

# TEACHING SOCIOLOGY

AN OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

VOLUME 38 • NUMBER 2 • APRIL 2010

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ISSN: 0092-055X

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# Teaching Sociology

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Valdosta State University  
email: teachingsociology@valdosta.edu

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Glenn Muschert  
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email: teachsoc@muohio.edu

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The American Sociological Association acknowledges, with appreciation, the facilities and assistance provided by Valdosta State University.

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## Comment from the Editor

Teaching Sociology  
38(4) 285–286

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DOI: 10.1177/0092055X10384391

<http://ts.sagepub.com>



As I write this, the sun is just beginning to break through the darkness—it is going to be a hot July 4th weekend in South Georgia. It has been a year since I began to receive manuscripts as the editor-elect of *Teaching Sociology*—where have the days gone? This year has flown by—full of so many “firsts”: sending my first edition off to Sage; writing my very first “congratulations, your article has been accepted for publication” letter; the journal going “live and online” in Sage’s ScholarOne software system on January 1; seeing the excitement of my managing editor, graduate student Susan Nebel, when she saw her name in print for the first time.

I have learned that being an editor is much like teaching: One has goals for the day, but one never knows what will happen once class starts. Some of my goals for the editorship have been accomplished, and others are proving more elusive. I am excited to report that the transition to a completely online submission and review process seems to be going well. Authors have made the transition to the ScholarOne software with few problems. Reviewers too have adapted to going online to find the blinded manuscripts and to submit their reviews. As always, if you ever experience trouble with the submission–review process, please let me know.

So what has not gone as well as I had hoped? Last January I wrote in my editorial comment that “beginning in the next edition of *TS*, each edition will feature a review essay about books and monographs available for some of the central classes common to most Sociology programs.” This has not happened. While my deputy editor, Glenn Muschert, has worked diligently on finding people willing to do these labor-intensive peer-reviewed manuscripts, the time needed to ship books to these individuals, to read them, to write the review, and then to have it peer reviewed (sometimes multiple times) has not always meshed well with the timetable for production of every issue. The good news is that our first review is in this edition—“Growing Pains in the Sociology of Aging and the Life Course: A

Review Essay on Recent Textbooks” by Christopher Wellin. We hope to have more for you in the coming months, but not in every issue.

There are many people I want to thank for their help this past year. The Sage production team—Allison Leung, Kristen Marchetti, Scott Springer, and Eric Moran—has been so available to answer software questions, to work through copyediting issues, and so on. I know that they are just an e-mail and a few time zones away! I want to thank Liz Grauerholz, the past editor of *Teaching Sociology*. She has been gracious with her time and so helpful. Karen Edwards and Janine McKenna, at the ASA, have completed the wonderful team that supports those of us who are editors of ASA journals.

In addition, I want to thank my deputy editor, Glenn Muschert, for his counsel and hard work. On top of these duties, he also was program chair for the Society for the Study of Social Problems’ 2010 Annual Meeting, so I know he has had a busy year too! Thanks also to Tirth Raj Bhatta, who worked exceptionally hard as Glenn’s assistant this past year. Good luck, Tirth, as you begin your doctoral studies at Case Western Reserve!

I want to thank the members of the Editorial Board who are ending their terms: Rebecca Bordt, Tracy Dietz, Lauren Dundes, Angela Hattery, David Jaffee, Diane Johnson, Donna King, Monica Snowden, Heather Sullivan-Catlin, Jan Thomas, Jean Van Delinder, Leslie Wang, and Morrison Wong. They truly have been part of a working board, and I appreciate their help and support.

I also want to express my appreciation to those of you who answered my call to review manuscripts. Reviewers are the lifeblood of academic journals, yet they are anonymous for most of the process. I am so impressed by the thoughtful, detailed reviews that I have received this year.

And most of all, I want to thank Susan Nebel, my outgoing managing editor. She worked in the journal office while enrolled full-time as

a graduate sociology student. She quickly learned two software programs for manuscript processing, as well as several e-mail systems, and through it all she was always courteous to authors and reviewers and industrious. Good luck with your doctoral plans, Susan.

I look forward to continuing to add content to the *Teaching Sociology* Web page and to clarify

online submission guidelines in the next year. Please let me know what your thoughts are about the journal; I am striving to make it useful to you, its readers.

Kathleen S. Lowney

*Editor*

E-mail: [teachingsociology@valdosta.edu](mailto:teachingsociology@valdosta.edu)

# ASA's Bachelor's and Beyond Survey: Findings and Their Implications for Students and Departments

Teaching Sociology  
 38(4) 314-329  
 © American Sociological Association 2010  
 DOI: 10.1177/0092055X10378827  
<http://ts.sagepub.com>



Roberta Spalter-Roth<sup>1</sup>, Mary Scheuer Senter<sup>2</sup>,  
 Pamela Stone<sup>3</sup>, and Michael Wood<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

With the support of the National Science Foundation, the American Sociological Association conducted a longitudinal survey of sociology majors from the class of 2005, following them from senior year into careers or graduate school. The first part of this article provides a context for the results from the *What Can I Do with a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?* study and a summary of its key findings. Wave I data demonstrate strong student interest in sociological concepts, perceived mastery of some research skills but not others, and general satisfaction with the major. Sociology majors are both idealists and careerists. The majority expects to enter the job market after graduation but is not satisfied with the career advising they receive. Key findings from Wave II demonstrate that more respondents go directly into the job market than expected, job search strategies are important in finding a job that matches what students learned in their sociology programs, and those who find such jobs are more satisfied with the major. The second part discusses how the survey findings can be used to enhance curriculum, advising, and assessment without vocationalizing the curriculum and without adding extra burdens to faculty members' already heavy schedules. Finally, the article discusses how the data can be used as a baseline for department assessment.

## Keywords

social capital, occupations, liberal arts, job satisfaction, undergraduate major, fields of study, advising

Supported by the National Science Foundation, the American Sociological Association (ASA) conducted a longitudinal survey of sociology majors from the class of 2005, titled *What Can I Do with a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?* The purpose of this study, commonly known as *Bachelor's and Beyond*, is to fill in the information gap for faculty members about why students major in sociology and what they do with their educations. Students and their parents want answers to these questions, especially when students are more likely to have a parent who is unemployed than in past years as a result of the current recession.

This article places the study findings and the activities that can flow from them, such as changes in curriculum and assessment methods,

<sup>1</sup>American Sociological Association, Washington, DC, USA

<sup>2</sup>Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, USA

<sup>3</sup>Hunter College, City University of New York, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Roberta Spalter-Roth, Research and Development Department, American Sociological Association, 1430 K Street, NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005, USA  
 Email: [spalter-roth@asanet.org](mailto:spalter-roth@asanet.org)

in the context of changes in higher education. Although these changes may exacerbate disagreements among faculty members between those who favor traditional academic pedagogy and those who favor increasing the emphasis on applied sociology, as we will see these debates do not appear to be reflected in student views or goals. And, we argue that faculty can teach sociological concepts, theory, and methods while assisting students in their efforts to prepare for careers that employ the knowledge and skills they learned as undergraduates.

### *Sociology in the Context of the Corporate University*

Sociology departments find themselves in the midst of powerful trends affecting higher education. They exist in universities facing budget shortfalls and work with administrators who have embraced a business or vocational model for governing higher education (Newfield 2003; Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Sociologists and other liberal arts faculty have voiced concerns that the growth of this profit, corporate-oriented model has had negative and indeed pernicious consequences for teaching and learning (Tuchman 2009). They believe that education has become more skill oriented and does not put learning in a social context. On many campuses, the “practical arts,” such as business, public policy, health care, and criminology, are growing while the liberal arts are in decline (Brint 2002). In addition, the development of standardized assessments of student learning in which faculty do not participate is another contentious issue (Spalter-Roth and Scelza 2009b).

### *Sociology as a Liberal Art*

Sociology is a liberal art with an emphasis on scientific method. Yet the discipline has a tradition of both practice, often in the service of social reform, and abstract theory and methodology, often in the service of scientific understanding (Calhoun, Duster, and VanAntwerpen 2010). In spite of the long tradition of practice, now referred to as *public sociology* (Burawoy 2005), the undergraduate curriculum is not primarily designed to place majors in specific applied careers or to engage in specific types of social action. Indeed, there are calls to resist what is referred to as the

*vocationalization* of sociology, with the trading of emphasis on theory and methods for narrow career preparation. In contrast to these calls, department chairs at regional and national meetings report that they worry that their departments will be merged with other programs, will lose resources, or will fail to get additional faculty lines because of declining enrollments compared to departments viewed as more practical majors. This article does not suggest that faculty stop teaching the perspectives and the concepts that students say drew them to sociology, nor should faculty assume students’ responsibility for finding jobs and planning their futures. Nonetheless, the current context of higher education along with the study findings suggests that faculty may need to become more cognizant of future careers for sociology majors. Such an orientation need not change the primary role of sociology faculty.

The What Can I Do with a Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology? study shows that a majority of students major in sociology because they are excited by the concepts taught in their first course and are idealistic because they want to understand the relation between social forces and individuals and to change society. Yet, the majority of these students go into the labor market directly after graduation and hope that majoring in sociology will improve their career chances. Regardless of their reasons for majoring, the majority are dissatisfied with the career advice they receive. The need to know about the link between their major and possible careers may be especially useful for students of color, students of non-college graduate parents, and children of immigrants, groups that comprise a greater share of the student body, especially in sociology (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006).

### *Overview of the Article*

The first part of this article summarizes key survey findings from the first two waves of the Bachelor’s and Beyond survey. The second part of the article discusses the ways that the study findings can be used to enhance students’ understanding of how to take sociological concepts, which are often quite abstract, and use them in job settings, without adding extra burdens to faculty members’ already heavy schedules. The final part of the article suggests how departments can assess student learning by using the Bachelor’s and Beyond study as baseline data.



## BACHELOR'S AND BEYOND STUDY DESIGN

As part of the study design, sociology majors were to be interviewed three times starting in 2005: (1) Wave I in their senior year of college, (2) Wave II in 2007, and (3) Wave III in 2009. Wave III findings are not available as yet. A committee of current and former chairs of sociology departments served as advisors to the project and helped in designing the sampling procedure, selecting the topics to be covered, and developing the questionnaire.

### Study Design

**Sample.** Ninety-six sociology departments (both stand-alone and joint departments) participated in the first wave of the study. The departments were selected using one of two methods. First, 20 PhD-granting departments, 20 master's degree-granting departments, and 40 bachelor's degree-granting departments were randomly selected to represent the share of graduating seniors from each type of institution of higher education. If a randomly selected department declined to participate, another school of the same type was substituted from a list of volunteer departments. Participating department chairs provided the e-mail addresses of their senior majors who were graduating in December 2004, May 2005, or August 2005, once they received human subject approval and permission to divulge e-mail addresses to a third party for research purposes.

**Online survey.** The online survey was conducted by the Indiana University Center for Survey Research (CSR). CSR sent an online invitation letter to participate in the survey and two follow-up letters 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 online survey. These responses were weighted to correct for the overrepresentation of students graduating from doctoral institutions and the underrepresentation of students graduating from baccalaureate-only institutions.

**Follow-up.** Once they graduated, former majors were followed up through letters and e-mails for the second wave of the survey, conducted in the winter and spring of 2007. Of the 1,777 initial respondents, 778 responded to the second wave of the survey, for a 44 percent response rate.

## FINDINGS

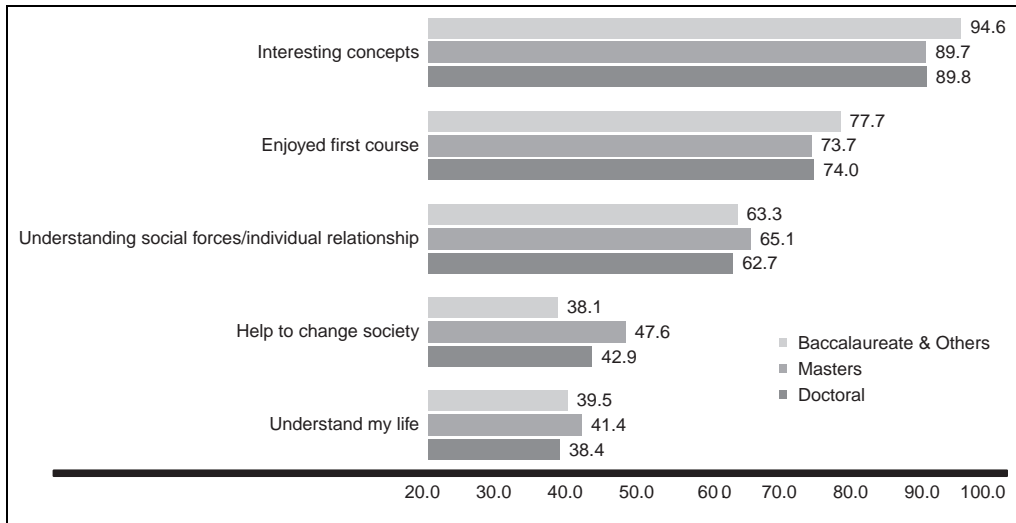
### Key Findings from Wave I of the Survey

Wave I data are divided by the type of school that students attended—doctoral universities with the PhD as the highest degree offered, master's comprehensive schools, and bachelor's-only schools.

**Why do students major in sociology?** Students were asked to indicate all of the reasons that they majored in sociology. Almost all respondents (about 90 percent) chose sociology because of their interest in sociological concepts. Three quarters of respondents majored in sociology because they enjoyed their first course. Almost 66 percent wanted to understand the relationship between individuals and society, and almost 40 percent majored because they want to change society. We used the SPSS CATPCA scaling procedure to determine whether the reasons for majoring in sociology would cluster into distinctive indexes. We found that, although 90 percent of majors liked sociological concepts, the other reasons for majoring formed two distinct clusters—idealists and careerists. Idealists majored to help change society, to understand their own lives, and to understand the relationship between social forces and individuals, while careerists majored to prepare for a job or to prepare for graduate school. Graduating seniors majored in sociology for both idealist and careerist reasons.

For students these categories were not polar opposites. Many students majored for both reasons. More than 30 percent of all idealists also majored for careerist reasons, and 53 percent of careerists majored for idealist reasons. African American students were the most likely to be both careerists and idealists. Finally, graduating seniors did *not* major in sociology because they thought it is easy or convenient. Only 7 percent selected sociology because it requires fewer credit hours than other majors, and fewer than 5 percent selected sociology because the major they wanted was not available. Figure 1 shows the top-five reasons for majoring by type of school.

**What did they say they have learned?** Almost 90 percent of respondents strongly agreed that they understand basic sociological concepts. About 70 percent strongly agreed that they learned about the differences between theoretical paradigms, the effects of status differences on daily life, critical views of society, social issues, and



**Figure 1.** Top-five reasons for majoring in sociology by type of school: 2005

Note: Percentage responding "very important"; weighted data.

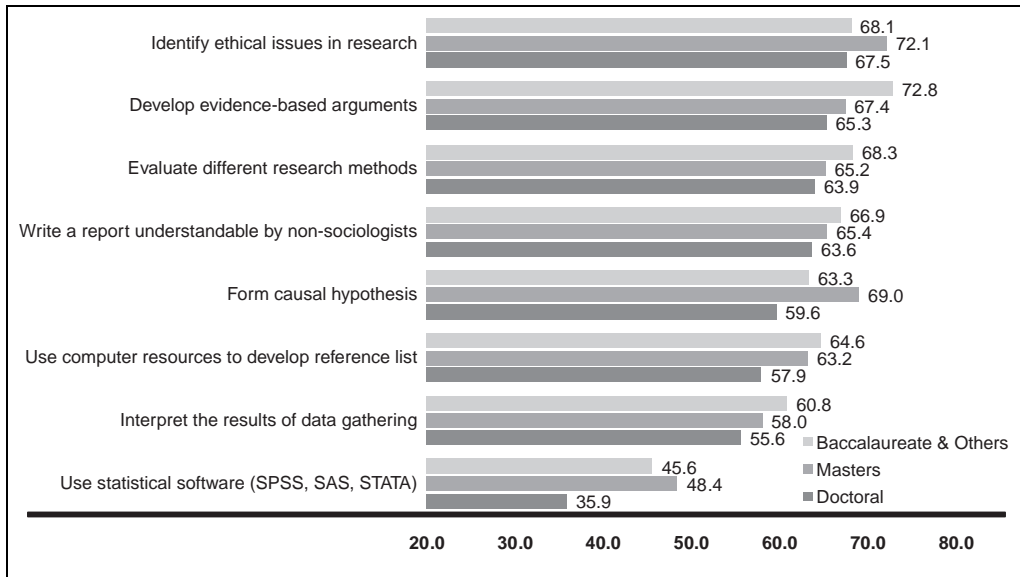
the relation between individuals and social institutions. There is some variation by type of school.

Graduating seniors were also asked about the research skills they learned as part of their sociology major. The highest percentage of respondents (about 70 percent) strongly agreed that they can identify ethical issues in research, develop evidence-based arguments, evaluate methods, write reports, and form causal hypotheses. In contrast, fewer than one half of responding majors strongly agreed that they can use statistical packages in the social sciences. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents strongly agreeing that they had mastered specific research skills. There were no differences in the ranking of skills mastered among the three different types of institutions of higher education.

*Did they participate in out-of-classroom activities?* Not all learning takes place in the sociology classroom. Internships, participation in sociology clubs, attending regional meetings, or taking part in job fairs are all extracurricular activities that can lead to jobs or to success in graduate school. More than two thirds of respondents participated in at least one extracurricular activity, although there were significant variations by type of school. These activities were divided into three clusters: applied activities, scholarly socialization, and mentoring. The specific activities in each cluster and the percentage of respondents that

participated in them are shown in Table 1. Participation in applied activities was most likely to occur at master's-level schools, while scholarly socialization and mentoring activities were most likely to occur at bachelor's-only institutions. Applied activities can lead to jobs that reflect what students learned as sociology majors. Other types of extracurricular activities, including scholarly socialization and mentoring, can increase the likelihood of attending graduate school (Spalter-Roth, Van Vooren, and Senter 2009).

*What were key areas of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with departments?* Majors reported significantly different levels of satisfaction with aspects of their programs, depending on the type of school they attended. Those graduating from bachelor's-only departments were the most likely to report that they were strongly satisfied with their programs, with almost 8 out of 10 majors reporting this, compared to about 7 out of 10 at master's comprehensive and doctoral institutions. Majors were not satisfied with the career and graduate school counseling that they received, regardless of type of school. Fewer than 20 percent of students were satisfied with career advising, and fewer than 13 percent were satisfied with graduate school advising. Nor are there significant differences between those students whom we label as idealists and those we label careerists in terms



**Figure 2.** Top-eight skills gained by graduating sociology majors by type of school: 2005

Note: Percentage strongly agreeing; weighted data.

of their satisfaction with career and graduate school advising (see Figure 3).

*What were their plans after graduation?* Majors were asked whether they intended to go directly into the job market after graduation, go to graduate school, or do both. The largest percentage of respondents (42 percent) reported that they would pursue paid employment, 26 percent intended to go to graduate school while being employed, and the smallest group (22 percent) aimed to attend graduate school but not seek paid employment. A higher percentage of those intending to go on to graduate school attended master's comprehensive universities compared to those at doctoral universities or baccalaureate schools.

### Key Findings from Wave II of the Survey

Wave II respondents reported whether or not they realized their undergraduate plans. Because the majority of majors went into the job market after graduation, this article highlights job search strategies, types of jobs found, and satisfaction with jobs and with the major.

*Did they realize their plans?* Many former majors who responded to Wave II of the survey did not carry out their undergraduate plans. About

40 percent of respondents planned to seek employment and not attend graduate school. By 2007, nearly 60 percent reported being employed exclusively. While 20 percent of seniors planned on attending graduate school (primarily in education, criminology, and sociology), just over 10 percent were in a graduate program in 2007 (a few did report having completed a graduate program). The percentage of those who planned to work and attend graduate school simultaneously decreased slightly (see Figure 4).

*What job-getting strategies were successful?* Many students were not aware of strategies that could enhance their ability to search for employment that draws on sociological skills and concepts. Relatively few students listed these sociological skills on their resumes or discussed them in job interviews. However, those who did communicate their sociological skills to potential employers were more likely to use them on the job. For example, of the 69 percent who strongly agreed that they had learned to evaluate different research methods, almost three quarters failed to list this skill on their resume. Of those who did not do so, almost 80 percent did not discuss their ability to use this skill at a job interview. Perhaps this skill was irrelevant to the jobs they were pursuing, or perhaps not, but the outcome of not communicating the skill was that only 26 percent of

**Table 1.** Student Activity Participation by Type of School (in percentages)

Activity	Doctoral	Master's	Baccalaureate
Vocational training and networking			
Leadership program	30.6	39.3	42.4
Internship	27.9	43.7	18.5
Service learning program	26.0	29.8	16.1
Community activity	25.0	30.3	19.4
Job fair	16.3	29.4	15.2
Scholarly socialization			
Sociology club	15.0	29.0	43.0
Honors program	9.3	16.0	20.7
Professional association	6.3	7.9	18.5
Mentoring activities			
Mentoring	15.6	20.1	32.3
Faculty research	12.0	13.0	20.4

those who strongly agreed that they had learned the skill ended up using it on the job. Contrast this outcome with those who did list the skill on their resumes and did discuss it in an interview. For these respondents, more than 80 percent reported using the skill on the job (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2008a).

*What types of jobs?* Former majors were employed in a wide variety of jobs after they graduated. The largest group (about 25 percent) of respondents was employed in social service and counseling occupations in nonprofit organizations. These graduates address social problems by working with battered women, poor families in need of resources, and adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system, for example. Respondents in the next largest job category provided administrative support and management skills in a wide variety of organizations. For instance, they manage or assist in the running of on-site information technology systems “troubleshooting a variety of issues that pop up with computers,” assisting in human relations departments, and running employee training programs. A smaller percentage was employed in sales and marketing for information technology, hardware, and software firms.

Others were employed by local governments as teachers, librarians, police officers, crime scene investigators, and parole officers. The smallest full-time occupational category was social science researchers. Both careerists and idealists are found in all of these types of jobs, with no significant difference between them (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2008b).

*How close were their jobs to sociology?* A minority of majors (20 percent) reported that the jobs they hold 18 months after graduation were very closely related to their sociological studies, almost half reported that their current jobs were somewhat related to sociology, and fewer than one third (31 percent) reported that their jobs were unrelated to sociology.

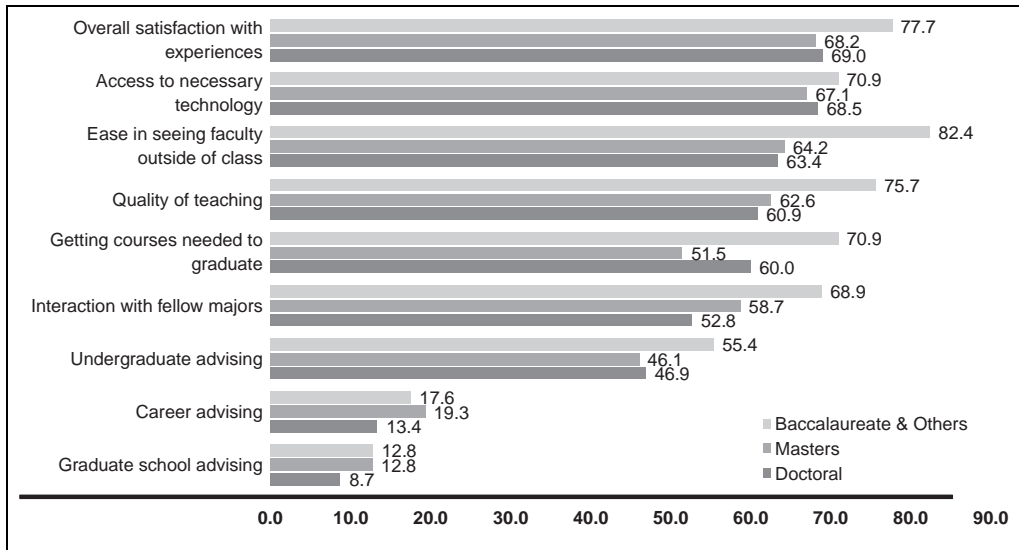
Those who reported that their jobs were not close to what they learned as majors noted that there are few jobs labeled “sociologist.” More than 80 percent of all respondents reported that they had *not* been helped by faculty or career counselors to learn about the jobs for which sociology majors were qualified and what skills they might emphasize in their job search.

Those majors who strongly agreed that their jobs are closely related to sociology also reported high satisfaction with their jobs (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2008b). Almost 65 percent of those who reported that their jobs were closely related to what they had learned as sociology majors also reported being very satisfied with their jobs, although this relationship may not be causal. In contrast, only about 18 percent of those who reported that their jobs were not related to sociology reported that they were very satisfied with these jobs (see Figure 5).

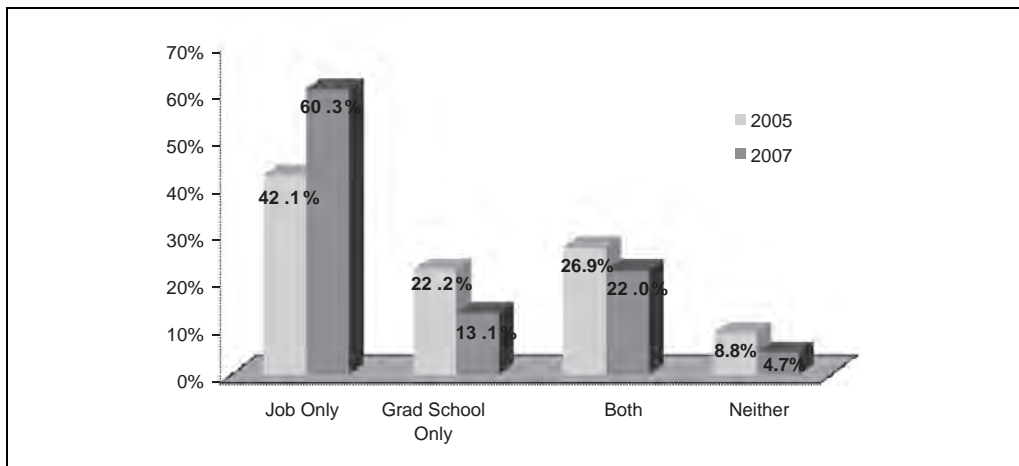
*How satisfied are they with the sociology major, 18 months later?* In 2005 more than three quarters of senior sociology majors who responded to Wave I of the survey reported that they were very satisfied with their choice of a major. In 2007, fewer than 60 percent reported being very satisfied. A possible reason for the decline may be the lack of closeness between the perspectives, concepts, and skills that they had learned as undergraduates and the jobs they found.

## IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS FOR CURRICULUM

The experiences of sociology majors who received their undergraduate degrees in 2005



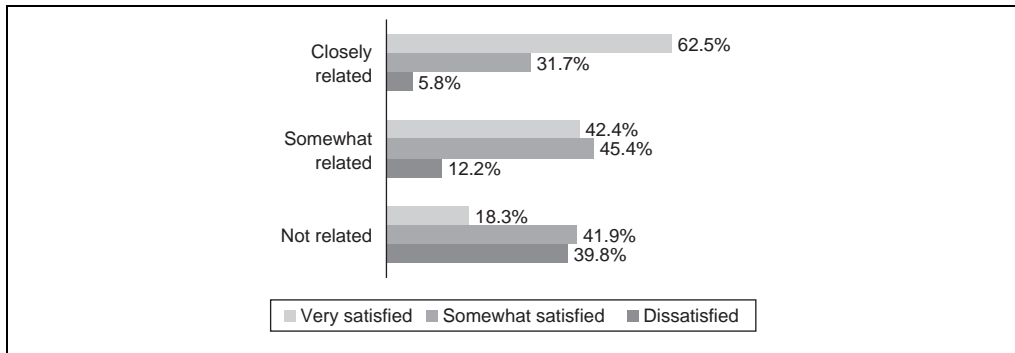
**Figure 3.** Overall satisfaction with outcomes of sociology programs by type of school: 2005  
 Note: Percentage very satisfied; weighted data.



**Figure 4.** Plans for future at Wave I and realization of plans at Wave II (in percentages)

may have implications for the ways in which departments organize their programs to help students find positions that reflect the skills they learned as sociology majors. Results from the Bachelor's and Beyond study revealed that students were dissatisfied with the career advising they received. This suggests that departments may need to do more to assist students in their efforts to begin careers. Moreover, student satisfaction with the major

was linked to finding jobs perceived as being close to the sociology major. Although departments and their faculties may want to do more to help students, they are already pressed with competing demands on their time. The number of sociology students in departments has grown between 2001 and 2007, while the number of faculty members has remained flat, and increasing demands for accountability and assessment create



**Figure 5.** Overall satisfaction with the sociology major by relation to job (in percentages)

Note: For each level of relation to job, the satisfaction measures add to 100 percent.

more work for an already burdened faculty (Spalter-Roth and Scelza 2009a, 2009b).

In this climate, it is important to integrate addressing students' needs into activities that faculty members are already doing or that can be delegated to others effectively. A variety of suggestions follows for improving career advising, integrating career building assignments into courses, and enhancing the activities that seem most useful in yielding positive career outcomes for undergraduate students without vocationalizing the disciplinary core. All of these activities are based on emphasizing the theories, skills, perspectives, and concepts that are central to the discipline.

### *Career Advising Based on Sociological Skills*

Many majors have parents who are not well positioned to help them with job searches, because most of our majors' parents are not college graduates (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006). Resumes prepared by graduating seniors do not necessarily incorporate the job-relevant skills that are, in fact, part of the sociology curriculum; in no case do more than one half of graduating seniors list on their resumes a skill included in the Bachelor's and Beyond survey. While sociology faculty have no time or desire to become professional career counselors, the Bachelor's and Beyond findings suggest that departments may want to establish better links to the career services units on their campuses.

Career counseling units typically help students with resume writing and with preparing for job

interviews. Given that their knowledge of what sociologists do or what they learn may be limited, however, career counselors need to be briefed by sociology advisors. Model resumes, used by departments as part of their assessment efforts to help clarify departmental learning goals for students, might be of assistance to career counselors as well (for an example of such a resume, see McKinney et al. 2004). The creation of such resumes in departments stimulates discussion of the question, What is it that we want students to know and to be able to do when they graduate from our program? Model resumes could also serve as extremely useful examples to students creating resumes for their own job searches and might help address the mismatch between the skills students learn and the ones they list on their resumes. Departments might also consider ways to help their students distinguish themselves on their resumes, by creating yearly awards for best undergraduate paper, best research project, or best service learning project.

Departments should ensure that their undergraduate libraries maintain copies of publications designed to assist sociology students with job searches. The ASA produces career materials that are available online and for faculty to distribute to students (see <http://www.asanet.org/students/index.cfm>). And departments could consider developing an applied-sociologist-in-residence program for a day, week, or semester to provide opportunities for students to interact with a sociologist who is not a faculty member.

Although departments do not commonly conduct alumni and employer surveys as part of their assessment programs (Spalter-Roth and Scelza

2009b), such surveys can provide students with examples of relevant job possibilities. Some departments develop advisory boards, consisting of alumni or other friends of departments, to evaluate student performance in capstone courses. Members of such advisory boards might also be participants in panels to demonstrate to current students what can be done with an undergraduate degree in sociology or to give students advice on career searches. In the absence of advisory boards, sociology clubs could organize meetings for majors on career-related topics, with featured speakers coming from career services staff or from the ranks of departmental alumni. Department Web sites might also profile alumni, with particular attention paid to their career trajectories.

Finally, departments could lobby their career services units to organize job fairs for students that focus on the kinds of social service, administrative support, management, and research positions that most of our undergraduates pursue.

### ***Career Building Assignments Integrated into Courses***

Numerous sociology classes provide opportunities for student assignments that both teach subject matter content and assist students with career exploration. Such assignments can make students aware of the applicability of sociology to a variety of career fields (Finkelstein 2009). They could begin in the introductory course or could be integrated into more advanced courses in social inequality, the sociology of work, the sociology of organizations, economic sociology, or methods. For example, beginning students could become familiar with secondary data sources by using the Bureau of Labor Statistics *Occupational Outlook Handbook* to learn about the job prospects for sociologists, social workers, survey researchers, lawyers, teachers, and so forth.<sup>2</sup> More advanced students could trace the historical trajectory of their desired occupational fields and place these changes within the context of the larger changes taking place in the economy and society (for examples from the sociology of gender and work, see Giuffre, Anderson, and Bird 2008).

Students in methods courses can enhance their research skills while gaining a more sophisticated understanding of careers. For example, a student can conduct qualitative interviews or focus groups with individuals who are currently employed in

the student's desired occupational field, with departmental alumni, or with supervisors who hire recent graduates. Questions could emphasize skills used in jobs, skills that should have been developed as undergraduates, advice to give to new graduates, and so forth.

Students can develop observational skills by job shadowing a social scientist working in an applied setting or by observing the interactions between clients and staff in social service organizations. They can develop content analysis skills by finding "themes" in resumes (e.g., skills stressed, common errors). Students can develop survey construction, administration, and analysis skills through questionnaires for program alumni, focusing on career preparation and success. The National Science Foundation has provided funds that will make the Bachelor's and Beyond data file available to faculty to use for student assignments, allowing students to gain both analysis and career exploration skills through hands-on analysis.

The capstone course can be a venue for including assignments that assist students with the transition to careers, such as a self-assessment (Lambert 2008), a resume construction assignment, a job search plan (including identification of a town and its demographic and economic characteristics; networking opportunities; job vacancy review), a graduate school application with emphasis on a narrative emphasizing goals, and an educational autobiography stressing factors that have been most critical in promoting learning and developing one's "self."<sup>3</sup>

In creating any such assignments and discussing them with students, faculty need to be explicit in highlighting how particular assignments are designed to develop specific core sociological skills, which, in turn, have implications for job, career, and resume (Finkelstein 2009). Critical to sociology—and to employers—are skills in written or oral communication, working in groups or teams, cultural competency (and the ability to work with diverse others), interviewing, data collection (for use in needs analyses, program evaluations, etc.), data analysis, and computer application (including spreadsheet manipulation, SPSS, or NVivo).

### ***Enhanced Methods and Application***

Our results suggest that students lacked confidence in some of the statistical and methods skills

that are commonly taught in undergraduate programs (e.g., the ability to use statistical packages in the social sciences). Yet, graduates who listed sociological methods skills on their resumes and discussed them in job interviews were more likely to use those skills on the job than those who did not, and to express high levels of job satisfaction. While these data suggest the need for enhanced training in statistics and methods so that relevant skills are, in fact, mastered, simply adding more courses may not be the answer, given students' and faculty members' lack of time. In fact, data from department chairs suggest that departmental majors require, on average, one methods course and one statistics course only (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2003). Instead, as stressed in the *Liberal Learning* document (McKinney et al. 2004), integrating data analysis throughout the curriculum should lead to enhanced learning and an enhanced perception on students' part that the statistics and methods skills learned have applicability across content areas. Recent initiatives have provided resources for faculty interested in such integration (see the Social Science Data Analysis Network at <http://www.ssdan.net>; Hoelter et al. 2008; Howerly and Rodriguez 2006).

While most students engaged in some type of out-of-classroom activity, our results show that relatively few undergraduate sociology majors took part in activities such as internships, community activities, and service learning. Students with these experiences were significantly more likely than others to secure jobs that were close to their sociology major (Spalter-Roth et al. 2009). McKinney (2007:118) argues that "in-class assignments and out-of-class learning opportunities that involve application and relevance" help students learn. A number of volumes from the Academic and Professional Affairs Program of the ASA provide suggestions on how to implement such programs on campuses without increasing course loads (see <http://www.asanet.org/teaching/apap.cfm>).

### **Possible New Courses: Proseminars and Applied Sociology**

While this article shies away from proposing new curricular offerings that require sizeable commitments of new resources and faculty time, applied or public sociology courses could be efficient for departments and useful for students—including

those who are idealists as well as careerists—who want meaningful careers using sociology. Thanks in part to Michael Burawoy (2005), increased attention has been given to courses in the curriculum with titles such as Applied Sociology or Public Sociology. Such courses are explicit in showing students the myriad ways that sociology can be used in the workplace and in society to reduce social problems and enhance social well-being. These courses and related print materials (such as the recently published *Doing Sociology: Case Studies in Sociological Practice* by Price, Straus, and Breese 2009) may be of particular interest to students. A for-credit proseminar for sophomores may also be a mechanism for resolving how departments can do more to promote student involvement in activities outside of the classroom and to help students clarify their future goals.<sup>4</sup> Possible course activities could include an introduction to departmental faculty's research interests and ongoing projects (this discussion might prove especially useful for students interested in pursuing research positions) or a discussion of appropriate minors or cognate courses for sociology majors interested in pursuing applied careers in social service and counseling, management, education, law, and so on (given that these are the major types of jobs secured by sociology majors).

### **Link Undergraduate Curriculum to Students' Future Plans**

The standard undergraduate curriculum seems designed to prepare students who expect to move in a seamless fashion from undergraduate to graduate studies in sociology. However, the Bachelor's and Beyond project demonstrates that this scenario holds true for very few of our majors (Spalter-Roth and Van Vooren 2008b). Departments might consider new concentrations of existing courses that are especially relevant for the students who want to pursue careers in social service work, in education, or in law, given the large numbers of sociology graduates who work in these fields. For example, students interested in social service (the most popular career path of majors) would surely benefit from required courses in inequality, in formal organizations, in political sociology, and in the sociology of the family. In fact, numerous departments



have already gone this route. A recent ASA brief shows that 283 departments out of a total of 816 have concentrations, with 62 percent of these in “crime, law, and society,” 29 percent in “social work or social services,” 16 percent in “gerontology,” and 15 percent in “family and youth” (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2003). This model of combining a core in sociological theory and methods with content courses in specialized areas with career implications might be appropriate for additional departments as well.

## USING BACHELOR’S AND BEYOND FOR ASSESSMENT

Assessment of student outcomes has been of active concern to the discipline for at least a decade yet remains a contentious issue in the academy. Almost all sociology departments have implemented some kind of student assessment procedure as a result of mandates from universities, state governments, and accrediting organizations. This section describes how the Bachelor’s and Beyond survey can be used to provide a low-cost and easily administered assessment procedure, illustrating its use with the experience of Hunter College (City University of New York), one of the departments that participated in development of the study.

### *Assessment and Its Discontents*

The chief complaints about assessment are the amount of work and effort required, especially in view of the escalating demands on chairs and faculty members. Concerns about the top-down nature of demands for assessment are coupled with the fear that such information may not be used constructively (Spalter-Roth and Scelza 2009b). In addition, some departments may encounter difficulty in establishing consensus about what knowledge and competencies students should be expected to acquire in the major. Use of the ASA-developed survey of sociology majors as a data-gathering assessment tool addresses several of these concerns.

First of all, the survey was developed by the sociological community (the ASA research department staff and a committee of sociologists convened for this purpose) and tailored expressly for undergraduate majors at the point of graduation. It provides for a comprehensive understanding of

student experiences with courses and with the sociology major as a whole. The ASA survey of sociology majors is not a narrowly focused instrument based on standardized metrics.

The Bachelor’s and Beyond survey does consider topics directly relevant to assessment. In fact, one of the primary goals of the first wave of the longitudinal survey was to gauge student learning and outcomes; the survey includes questions about (1) the knowledge and understanding of sociological theory and concepts; (2) research skills, including information search and gathering, study design, and quantitative skills; (3) perceptions and opinions about the major and the department; (4) plans after graduation; and (5) various kinds of demographic information. These topics are likely to be relevant no matter what the overall mission of a department or its particular assessment goals. Along these lines, the survey can be particularly useful if a department does *not* have consensus on goals and learning outcomes. Rather than waiting until such agreement can be forged, the assessment can move forward and look to establishing broad assessment goals using inductive insights from the information gathered.

Another benefit is that the survey is available immediately from the ASA Web site and hence does not require any major time investment on the part of faculty charged with the task of assessment. The survey was designed as a Web survey and can be readily administered to students on campus or off. The survey is self-administered, and once a student is set up with access information no further intervention is needed. Making the survey Web administered facilitates its use on an ongoing basis, preferable for assessment purposes to episodic data gathering.

### *Practical Considerations*

The first practical issue to be considered is when or on what occasion students will take the survey. In Hunter’s sociology department, graduating sociology majors are required by the registrar to obtain approval of their transcripts by a departmental advisor; that occasion provides an ideal situation for administration of the survey. Upon completion of the graduation audit, students are asked to take a short survey (which typically takes only 10-12 minutes) in order to help the department better understand and serve students needs. A student takes the survey at a networked computer and without direct monitoring or further

intervention by the advisor. To date, no students have refused to take the survey, and only a few (about 1 percent) have not answered all questions.

Web administration of the survey helps create space between the student as respondent and the faculty advisor, thereby contributing to more candid student responses. If a department opts to have students take the survey via pencil and paper, students should submit the completed questionnaire to an office staff member or through the mail in order to preserve anonymity.

As noted, the actual text of the survey can be obtained at the ASA Web site, which also shows the text of the follow-up surveys. There are several skip-pattern items that must be programmed if the survey is Web administered. At Hunter, survey monkey.com was used to host the survey. The department added several open-ended questions to the ASA battery, asking students more about their plans after graduation, especially graduate school plans.

After adding or revising questions, an institutional review board (IRB) protocol can be prepared and submitted. The initial page of the ASA questionnaire explains to students that the survey is voluntary and that participation can be discontinued at any time. From an IRB perspective, survey research for assessment purposes that does not involve a vulnerable population and in which individual respondents cannot be identified directly or indirectly will likely be considered low risk and should obtain straightforward approval.

### *Additional Considerations*

*Subjective versus objective measures.* The ASA survey gauges student learning by asking students to indicate whether or not they have learned a concept or acquired a proficiency or skill as part of the major, using a Likert-type scale for response categories. For example, conceptual and theoretical knowledge is measured with several items that have the preamble, "Did you gain the ability to describe and explain the following concepts as part of your sociology major? Please indicate the extent to which you agree that you learned to describe or explain each concept." Students are asked to report on what they have learned in the same way that anyone taking a survey may be asked to report past behavior or experiences. An important issue is whether a student's subjective perception about what she or he has learned corresponds to an objective, direct measure of performance.

Some assessment stakeholders may ask for supporting evidence to bolster the student's perception. One response is to refer them to research showing a correlation between self-report and objective learning outcome (e.g., Chesebro and McCroskey 2000). A second alternative is to correlate student responses with sociology grade point average. A third alternative is to add more objective items to the questionnaire as a form of validation that ask students to demonstrate a competency, for example, by answering factual questions. The responses to these more objective questions can be used as filters and in crosstabulations to help establish the validity of the subjective self-reports. For Hunter's use of the survey, several factual questions were added about sociological theory, as well as a specimen three-variable table that students were asked to read and interpret. Depending on the survey vendor and software, tables can be inserted into the questionnaire as image files.

*Benchmarking.* The question of benchmarking local results against national norms arises given that the ASA survey was developed to have broad application and was administered to a national sample. On the one hand, some assessment experts have advised that comparing results of assessment outcomes for individual departments to national results should be done with caution, if at all. The Task Force on Faculty Productivity and Teaching Effectiveness (Meiksins et al. 2003: section on Outcomes Assessment) cautioned in its final report that assessment of student learning should be decentralized, controlled, and owned by departments and that "departments should resist efforts to make comparisons with aggregated, national data." On the other hand, national benchmarks provide a useful basis for comparison, especially for departments that have no track record of assessment and would otherwise be interpreting their results in a vacuum. Departments may want to think through the issue of benchmarking and to formulate policies about where and how national findings will be shared and with whom.

If a department does decide against benchmarking its results against national norms, the ASA provides Custom Peer Analysis reports that compare the participating department with peer groups that can be defined according to the department's preferred criteria (e.g., type of institution, whether bachelor's or PhD granting). However, there is a charge for such reports, and departments

on limited budgets may look for the no-cost alternative of the national results available from ASA. In the next year, ASA will provide a public data set that allows faculty to select their own peer groups based on key characteristics.

Given that a department has obtained results for comparison (either against customized peer institutions or the national sample), how can comparisons be carried out? The data analysis featured in the report of findings from Wave I of the survey made extensive use of rankings to summarize results. Returning to the conceptual and skills questions discussed above, this means looking at which skills had the highest percentage of students indicating “strongly agree” or “agree,” for example. Local rankings can be compared to national rankings and insights obtained about similarities and differences. Such rankings can be displayed graphically in a simple plot (e.g., national ranking shown on the  $y$  axis and local ranking on the  $x$ ), or the correlation can be summarized via Spearman’s  $\rho$ . More detailed comparisons can be made using the one-variable version of common tests such as chi-square, specifying expected frequencies according to the national (or peer) comparison group. Such comparisons might be more detailed than needed for an assessment report but would give the department a clear view of the similarities and differences between the department and the comparison group.

### *Assessment as a Process*

Assessment should be regarded as an ongoing process where results are incorporated into continuing efforts to develop and improve a department’s various instructional and advising activities. Hunter is now in the third semester of administering its modified version of Wave I of the Bachelor’s and Beyond questionnaire. Student enthusiasm and cooperation with the survey remains high, and continued administration of the survey is proving to be unproblematic. As the number of observations increases, ongoing analysis is yielding a clearer picture of what students are learning, their plans for the future, and what they perceive to be the major’s and the department’s strengths and weaknesses. The provenance of the survey and its development by the disciplines’ professional association (ASA) give faculty confidence in the survey and the findings it yields, making it an effective starting point for internal department discussion as well as bolstering its credibility with external stakeholders.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sociology departments and faculty are confronting powerful trends affecting higher education. They exist in universities facing budget shortfalls, and many work with administrators who have embraced a business or vocational model for governing higher education. They face more demands for greater accountability and heavier teaching and service workloads. On many campuses, the “practical arts,” such as business, public policy, health care, and criminology, are growing, and the liberal arts, including sociology, are in decline. For their part, students experience escalating tuition costs, while parents are facing higher rates of unemployment, and graduating seniors are entering a job market with the highest percentage of unemployment in a decade. In this environment, it is not surprising that faculty, students, and their parents should ask, What can I do with a bachelor’s degree in sociology?

The Bachelor’s and Beyond study shows that students who responded to the survey major in sociology because they embraced its concepts and orientation and enjoyed their first course. They gained many research-related skills as they move through their major, and they participate in various kinds of activities outside of the classroom. Overall levels of satisfaction with sociology programs are high, with students saying positive things about their faculty and the quality of teaching.

The Bachelor’s and Beyond study also demonstrates that many of our sociology majors combined both idealism, the desire to understand and change the world for the better, with careerism, a desire to secure a good job or a position in graduate school. Students do not pick sides in the debate about whether sociology is best defined as a liberal or a practical art. Regardless of their orientation, the study findings show that the majority of students who responded to the survey were likely to enter the labor force after completing their undergraduate degrees, and they express concerns about the quality of the career and graduate school advising they received. The study reveals that many student respondents did not highlight the sociological skills that they learned in their programs on their resumes nor discuss these skills with potential employers. Because sociology attracts majors who do not have high levels of social capital (because

of their minority group status or their parents' lack of postsecondary school experience), it is especially important that faculty, departments, and the discipline provide guidance to students in navigating the transition from college to post-collegiate life.

As they move away from their undergraduate years, survey respondents' satisfaction with the major declined, but those who perceived their jobs as being close to the sociology major are more satisfied. For departments that wish to increase their enrollments and their alumni's satisfaction with the major, helping students to identify the skills that they have learned, recommending or providing experiences that assist students in exploring careers, and suggesting the kinds of jobs that reflect their sociological education could help meet these goals.

In this article, we discussed the implications of the findings from the Bachelor's and Beyond project for faculty members and their departments. We suggest that departments consider ways of improving career guidance without turning faculty members into career counselors and without absolving our students who are idealists and careerists from the ultimate responsibility of securing their own futures. Many departments may benefit from enhanced ties with career services units on their campuses and with their program alumni. Further, we encourage sociology faculty to create classroom and out-of-classroom activities for students that combine career exploration with the rigorous pursuit of the core knowledge, theory, and methods that are essential to the major. Finally, we suggest that some departments might want to develop a limited number of new courses (such as proseminars) or might package existing sociology courses in new ways to serve better the needs of students to support themselves in the current recessionary economy. Incorporating activities that emphasize the relationship between sociological knowledge, marketable skills, and future careers is an important future direction for sociology departments, even as early as the introductory course. And departments should remember that the introductory course is itself a key vehicle for exciting students about sociological concepts and encouraging them to major in the discipline.

While sociologists have many reasons for being wary of assessment pressures, we suggest that the Bachelor's and Beyond survey also provides departments with a credible, easily accessible, and

easily administered vehicle for assessing the learning of their own students. Sociologists and their departments stand to gain if they use the survey coupled with their own measures of sociological skills to conduct assessments, without becoming distracted from their core missions of teaching and research.

Throughout this article we have tried to be sensitive to the pressures on students and faculty to do more with less. And we have stressed that neither we nor our students want to reduce sociology's commitment to critical thinking and to social change. According to study findings, sociology students, while they are not becoming social researchers in large numbers, are assuming responsible positions in the labor force that allow them to make a difference in individuals' lives and to improve society. 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. Graduating seniors entering the workforce with their commitment to the sociological imagination and to sociological methods can fulfill their need for income while contributing to the solution of social problems and the enhancement of social well-being.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks go to Nicole Van Vooren, research associate at the American Sociological Association, for all her work in generating findings, making tables and charts, and editing text. Also thanks to Kathleen S. Lowney and three anonymous reviewers for their suggestions that improved the article greatly. All errors are, of course, the authors.

## NOTES

Reviewers for this manuscript were, in alphabetical order, Chad Hanson, Diane Pike, and Susan Takata. Now available in the American Sociological Association bookstore: *Launching Majors into Satisfying Careers: A Faculty Manual with a Student Data Set*.

1. Students were asked whether they participated in 10 specific types of activities designed to enhance social and cultural capital. The SPSS CATPCA scaling procedure was used to determine whether these activities would cluster into distinctive indexes, each representing

- a type of social or cultural capital. We found that the activities formed the three distinct clusters discussed in the text—applied or on-the-job training, scholarly socialization, and mentoring.
2. Many of these suggestions come from Tim Bower and Janine Bower (2007), “From Classroom to Community: Career Profiling and Identifying Sociology in Practice.”
  3. These suggestions for capstone assignments come from Kathleen S. Lowney, Valdosta State University, posted on the TeachSOC listserv, June 4, 2008.
  4. While a Web search finds that proseminars are more common for graduate students than undergraduates, the University of Notre Dame and the University of Toledo have proseminars for undergraduates.

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## BIOS

**Roberta Spalter-Roth** is the director of research and development at the American Sociological Association and principal investigator of the Bachelor's and Beyond study. She produces and disseminates research

on sociology as a profession and a discipline, including studies of academic and nonacademic career paths; gender, race, and ethnicity in the sociology pipeline; work–family issues; the characteristics of sociology departments; and professional networks.

**Mary Scheuer Senter** is a professor of sociology at Central Michigan University. In addition to teaching in the areas of social inequality and research methods, she directs the Center for Applied Research and Rural Studies. The center provides research services to university offices, nonprofit organizations, and governmental units, with an emphasis on central and northern Michigan.

**Pamela Stone** is a professor of sociology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, and author of the recently published *Opting Out? A member of the American Sociological Association committee that oversaw the Bachelor's and Beyond study, her current research focuses on women's unpaid caregiving and work–family arrangements.*

**Michael Wood** is an associate professor of sociology at Hunter College, City University of New York. His current research interests include informed consent in social and medical research, and consumer behavior.