and Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology? Wave III*

is a big concept that I don't think I would have gotten necessarily in another major. Even gender, I took a great class in gender roles, so that comes into play. I mean it's not direct but it's key to what I do.

Other skills and concepts were considered to be very useful. About two-thirds of former majors mentioned using leadership skills on the job very often. The ability to view society from an alternative or critical perspective, understanding sociological explanations about social issues, and knowing basic sociological concepts were also used on the job very often.

While we do not know whether graduates learned these soft skills in the sociology classroom, in outside activities, or on the job, sociology is especially well positioned intellectually to impart these particular skills to students.

In contrast, Wave III respondents are unlikely to report that basic theoretical perspectives such as functionalism, conflict theory, and social interaction as very useful on the job (15.8 percent), although in the qualitative interviews one former student employed in a part-time job did explain how she used a sociological perspective on her job to understand the world and how it works.

...[It] definitely plays into how I view the world and how I see the things that need to be changed, and see how society as a system, as an organism,[with]functions.

Another respondent, a lawyer at a non-profit organization declared that she did not use most of the skills or concepts that she had learned as a major, but was pleased that she had learned 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.

Hard Skills. In 2005, seniors were asked to rank the hard skills that they had learned during the course of their sociology major. Among the top ranked skills were research skills such as developing evidence-

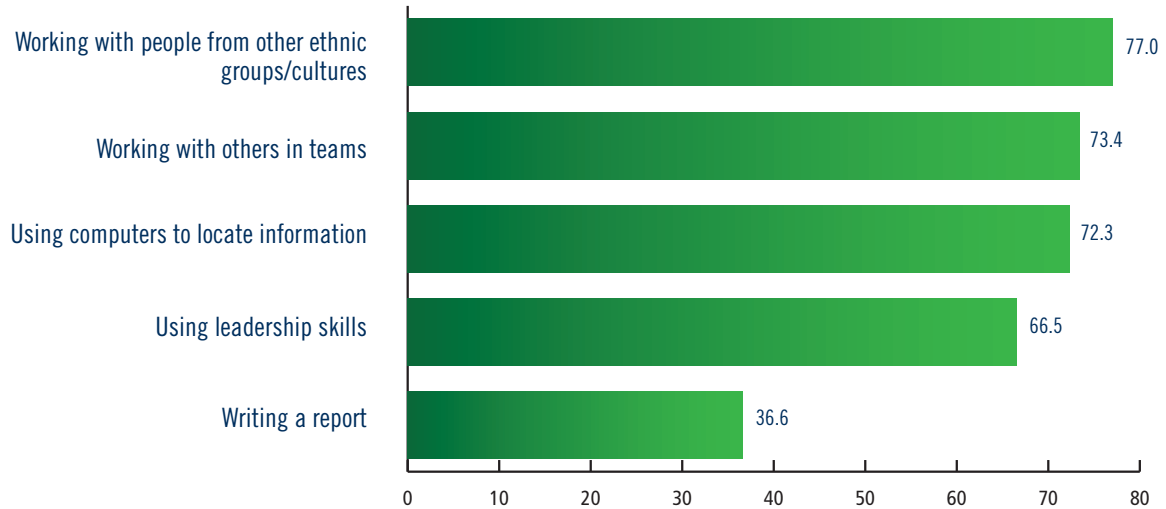
based arguments, and evaluating different research methods. In 2009, respondents did list the hard skill of using computers to find information as among the five that they used very often, and the development of this skill is a key learning object in research methods courses (if not others) in sociology. Respondents, by contrast, were least likely to use research methods and statistics skills, especially statistical packages very often. Yet in the qualitative interviews former majors working in the "helping professions" did say that they used research and statistical skills as a part of their jobs, if not the major part. Some wished that they had taken more quantitative courses. Figure 4 shows the five skills most likely to be used on the job very often and the 5 skills that are least likely to be used very often.

What skills and activities do they wish had been more available?

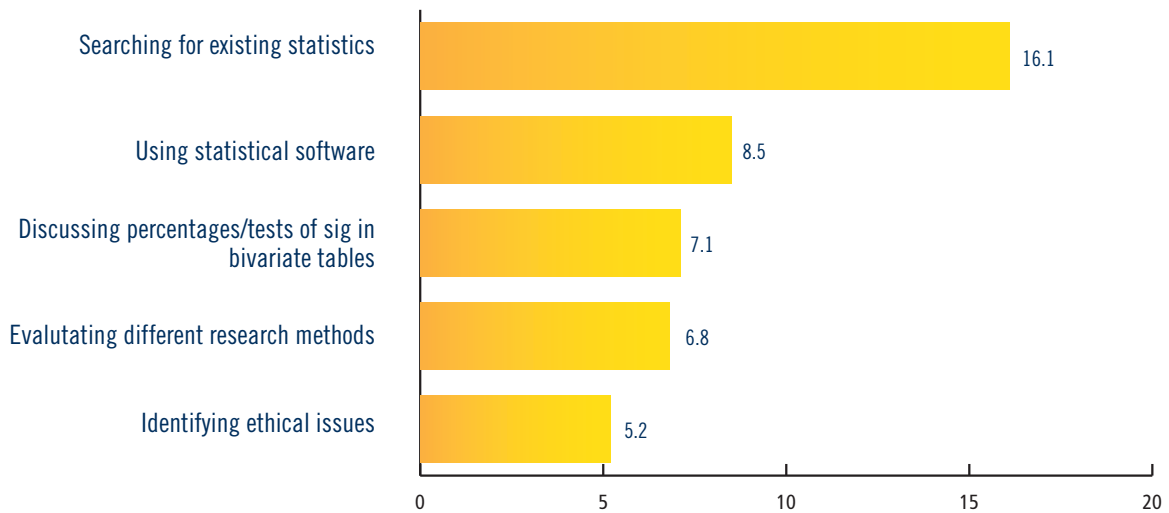
We have seen that respondents listed soft skills as the ones that they were most likely to use on their jobs. In responding to the survey questions about what skills they would have liked to have learned as part of their sociology major, respondents wanted a mix of more social capital and soft skills as well some additional hard skills. Figure 5 shows that networking is the most frequently checked "wish I would have learned" activity (48.9 percent). Former students may see it as a method for gaining more social capital, whether through faculty mentoring or through other means of making contacts. Many interviewees voiced the same desire: Some wished that there were more internship opportunities available or that they had taken advantage of this activity, while others wished that they had had more interaction with faculty members or had participated in sociology clubs. The desire for more of this kind of social capital was followed by a wish for a mix of hard and soft skills including writing grant proposals, employee relations, project management, counseling, and evaluating public policy. Skills that were least likely to be mentioned

Figure 4. Sociological Concepts Used on the Job (percent responding 'all the time')

SKILLS USED MOST OFTEN ON THE JOB



SKILLS USED LEAST OFTEN ON THE JOB

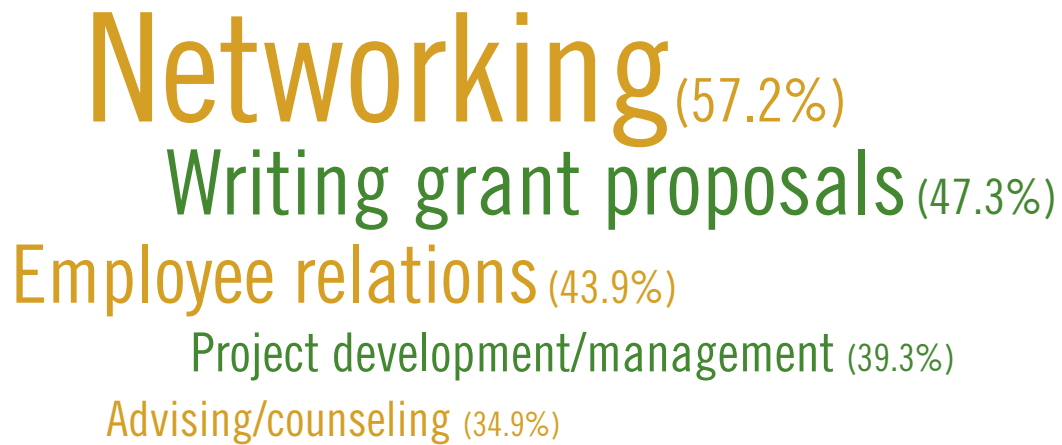


Source: ASA Research and Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology? Wave III*

were survey research methods (12.3%), qualitative methods (14.9%), statistical analysis (16.2%), and data management (18.3%). Although these skills may be desirable for the science labor market, relatively few respondents list their occupation as “social science researcher;” therefore, these skills would not be central to their jobs. This lack of a match between skills learned and skills desired may change as more students complete PhD programs.

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

Figure 5. What Skills Should be Taught?



Source: ASA Research and Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology? Wave III*

Are they satisfied with jobs and with the sociology major?

In 2007 we found that more than 90 percent of those who had found jobs that were very closely related to what they had learned as majors were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their jobs. The same findings held true in 2009, although a higher percentage of respondents were somewhat satisfied rather than very satisfied with their jobs. Nonetheless, satisfaction with the sociology major decreased dramatically from 70 percent in 2005 to 40 percent in 2009. Satisfaction with the major may decrease in retrospect as former majors recalled their lack of preparation for the job market. As we learned in Wave I, the majority of students were not satisfied with the career counseling that they received (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006). As one interviewee noted:

My department was not strong in connecting us to real work opportunities...[When] asking professors what I could do with a bachelor's or a master's degree they didn't know beyond their own academic route.

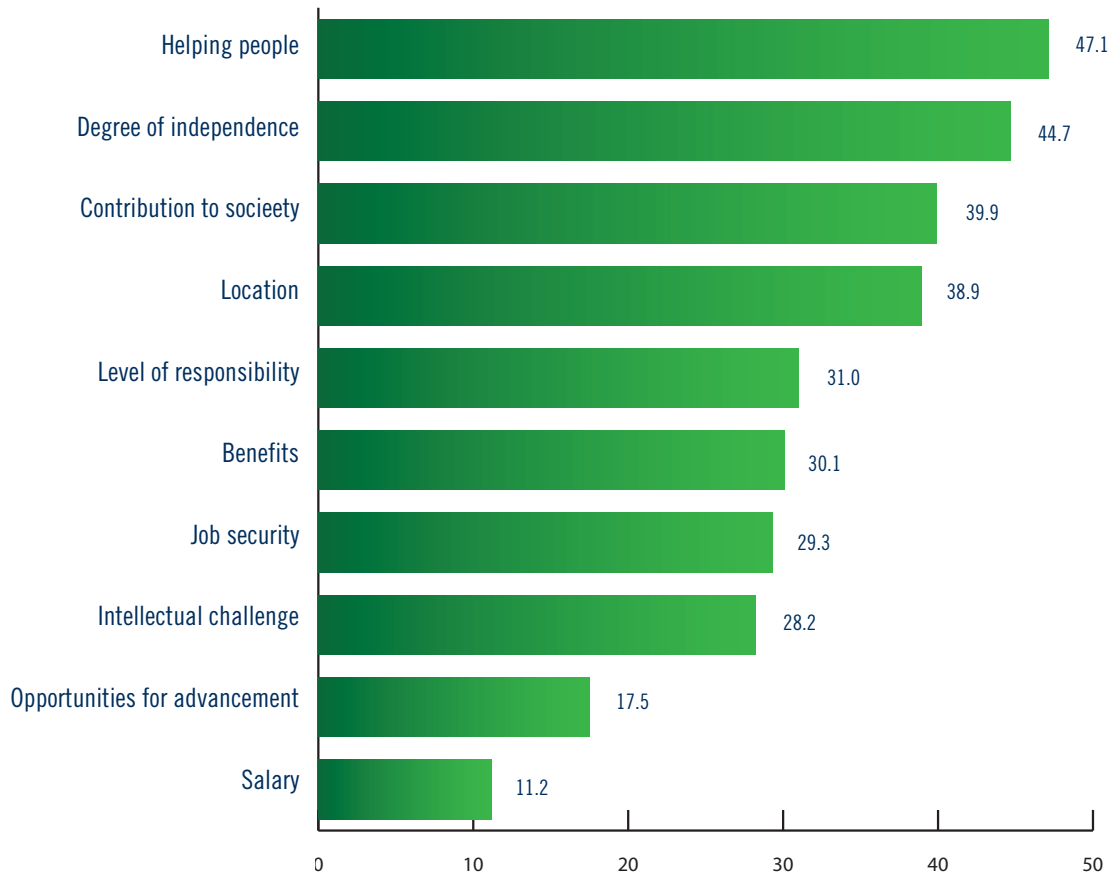
Perhaps satisfaction with the major also declines when respondents examine the specific features of

their jobs. Figure 6 shows that fewer than 50 percent of respondents were “very satisfied” with any aspect of their jobs that we asked about. The highest levels of satisfaction were with social contribution and helping individuals. This finding may be explained by the relatively high percentage of respondents who are working in social service jobs and by the high percentage of students who were “idealists” in 2005, desiring to change society for the better. They were least satisfied with their salaries. Additional social capital, soft skills, and hard skills along with help in making the transition from undergraduates to the next phase of their lives should result in better jobs from the former students’ perspective, at least in relatively good economic times.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

How can we explain the marked decline in student satisfaction with the sociology major from 70 percent to 40 percent as students move from being seniors to graduates with four years of post-baccalaureate experience, and what can sociology departments do to prevent this decline? We sought

Figure 6. Satisfaction with Job Aspects
(percent responding 'very satisfied')



Source: ASA Research and Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology? Wave III*

explanations for the decline in satisfaction by examining the human and social capital students had gained from the sociology major and their experience in the job market and in graduate school.

Given that only a small minority of students went into the science workforce as researchers and the largest groups went into social services, it is not surprising that students were more likely to use sociological concepts, perspectives, and soft skills on the job compared to hard skills. Knowledge of race, class, and gender stratification—indispensable for a sociological understanding of the world—was

considered particularly useful on the job. The soft skills of working with people from other racial or ethnic groups and working on teams are also reported as critical to job success.

Although majors credit sociology programs for their understanding of racial and ethnic differences, most former majors wished they had gained more soft skills while undergraduates. The majority of 2005 graduates did pursue additional human capital, including soft skills, in graduate school, but only a relatively small percentage did so in sociology programs.

Based on these findings, we suggest faculty members should continue to emphasize basic sociological concepts and principles in the curriculum, perhaps more than the typical theoretical perspectives of functionalism, conflict, and interaction theory. Faculty teaching theory classes should consider assignments that help students apply theory to “real world problems” and job settings as well as to academic research. Maintaining an emphasis on using computers to locate information is essential, while it might be useful to place greater emphasis on integrating research skills, especially using statistical packages, in all sociology courses (suggested by the ASA report, *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major Updated: Meeting the Challenge of Teaching Sociology in the Twenty-First Century* (McKinney et al. 2004)). In addition, faculty members might also want to do more integration of soft skills, such as working in groups, into classes so as to benefit the majority of sociology graduates who expect to pursue applied and professional careers that require working with people. Departments might want as well to explore the diverse ways in which they can help students create stronger networks, whether through ties with faculty, with alumni, or with professionals in internships and service learning sites. In addition, making students aware of the human capital that they possess and encouraging them to participate in out-of-classroom activities that helps them make transitions into the job market and to use the sociology education that they

received as majors.⁴ Specifically, faculty could make students aware that leadership in sociology clubs and service learning projects can result in the kinds of skills graduates use on the job, especially if these skills are listed on resumes. Participating in internships and community activities can assist students’ likelihood of interacting with a diversity of people.

With the current recession, students are choosing colleges and programs that emphasize careers (Benton 2009; Garrett 2010). Sociology has long embodied both a commitment to the liberal arts and sciences and to the work of practice and application. Our sociology graduates from the Class of 2005 tell us that their jobs allow them to help people and to contribute to society. This is positive news. Further, they use many of the concepts and some of the skills that are at the core of sociology. Nonetheless, graduates are increasingly critical of the major, and they want more human and social capital. Elsewhere, we describe how faculty can give students career guidance by emphasizing the skills, theory and concepts that they learn as sociology majors (Spalter-Roth, Senter, Stone, and Wood 2010 [forthcoming]). As we said in this forthcoming article, “Incorporating activities that emphasize the relationship between sociological knowledge, marketable skills, and future careers is an important future direction for sociology departments... A renewed commitment by the discipline to strengthening sociology’s core while acknowledging the difficult employment situation students are encountering can enhance student success and the long-term viability of sociology departments”. •

⁴ Data from the 2009 National Association of Colleges and Employers survey reinforce this point. Benton (2009) reports that 73 percent of students who did find jobs had been interns somewhere.

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As the national organization for sociologists, the American Sociological Association, through its Executive Office, is well positioned to provide a unique set of services to its members and to promote the vitality, visibility, and diversity of the discipline. Working at the national and international levels, the Association aims to articulate policy and implement programs likely to have the broadest possible impact for sociology now and in the future.

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