

# PAYING ATTENTION TO THE MASTER'S DEGREE IN SOCIOLOGY

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## *An Overview of Changes in Master's Programs*

A growing number of major research universities are shrinking the size of their PhD programs and increasing the size of their master's programs, especially in the social sciences (Jaschik 2009a). The projected decline in the size of programs is a response to falling endowments and worries about the job market for new PhDs (Jaschik 2009b). In addition to decreasing the size of PhD programs, universities are trying to increase enrollments in professional schools that do not have a model of supporting students throughout most of their graduate education.

In the current recessionary period, potential master's students are being warned against incurring additional debt unless the program is helpful for a specific career (Taylor 2009). Many students seek master's degrees in order to improve their job opportunities (Task Force on the Master's Degree in Sociology 2009). The National Science Foundation (NSF) (2009) and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) (2008) recommend programs that prepare science students (including social science students) for careers in business, non-profits, and government agencies. In the view of NSF and NAS, successful programs should provide strong disciplinary foundations along with internships and research experiences, because the coupling of disciplinary education with practical skills training better meet employer needs.

In 2008, more than 428,000 students were enrolled in graduate schools, with 85% enrolled in programs leading to a master's degree (Bell 2009). The largest number were enrolled in career-oriented education and business programs, followed by health sciences and engineering. Overall, the number of master's degrees awarded in the sciences (including social science) more than doubled between 1970 and 2006, yet over the course of these years, the number of master's degrees awarded in sociology declined by about 13 percent (National Center for Educational Statistics 2009). Sociology appears to be less successful than other science disciplines in growing its master's degree.

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## ASA Efforts

In 2004, an informal group of department chairs of master's-only programs asked the American Sociological Association (ASA) to work with them to develop strategies to ensure that the master's is a meaningful professional degree. In 2005 the ASA's elected Council appointed a Task Force on the Master's Degree in Sociology. Council asked the Task Force to produce a report that would be useful to sociology departments starting or reviewing applied, professional, clinical, or other terminal master's programs.

After much discussion, reviewing criteria of successful programs from other associations, and collection and analysis of existing data, the Task Force issued a report, titled *Thinking About The Master's Degree In Sociology: Academic, Applied, Professional, and Everything in Between* in 2009. The Task Force suggested that the limited growth of sociology programs may be because they are not well understood by administrators and, as a result, receive fewer resources, or because students think that master's programs in sociology do not prepare them for the job market and career advancement, but instead focus on students who want to earn a PhD. Within this context, the Task Force suggested that more attention be paid to master's programs and that more programs might need to focus on developing applied or professional master's programs that prepare students for research, policy, management, and service occupations.

The Task Force did not feel fully confident in making recommendations about how to strengthen master's programs until they knew more about why students entered sociology master's programs, the characteristics of these students, their future educational and occupational goals, what they learned in their programs, how they paid for their education, and whether or not they were satisfied with their master's program. The Task Force proposed that a longitudinal survey of current master's students and their post-graduation experiences be conducted. The elected ASA Council agreed with this recommendation, and the first wave of the survey was conducted in the spring of 2009. The findings reported here should begin to fill the gap in knowledge about sociology's master's degree programs.

## The Survey

The first wave of the master's survey was conducted under the auspices of the ASA Research Department and the Task Force. This survey was administered by the Research Department and the Indiana University Center for Survey Research. The Research Department surveyed 224 departments that awarded at least one master's degree in sociology in AY 2006/07. The graduate directors of these programs were asked about the characteristics of their programs and asked to send a list of their master's students and their email addresses. More than half (122) completed the graduate directors survey. Of these respondents, about half claimed to award an applied or professional master's degree that would lead to jobs capitalizing on the skills students learned. Among the non-respondents were PhD programs that said they offered a master's degree only as a "consolation prize" and did not track their master's students. While the graduate directors were sending their student lists, members of the Task Force designed the on-line student survey. The on-line survey asked students about the type of department they attended, their reasons for obtaining a degree, the skills they learned, their satisfaction with the program, their future plans, their demographic characteristics, and how



they financed their education (see [http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/ASA\\_MASdntSvy09.pdf](http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/ASA_MASdntSvy09.pdf) for a copy of this survey). The survey was accessible on-line from winter 2008 through spring of 2009. Based on the lists received from the graduate directors, we estimate that about 1,600 students had access to the survey. With 872 responders, we achieved a 55% response rate.

## Findings

Most students enter sociology graduate programs because of their interest in the field. More than three-quarters (78.3%) cited this as a reason for getting a master's degree in sociology. Beyond this common interest, students enter the program for different reasons and expect different outcomes. These expectations vary significantly by gender, race and ethnicity, but not by parents' educational attainment.

### WHO IS IN GRADUATE SCHOOL?

There are differences in the racial/ethnic composition of students in sociology master's programs compared to those enrolled as undergraduate majors. Almost 70% of respondents are female, compared to 77% of those who received a bachelor's degree in sociology (see Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006). Almost two-thirds of master's students are white, compared to 75 percent of those who received their bachelor's degree in sociology. In contrast, there is a larger percentage of Blacks, Asians, and individuals who list themselves as "multi-racial" in master's programs compared to bachelor's programs. A slightly smaller share of Latino respondents are in master's programs than in baccalaureate programs (see Table 1).

The largest group of respondents' parents completed a baccalaureate degree or higher (40% of fathers and 37% of mothers), but a substantial minority of students had parents whose highest degree was a high school diploma (25% of fathers and 25% of mothers). Master's candidates are also more likely to have parents with advanced degrees than undergraduate majors, although parents of under-represented minority students generally have less education than parents of white students.

Men and students of color are more likely to enroll in sociology master's programs than they were to have enrolled in a sociology baccalaureate program (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006).

**Table 1. Race/Ethnicity Characteristics**

RACE/ETHNIC CATEGORY	PERCENT OF TOTAL MA STUDENTS	PERCENT OF TOTAL BA STUDENTS
White	64.6%	75.4%
Black	12.9%	9.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	8.0%	4.8%
Latino	4.8%	7.2%
Multi-racial	7.3%	2.1%
Other	2.4%	1.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: ASA Research Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in Sociology?* 2009; *What Can I Do With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?* 2005



**WHAT ARE THEIR FUTURE EDUCATIONAL PLANS?**

The master's degree in sociology is not necessarily a stepping stone toward a PhD for many students. About 43% of survey respondents do not expect to pursue a PhD or other graduate training, at least in the foreseeable future. A somewhat higher percentage (49%) reports an intention to pursue a PhD in sociology. The remaining 8% expect to pursue a PhD in another field such as psychology, education, or social work. However, within the first 12 months after obtaining their master's degree, 54% of respondents do not plan to go on for additional graduate training, suggesting a substantial portion of master's candidates intend to go directly into the labor force.<sup>2</sup>

Women are significantly less likely than men to expect to pursue a PhD in sociology (46% of women compared to 59% of men). In contrast, members of racial and ethnic groups intend to pursue PhDs in proportion to their representation in the population of respondents, with Whites slightly over-represented and Blacks and Latinos slightly underrepresented. These differences are not significant, however (see Table 2). We expected to find that students planning to pursue a PhD would have parents with more education than those pursuing a terminal master's degree. This was not the case, however. Parents' education did not seem to influence who went on to pursue PhD degrees.

As we will see, differences in educational plans are reflected in differences in occupational expectations.

**WHAT ARE THEIR OCCUPATIONAL EXPECTATIONS?**

Students enroll in sociology master's programs with the expectation of getting better jobs. Almost 60% expect to get a better job as a result of obtaining a master's degree. This include those who expect a terminal master's degree as well as those expecting to earn a PhD. Only one-fifth (20.2%) intend to work at their current jobs after obtaining their master's degree.

There are significant differences in the job plans of those who expect a terminal master's and those who expect to pursue a PhD degree (in sociology or another field). The largest job category combines management with research or with professional services to individuals (see Figure 1). Sociology students interested in this job category (who may want to manage non-profit service agencies or to manage government or industry programs) are significantly less likely to expect to go on to obtain a PhD. The second largest job category is

**Table 2. Racial and Ethnic Representation Among Those Pursuing PhD**

RACE/ETHNIC	PERCENT PURSUING PHD
White	67.0%
Black	9.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	8.3%
Latino	4.5%
Multi-racial	8.1%
Other	2.8%
Total	100.0%

Source: ASA Research Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in Sociology?* 2009.

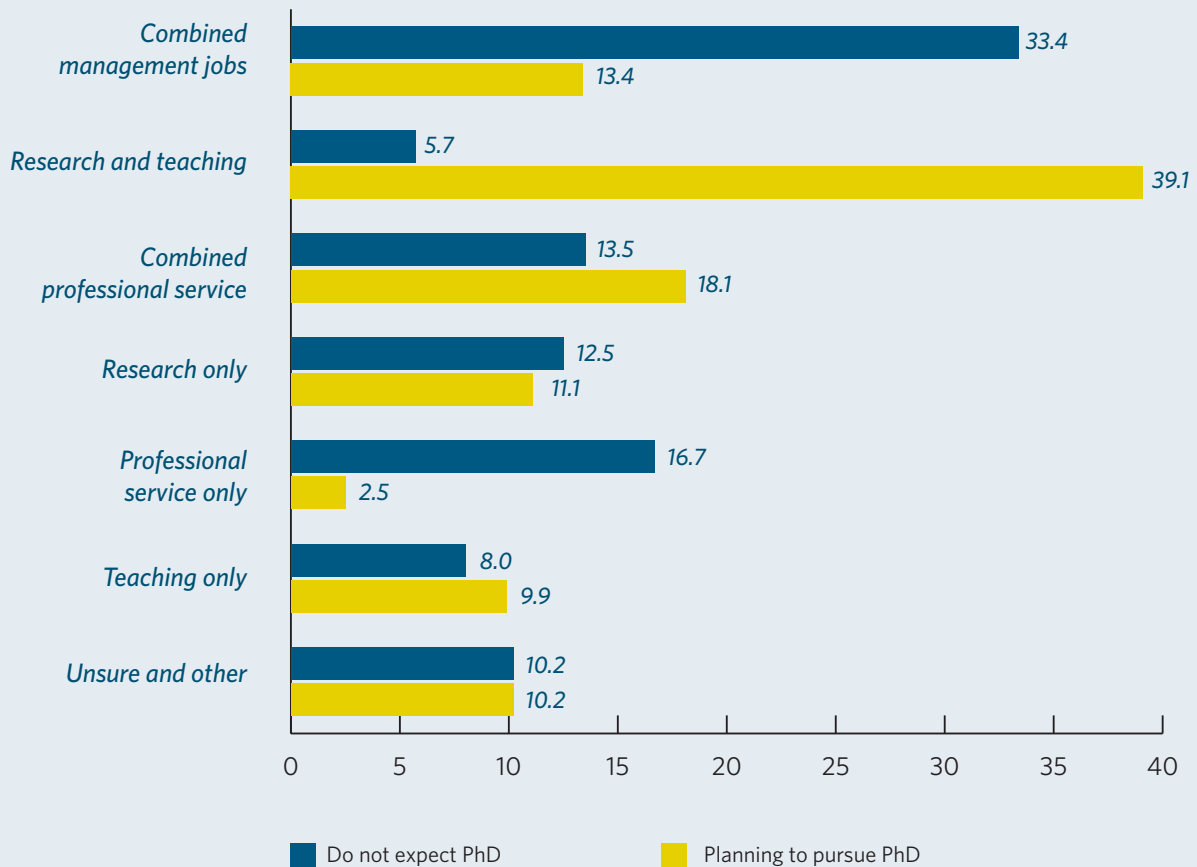
<sup>2</sup> As a result of limited responses from PhD-only departments, these numbers may underestimate the percentage of students pursuing PhDs



comprised of positions that combine research with teaching. Students interested in this category generally expect to pursue PhDs. The third largest job category combines professional services with research and teaching. Students with interest in these jobs include those who might either run research programs at social service agencies or obtain faculty positions or both. They are equally likely to finish with either a master's degree or to go on to obtain a PhD.

Professional service jobs are among the occupational categories exhibiting the smallest percentages of student interest, and are significantly more attractive to terminal master's degree respondents. There is no significant difference between those master's-only students and those potential PhDs who expect to teach or do research, but not combine the two.

**Figure 1. Post-graduate Job Plans (in percent)**



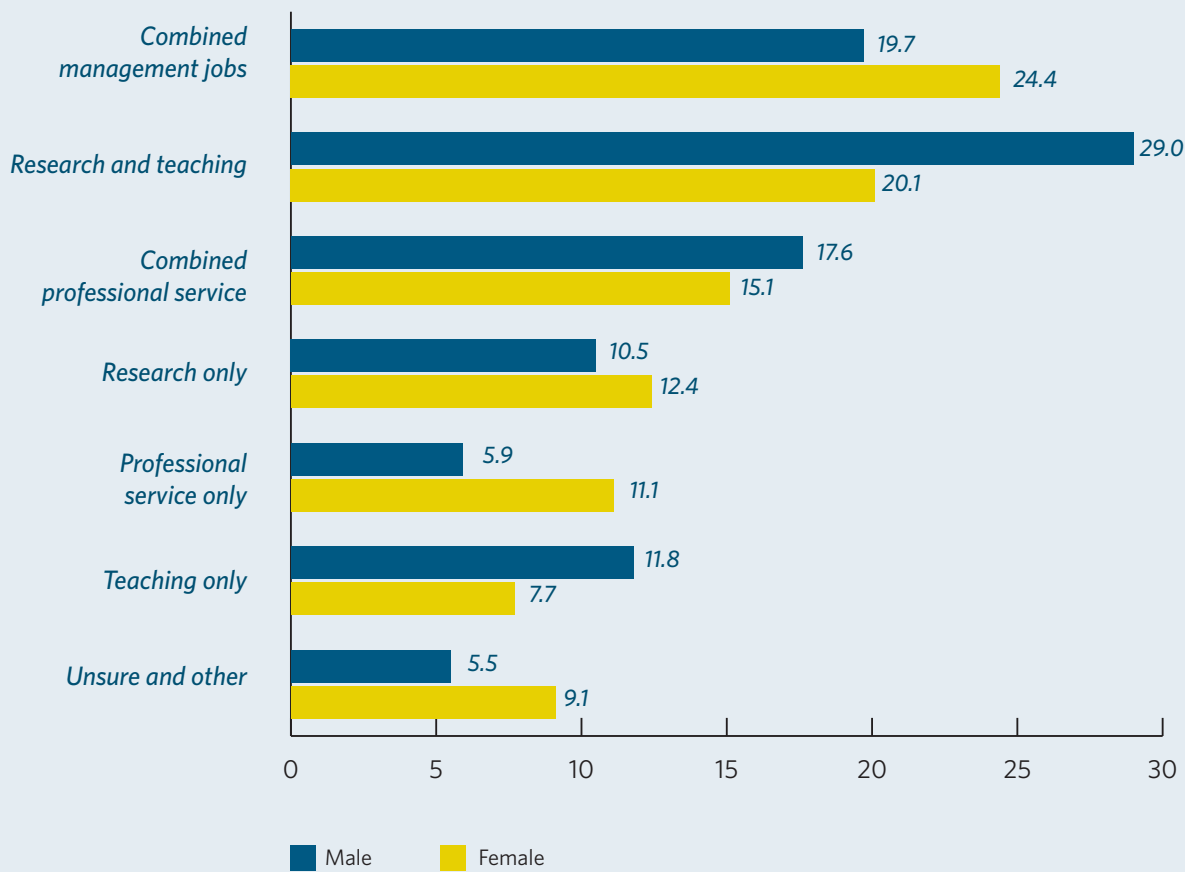
Source: ASA Research Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in Sociology?* 2009



**JOB PLANS BY GENDER**

There are significant differences in future job plans by gender (see Figure 2). Men are more likely to pursue combined research and teaching and teaching-only positions. Women are twice as likely as men to pursue professional service positions and somewhat more likely to pursue combined management careers. This fits with the data that was displayed in Figure 1 that women are significantly more likely to regard a master's as a final degree (at least in the foreseeable future). Men who go to graduate school in sociology appear to enroll with the hopes of pursuing a PhD and a teaching and research career. Women appear to think that a sociology master's degree can lead to other career options.

**Figure 2. Men's and Women's Job Plans Differ** (in percent)



Source: ASA Research Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in Sociology?* 2009



**Table 3: Job Plans by Race and Ethnicity** (in percent)

JOB PLANS	WHITE	BLACK	LATINO	ASIAN/ PACIFIC ISLANDER	MULTI- RACIAL	TOTAL
Combined management jobs	21.1	36.3	26.3	21.9	19.0	23.4
Research and teaching	25.5	11.8	18.4	17.2	27.6	22.7
Combined professional service	15.8	10.8	18.4	12.5	20.7	15.5
Research only	11.9	5.9	5.3	28.1	8.6	11.8
Professional service only	8.2	19.6	10.5	7.8	5.2	9.7
Teaching only	9.2	7.8	10.5	9.4	8.6	8.8
Unsure and other	8.4	7.8	10.5	3.1	10.3	8.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: ASA Research Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in Sociology?* 2009

### JOB PLANS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

There are also significant differences in the job plans of respondents of different races and ethnicities (see Table 3). White and multi-racial respondents are most likely to expect positions that combine research with teaching, probably because they are somewhat more likely to expect to pursue PhDs (although differences among racial and ethnic groups are not significant). Among racial/ethnic groups, Blacks and Latinos are most likely to expect to be employed in combined management positions. Blacks are most likely to expect to work as professional service workers. Perhaps this fits with Black undergraduate sociology majors' desire to change society and their likelihood of participating in community-related activities (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006; Spalter-Roth and VanVooren 2009). Asians are most likely to expect to be employed in research positions.

### TRAINING FOR THE FUTURE

Given the different educational and occupational objectives of terminal master's and potential PhD respondents, are there significant differences in the kinds of requirements, courses, and activities in which they participate? In the next set of tables and figures, we compare those who expect to complete a master's degree with those who intend to pursue a PhD.

### REQUIREMENTS

To learn about master's training we asked respondents about department requirements. We also asked those who participated in these activities whether they were required to or not. We limited the analyses to those who were scheduled to obtain their master's degree by 2009 in order to determine a valid percentage of respondents who had completed required activities or courses. By excluding students in the first year of their master's programs, who had not yet completed all the requirements, we avoided artificially lowering participation rates.

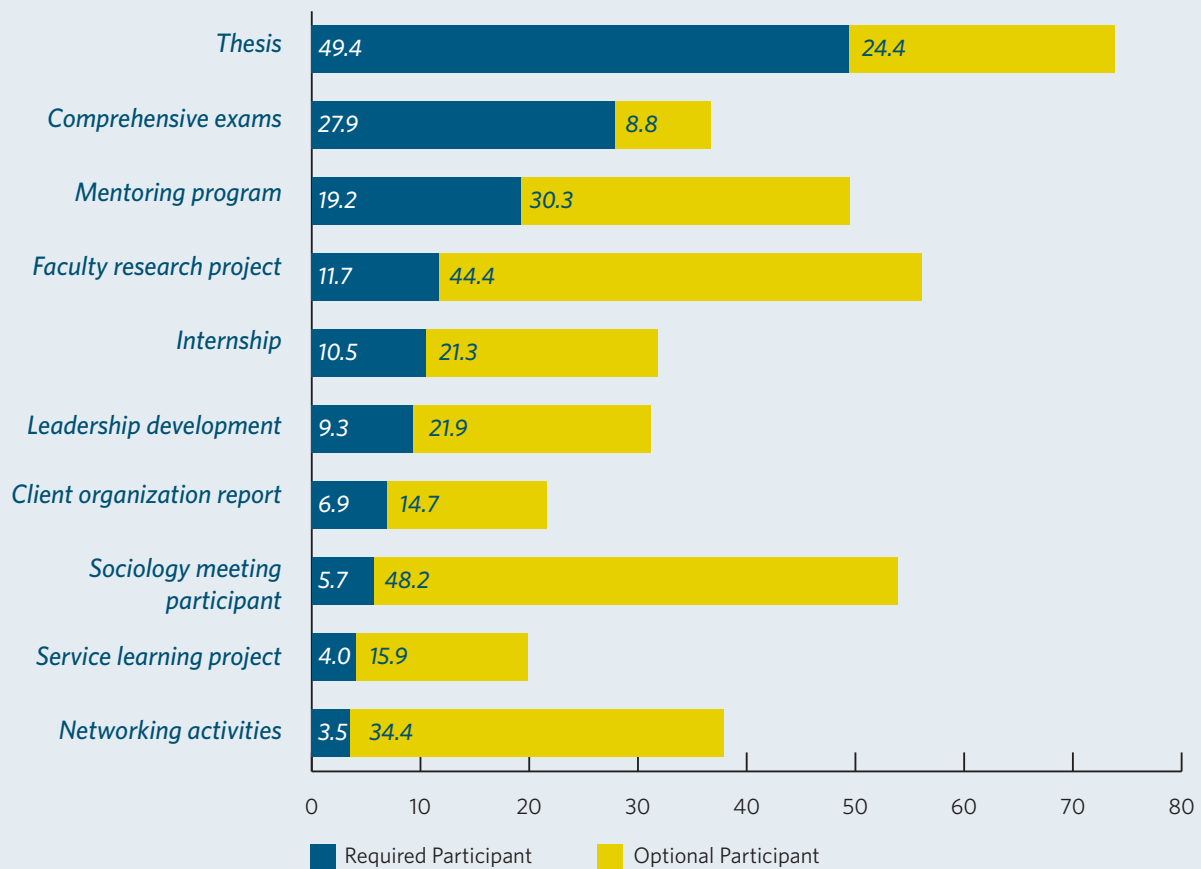
About half of the respondents, who expected to graduate by 2009, report that completing a master's thesis was a requirement in their program. An additional 24% expect to complete a thesis even though it is not required. Aside from taking courses, writing a thesis is the most characteristic activity of master's programs, regardless of type of program or future plans of students. Although 54 departments are labeled as applied, clinical, or



professional by the graduate directors of these programs, a master's thesis is as likely to be a requirement in these programs as it is in a traditional master's program that leads to the PhD. The percentage of programs requiring reports for clients that replicate those common to research, policy, and applied positions is very small (see Figure 3).

The next most common requirement is taking comprehensive exams. More than one-quarter of respondents report being required to do so. Given the discomfort caused by these exams, a relatively small percentage of those who are not required to take comprehensives do so. For the remainder of the activities shown in Figure 3, fewer than 20% of respondents are required to participate in them, although many more participate than are required. For example, only about 12% report being required to do a research project with a faculty member, although another 44% do so. Almost half of respondents voluntarily participated in a state, regional, or national sociology meeting, although only 6% are required to do so.

**Figure 3. Participation in Required and Optional Activities**  
(Percentage of those graduating in or before 2009)



Source: ASA Research Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in Sociology?* 2009





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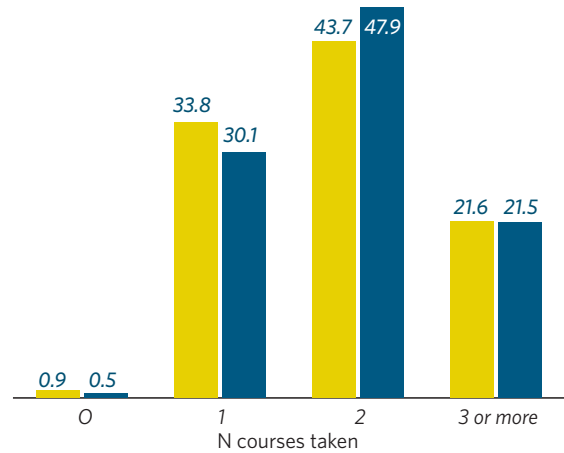
There are no significant differences in participation in most activities between master's students and those intending to pursue a PhD. However, the former appear somewhat less likely to write a thesis (49% versus 54%). Those pursuing a terminal master's degree (25%) are significantly more likely than those pursuing a PhD (15%) to participate in internship programs. This activity is considered by the National Research Council (2008) to be key to professional master's programs because they can result in on-the-job training and job contacts. In contrast, those pursuing a PhD were more likely to attend regional and national sociology meetings to learn to model scholarly behavior.

**SKILLS**

Are there significant differences between terminal master's and PhD students in the number of courses taken to learn sociological skills and theory? We find no significant differences in the numbers of methods courses taken by the two groups, with the largest percentage taking two courses (see Figure 4a). Significant differences are found in the number of statistics courses and the number of theory courses taken. Although one quarter of both groups took two statistics courses, those pursuing a terminal master's degree were more likely to have taken only one course compared to those pursuing a PhD (62% versus 55%) and less likely to have taken three or more courses (see Figure 4b). The majority of those expecting to end their current education with a master's degree complete only one theory

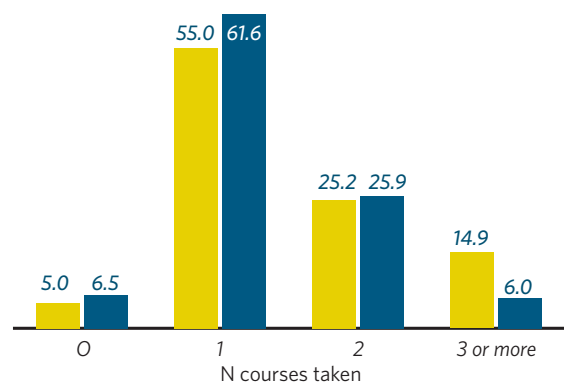
**Figure 4a. Methods Courses**

(Percentage of respondents graduating in or before 2009)



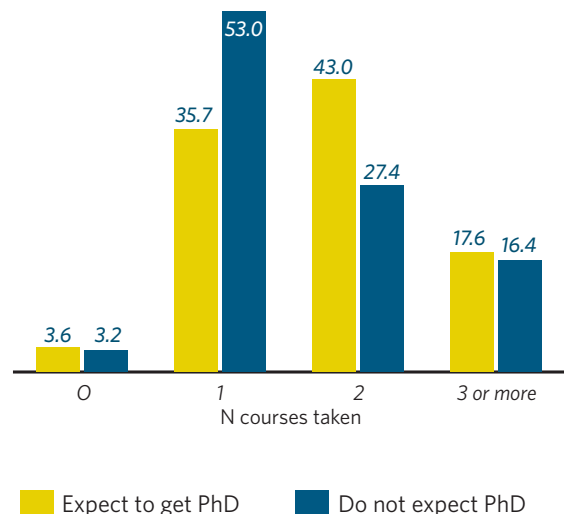
**Figure 4b. Statistics Courses**

(Percentage of respondents graduating in or before 2009)



**Figure 4c. Theory Courses**

(Percentage of respondents graduating in or before 2009)



Source: ASA Research Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in Sociology?* 2009



course (53%) and those expecting to go on for a PhD were more likely to complete two theory courses (see Figure 4c). Although we may expect those in master's-only programs to take fewer theory courses, taking fewer statistics courses may not fully prepare them for the jobs they hope to obtain after graduation.

**SOURCES OF REVENUE**

The master's degree is often supported by university administrators because it is thought to bring in revenues to the institution in contrast to the cost of PhD candidates to the university (Jaschik 2009a). Does this appear to be the case when we compare the revenue sources that respondents use to pay for their degrees? Are terminal master's students more likely to use loans and savings than are future PhD respondents? The seven largest sources of financial aid are listed below (see Table 4). Note that these sources are not mutually exclusive. These findings suggest that administrators' views of the revenues raised from master's programs are at least partially true since those who expect a terminal master's degree are significantly less likely to receive teaching assistantships or fellowships. Those expecting to pursue a PhD are about twice as likely to have teaching assistantships and fellowships and about 1½ times as likely to have obtained grants to help pay for their graduate education compared to those who do not plan on getting a PhD. It is likely that those who expect PhDs attend schools that award these degrees, and these schools have the resources for teaching assistantships and fellowships. Yet, it should be noted that the largest source of financing for those intending to obtain PhDs is loans, and savings is the third largest source of revenue.

Overall, 30% of respondents were very satisfied with the characteristics of their program and 56% were satisfied, while only 14% were dissatisfied. This is a positive finding for the value of master's programs.

**Table 4. Seven Largest Sources of Financial Aid (in percent)**

SOURCES OF FINANCIAL AID	Gender		Degree Plans	
	MEN	WOMEN	PHD	TERMINAL MASTER'S
Loans	63.9*	59.7*	58.1	53.8
Savings	48.3*	34.2*	38.9*	32.4*
Teaching assistantship	46.2*	33.6*	45.5*	24.2*
Earnings	36.6	28.8	31.5	26.4
Spouse/partner's earnings	22.3	27.0	24.4	22.7
Grant/stipend	25.2	21.3	24.6	17.1
Fellowship, scholarship	23.9*	17.0*	23.5*	12.0*

\*statistically significant, chi square (p < 0.05)

Source: ASA Research Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in Sociology?* 2009



We find differences between men and women as well. Men are significantly more likely than women to use loans and personal savings to finance their graduate education. They are also significantly more likely to have teaching assistantships and fellowships as a means of financial support. Women are more likely to get aid from spouses or significant others, although this difference is not significant. This variation may not be surprising, since, as we saw, women are significantly more likely to expect the master's to be their terminal degree.

### SATISFACTION WITH QUALITY OF MASTER'S PROGRAM

Given that many master's students pay for their degrees with loans and savings, are they satisfied with the programs that they pay for? Overall, 30% of respondents were very satisfied with the characteristics of their program and 56% were satisfied, while only 14% were dissatisfied. This is a positive finding for the value of master's programs. Figure 5 shows that students who expect to obtain a PhD are generally more satisfied than those who do not, including their ability to see faculty members outside of class (50% versus 44%). Likewise

Figure 5. "Very Satisfied with Specific Activities" by Degree Plans



\*statistically significant, chi square ( $p < 0.05$ )

Source: ASA Research Development Department, *What Can I Do With a Master's Degree in Sociology?* 2009



those expecting to pursue a PhD are also more likely to have an easier time getting core courses, and they report being very satisfied with the quality of teaching (39% versus 34%). Otherwise there tend to be small differences in satisfaction with program characteristics. “Quality of career preparation” (i.e., counseling) is the characteristic with the smallest percentage of very satisfied respondents (14% of future PhDs and 12% of terminal master’s students). Few sociology departments appear to consider the needs of the local labor market in designing master’s programs. Those expecting terminal master’s degrees are significantly more dissatisfied than those who expect to pursue PhDs (34% versus 27%). This difference is especially frustrating for master’s students who intend to move into the job market upon graduation.

## *Summary and Conclusions*

Although often perceived to be a consolation prize for students not capable of earning a PhD, the master’s degree is the most common graduate degree awarded in sociology. Yet, between 1970 and 2006 there was a 13-percent decline in the number of master’s degrees awarded. This is in contrast to the doubling of master’s degrees in other science fields. As the Task Force on the Master’s Degree in Sociology noted in its report to the ASA Council (2009), “If the decline in the number of degrees awarded is any indication of the health of the Master’s degree in sociology, it should be clear that these programs are not in the best of health (p. 43).” They suggested that the discipline pay more attention to and strengthen the master’s degree. In order to do this, they agreed that more information is needed about why students entered master’s programs, the characteristics of these students, how goals varied among students, what they learned, how they paid for their programs, and whether or not they were satisfied with them. This first wave of a longitudinal study of student’s enrolled in master’s programs in 2009 and 2010 provides this kind of information.

In this research brief we learned that 52% of respondents do not intend to go on for a PhD in sociology, with 43% expecting that the master’s degree will be their terminal degree, at least in the foreseeable future, and the remaining 8% expecting to pursue degrees outside of sociology. Although the majority of respondents are either very satisfied or satisfied with their programs, they want better jobs as a result of obtaining a master’s degree. Despite their job-orientation, only 12% of master’s-only candidates are satisfied with the career counseling that they receive. This is a clear area for improvement. Teaching students about job searching skills and local and national labor markets should be an important part of the curriculum for master’s students. Internships and preparing reports for clients may help with job contacts and should be encouraged. In addition, students need to be urged to take courses that will make them marketable. The master’s-only respondents were as likely to take as many methods courses as those intending to pursue a PhD, but they completed fewer statistics courses. It is our expectation that those with more statistics as well as methods courses will be more desirable in the job market.

In the next waves of the survey, to be conducted in 2010, we will learn about the actual future of current students. Did those who expected to go on for a PhD do so? Did those who wanted particular kinds of jobs get them? How satisfied will they be with their sociology master’s degree a year or two after degree completion? And what differences will there be by race and gender? We hope that this effort will help sociologists reexamine the master’s degree so that departments build better programs and the discipline experiences an increase rather than a decrease in students.



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