

Departures and Replacements: Are Sociology Departments Downsizing in a Period of State Budget Shortfalls?

March 2004

A recent series of articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* suggests that academic departments are downsizing as retirements accelerate and “hiring freezes abound.” A major reason for downsizing is the decline in state higher education budgets. During the mid to late 1990s, state higher education budgets grew. By FY 2000, the circumstances changed and more state’s higher education budgets did not keep pace with inflation than those that did. In 2003, state legislators passed the smallest increases in higher education appropriations in more than a decade and, in 2004, state spending on higher education declined for the first time in 11 years. State budget shortfalls and declining stock portfolios have affected scholarly disciplines in both the humanities and the sciences, including English, history, physics, and math. Interviews with department chairs suggest that teaching loads are increasing, as specialties are being cut, and temporary faculty are being hired to cover classes.

Are similar trends occurring in the social sciences and, especially, in sociology? Is sociology facing a “retirement bubble”? Can we expect a downsizing of sociology departments over the next decade as the largest cohort of full-time tenured sociologists ages and retires? Will departments be able to replace them with new tenured or tenure track full-time hires?

Many older sociologists earned their PhD degrees and assumed academic positions during the steady periods of growth in sociology that lasted until 1976. After 1976, there was a steady decline in the number of new PhDs, until 1990 when the numbers began to slowly increase. In 2001 and 2002, the numbers of new PhDs declined slightly (these are last years for which data are available from the National Science Foundation’s Division of Science Resource Statistics). If sociology departments can replace retiring faculty, new PhDs could face a favorable job market. Under a scenario of financial woes, however, retiring PhDs might not be replaced, new PhDs could face a tighter job market, and departments could shrink.

Aging in Sociology Compared to Other Social Sciences

Figure 1 shows an “inverted age pyramid” among employed PhDs in sociology compared to economics and political science. PhDs in sociology represent a smaller share of employed PhDs under age 35, when they are compared to these other two social science professions. Only 18.5 percent of employed PhDs in these three social science fields are

sociologists, compared to 51 percent of economists and 30.5 percent of political scientists. The share of sociologists increases as they age. In fact, there are more sociologists than economists in the 65-69 year old cohort. What do these findings suggest for the departures and replacements among academic sociologists?

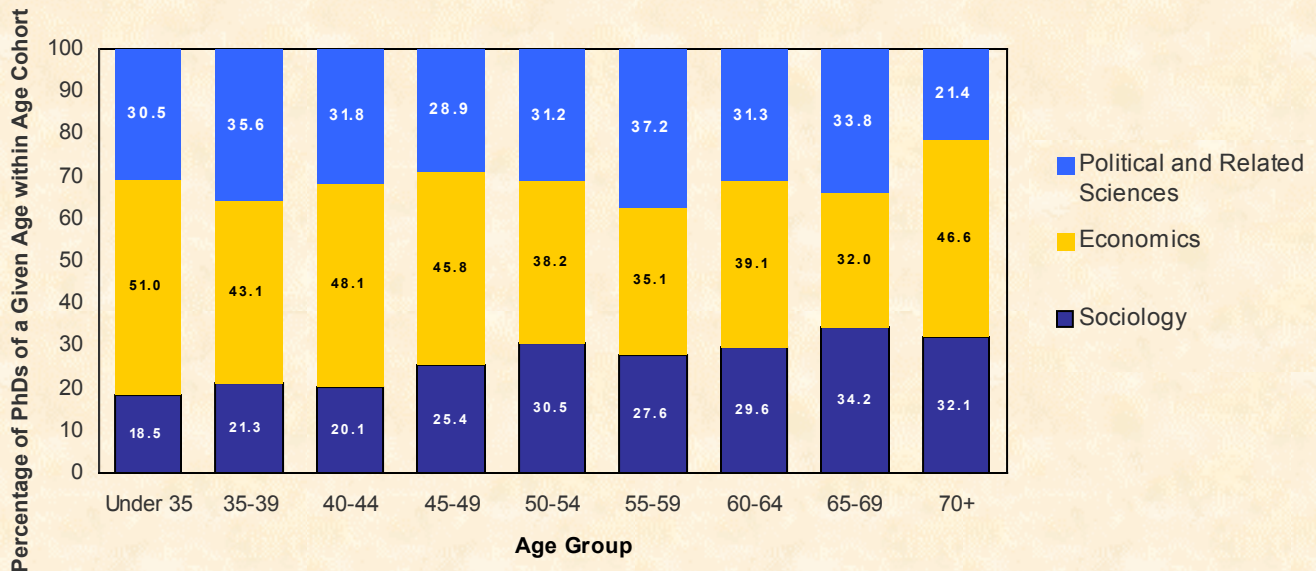


Figure 1: Employed Doctoral Social Scientists in Sociology, Political Science, and Economics within Age Groups in 2001.

Source: National Science Foundation/Division of Science Resources Statistics, *Survey of Earned Doctorates*, 2001.

Employment Status of Older Sociologists

One explanation of the inverted age pyramid is that older sociologists are not leaving full-time employment and hence there are fewer to replace. Data from the ASA membership database suggest that this explanation is probably not the case. Since 1999, the percentage of ASA members over age 65 who report that they are employed full time has decreased from 39 percent to 30 percent. Retirement is the reason for the loss of almost half of department faculty, according to data from the American Sociological Association’s publication, *How Does Your Department Compare? A Peer Analysis from the 2000-2001 Survey of Baccalaureate and Graduate Programs in Sociology*. In 2000-2001, almost 46 percent of faculty left sociology programs as a result of retirement or death; only about 4 percent left as a result of the failure to receive tenure, while half left for “other” reasons (see Figure 2). This pattern is similar across sociology departments located in different types of institutions. These findings suggest that there are potential positions for new sociologists.

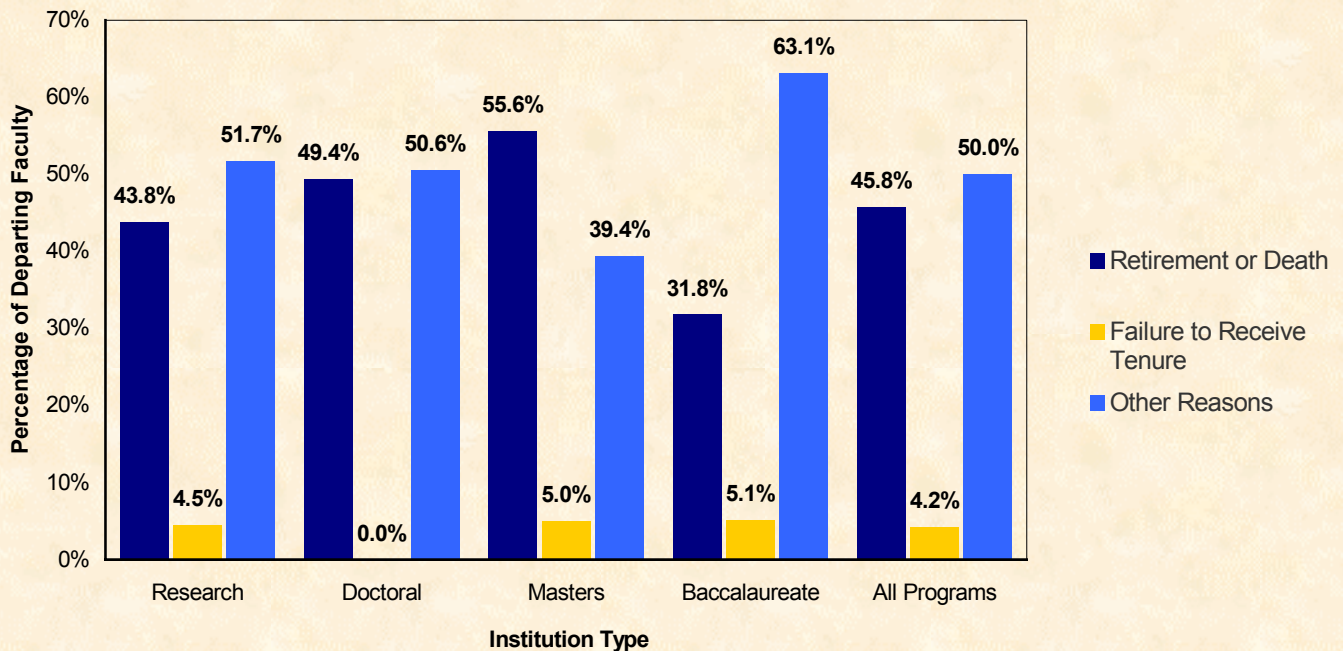


Figure 2: Reported Reasons For Sociology Faculty Loss, AY 2000-2001

Source: ASA, *Survey of Baccalaureate and Graduate Programs in Sociology*, 2000-2001.

Another explanation of the inverted age pyramid is that academic sociology programs, the largest employers of sociologists, are downsizing, and younger sociologists are not being hired to replace older ones. A third explanation is that relatively more new economists and political scientists are being hired, although sociology departments are not downsizing.

Faculty Replacement

As of Academic Year 2000-2001, sociology programs were not facing downsizing. Instead, the mean number of full-time faculty per department increased slightly since the previous year. Figure 3 shows that 1.5 full-time sociology faculty members were hired over the year and 1.4 full-time faculty members departed. The numbers of full-time faculty hired were greater than the numbers of faculty leaving, regardless of the institutional location of the sociology program. In fact, there was no significant variation in the replacement to departure ratio among types of departments, regardless of their average size.

Not all new faculty hires were tenured or on the tenure-track, however. As Figure 4 shows, there was a slight decrease in tenured or tenure track faculty in sociology

departments or programs, on average. About 1.3 new sociology faculty members were hired, compared to 1.4 tenured or tenure track faculty members who departed in AY 2000-2001. Sociology programs in institutions classified as “Baccalaureate” experienced the greatest losses, while sociology departments located at “Doctoral” universities, experienced some gains. These findings suggest that sociology programs did not downsize in AY 2000-2001 but, instead, faced some restructuring from tenured faculty toward full-time, non-tenure-track faculty. The possibility that economics and political science experienced stronger growth than sociology is a possibility, but we cannot determine if this is the case as a result of the lack of data on departures and replacements in these academic disciplines.

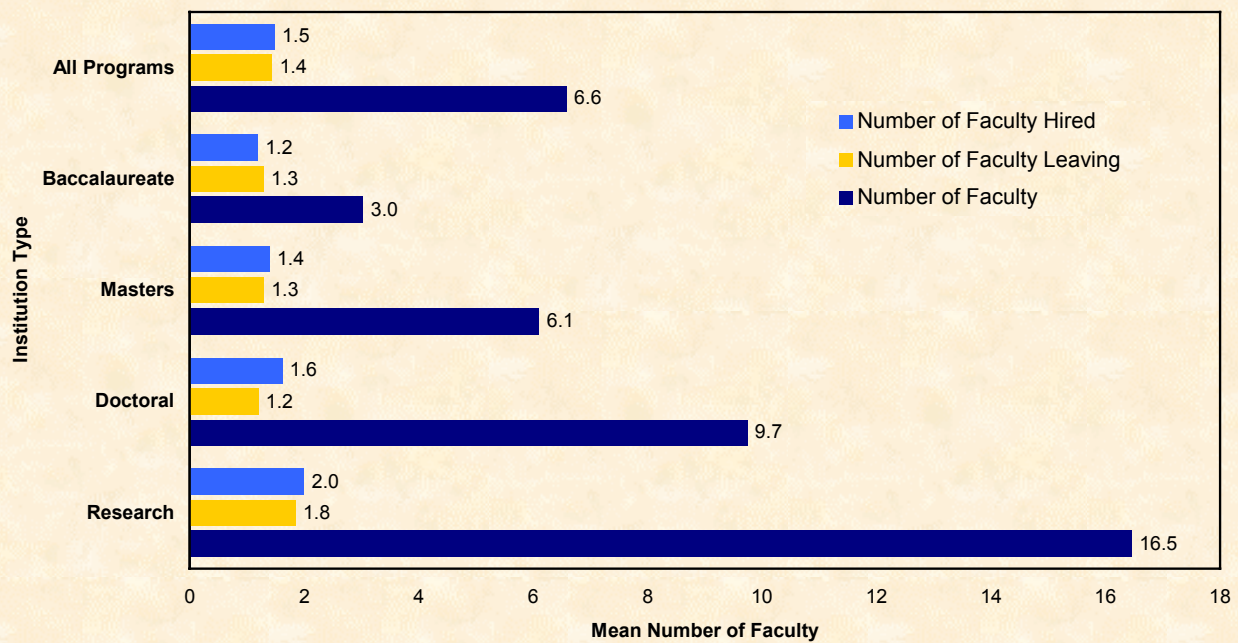


Figure 3. Number of Full-Time Faculty Hired in or Leaving Sociology Programs, 2000-2001

Source: ASA, *Survey of Baccalaureate and Graduate Programs in Sociology*, 2000-2001.

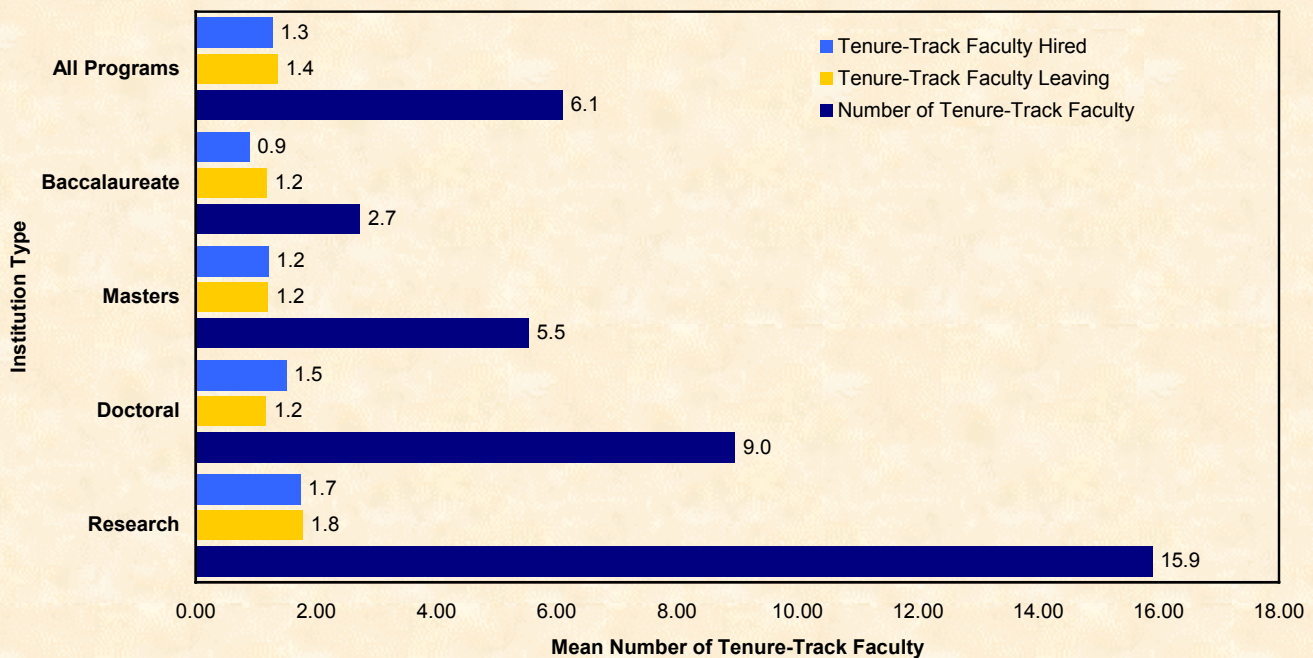


Figure 4. Number of Full-Time Tenure-Track Faculty Hired and Departed, 2001-2001

Source: ASA, *Survey of Baccalaureate and Graduate Programs in Sociology*, 2000-2001.

The Future

What does the future hold for sociology departments and programs at different institutional locations? Large-scale retirements can be expected. According to *How Does Your Department Compare?* about 20 percent of the 2001 sociology faculty is expected to retire by 2007 and about 32 percent by 2012. This finding suggests that sociology departments and programs will be facing a retirement bubble. Some departments have already faced this bubble. There is, however, significant variation by type of institution, with the highest retirement rates expected in sociology departments at doctoral institutions. These departments appear to be replacing departing faculty with full-time faculty, although they may be experiencing fewer replacements than departments of economics and political science. As of 2001, sociology programs did not downsize, on average, but stayed the same. There appears to have been a small shift from tenured to non-tenured faculty, especially at Baccalaureate institutions, over the course of the year.

The next round of ASA survey data on baccalaureate and graduate programs will shed light on whether restructuring continues, downsizing begins, or, growth occurs.

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Suggestion citation: American Sociological Association. 2004. "Are Sociology Departments Downsizing?" *Data Brief* (March). Retrieved from <http://www.asanet.org/research/downsizing.html>

How Does Your Department Compare? A Peer Analysis from the 2000-2001 Survey of Baccalaureate and Graduate Programs in Sociology can be ordered on the ASA website at www.asanet.org/forms/pubord.html. It is publication number 624.R03.