

Tracking Master's Students through Programs and into Careers

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For many students, the master's degree in sociology is not a stepping stone toward a PhD degree, rather, they pursue the degree as a strategy to improve their job opportunities. Recent reports from the National Academy of Sciences and the National Science Foundation propose that universities consider developing applied and professional master's programs that provide strong disciplinary foundations as well as internships and research experiences to prepare students for careers in business, non-profits, and government agencies.

In recent years, sociology departments have developed these programs to prepare students for careers outside of the academy. Yet, relatively few departments use evaluative measures to determine whether or not their programs are successful by tracking their master's students after they graduate.

It was in this context that the ASA Task Force on the Master's Degree in Sociology advised the ASA Research Department to begin to study the issue earlier this decade. The Research Department then developed and administered two sets of surveys. The first was a brief survey of graduate directors concerning the characteristics of their departments. The second was a longitudinal survey of students enrolled in master's programs. The first wave of the student survey, conducted in winter of 2008-09, asked about students' graduate school experiences and their future plans. The second wave, conducted in winter of 2009-2010, asked about the current status of these students, and those who had completed their master's degrees were asked what sociological skills they used and what skills they wished they had learned as part of their studies. The third wave of the longitudinal survey will be conducted in the winter of 2011. The findings discussed below may be biased to be more reflective of master's-only schools, given the differential response rates.

Applied vs. Traditional Programs

The graduate director's survey was sent to the directors of 224 programs that awarded at least one sociology master's degree in AY 2006/07. There was a 54 percent response rate (122 departments). Of these departments, 85 percent reported having a free-standing master's program and 15 percent did not award an intentional master's degree. More than half (53 percent) of the graduate directors reported that their departments offered an applied, professional, or clinical track. About one-third of master's programs require an internship as part of the curriculum, with applied programs being about eight times more likely to do so than traditional programs. Faculty members were more likely to have non-academic experience in applied programs. Applied programs were more than four times as likely to have an outside advisory board provide suggestions for curriculum changes and to help students with contacts and job search, although only about 10 percent of all programs have such boards. Applied programs were significantly more likely to offer online courses to meet the needs of working students. Applied programs are twice as likely to recruit students from their own baccalaureate programs. For a full list of characteristics, see www.asanet.org/images/research/Images/jpegs/mastersprog_comparison.JPG.

Graduate School Experiences

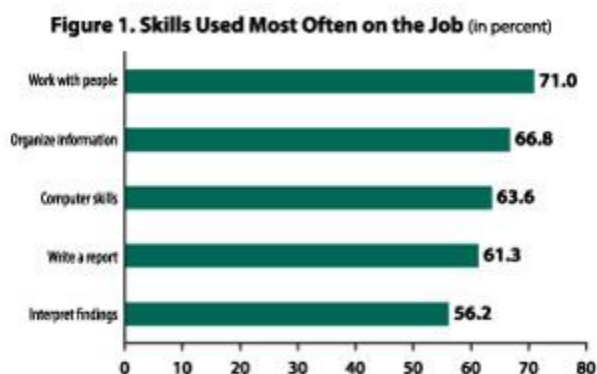
The first wave of the student survey was sent to about 1,600 sociology master's candidates. Of these candidates, 872 responded. More than three-quarters of students entered sociology graduate programs because of their interest in the field. In examining the candidate's experiences, we divided them into groups defined by their future plans: those who saw their MA as a terminal degree, and those who intended to pursue a PhD. Of the respondents to the first wave of the survey, about 52% were enrolled in terminal master's programs and 48% were enrolled in PhD programs.

There were some differences in the programs each of these groups pursued. Master's-only students were more likely to have taken only one theory course, while those pursuing a PhD were more likely to have taken two courses. Those pursuing a terminal master's degree were more likely than those pursuing a PhD to have taken only one statistics course (62 percent versus 55 percent). There was no statistically significant difference found in the number of methods courses taken between master's and PhD students. The largest percentage of those enrolled in either type of program took two such courses. In terms of future plans, the largest percentage of master's-only students anticipated combining social services with management or with research (40 percent). For a full description of student experiences and future plans, see *Paying Attention to the Master's Degree in Sociology* at www.asanet.org/research/MAinSociology.pdf.

Outcomes

More than 500 of the original 872 student responders to the 2008 cohort responded to the second wave of the survey. We found that one year after the first wave of the survey almost 40 percent were working in full-time positions, while 12 percent were enrolled in a PhD program. The remaining respondents were still finishing their master's degrees. More than half of the respondents did not expect to pursue a PhD or other graduate training in the foreseeable future.

Skills Wished for and Used on the Job



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The survey asked those who were employed full-time to report which skills and activities would have been useful preparation for these positions as well as which skills they used most often on their jobs. Grant writing was the skill that most respondents (57 percent) wished they had learned. About a third wished they had had better access to career counseling, and nearly 30 percent wished they had participated in an internship program. In spite of their wish for additional skills and activities that would help them on the job, almost half of respondents reported that their jobs are closely related to their sociological studies, suggesting that master's students are working in jobs that they feel utilize the skills learned in their

programs including organizing information, using computers, writing reports, and interpreting data, all of which are skills that can be learned as part of a sociology master's program (see [Figure 1](#)). To our surprise, the skill most frequently reported as being used on the job was "working with people (71 percent). It is not clear to us that this is an intentional skill learned in sociology programs or if these are skills learned in internships or other out of classroom activities.

Sociology departments have been developing professional and applied master's programs to prepare students for careers outside of the academy. Relatively few measure whether or not these programs are successful. The ASA Research Department conducted two surveys, first, to compare applied programs with traditional programs and the second to track a cohort of master's candidates. The results from the graduate director survey indicate that there is potential for building applied programs that include more faculty and advisory boards with non-academic experience. These changes could foster curricula changes and create internships opportunities that help students obtain positions that employ their sociological skills. From the student survey, we found that the majority of students were either satisfied or very satisfied with their sociology graduate school experience, although only 13 percent of those who intended to go into the workforce directly were satisfied with the career counseling that they received. Those in the labor force used the skills that they learned in their sociology programs. There are some very specific skills, such as grant writing, that they realize would have been useful as part of job preparation. In the third and final wave of the survey to be conducted in the winter of 2011, we will learn more about respondents' career trajectories and their continuing satisfaction with their master's programs. 