Preparing Undergraduates for Practice: Implications From a Survey of Graduates

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Preparing Undergraduates for Practice: Implications From a Survey of Graduates

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ABSTRACT

Results from a survey of B.A. sociology graduates are used to assess the extent to which the sociology curriculum prepares students for practice roles after graduation. The respondents graduated from St. Cloud State University between 1965 and 1985. During these years the sociology program had a traditional liberal arts emphasis. Graduates were asked to report on several aspects of their occupations (use of sociology, level of authority, and income being the most important) They also were asked to comment on which courses they found most useful, which courses they wished they had taken, and what advice they had for current sociology majors and for the sociology department at St. Cloud State. The results suggest that the general skills emphasized in the liberal arts curriculum contributed to the occupational success of graduates. However, in their comments graduates showed some dissatisfaction with the traditional curriculum. The general thrust of these comments was that, while the liberal arts emphasis is important, more attention should be devoted to career preparation. This confirms the value of the recent trend toward sociology curricula that are more directly addressed to practice issues. It also suggests the need for further change, particularly in the area of career advising.

Introduction

Most undergraduate majors in sociology enter diverse nonacademic occupations after graduation. About the only thing they have in common is their educational background in sociology. The question we address in this article is whether this education makes them better practitioners. Are they successful? Are they satisfied with their education and the career opportunities it has brought them? What can sociology faculty do to make these outcomes more likely?
We base our conclusions on findings from a survey of graduates from St. Cloud State University that shows that undergraduate education in sociology has contributed to the occupational success of our graduates. We also identified weaknesses in the traditional sociology curriculum regarding career preparation. In general, our findings support the recent trend toward applied curricula. We also offer some suggestions for improvement.

Previous studies have shown that graduates of liberal arts programs, including sociology, work in a wide variety of occupations. Rather than being trained for a specific occupation, liberal arts graduates are taught general skills useful in many occupations. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Although liberal arts graduates may lack technical skills that employers seek in entry-level workers, they tend to be strong in such general skills as communication and problem solving that lead to long-term success in many occupations.

Much has been written about the benefits of liberal arts education (cf., Woodlief, 1987; Jones, 1985; Beck, 1981; VanderMeer and Lyons, 1979). However, few studies have been published that actually compare the long-term success of liberal arts majors with those of more technical programs. The most important evidence of this sort comes from research conducted at AT&T. Howard (1986) reviewed two longitudinal studies of AT&T employees that suggest that liberal arts majors are more likely to possess the qualities of good managers than are other college graduates. The first study began in 1956 and covered a twenty-year period. The second study began in 1977 and covered a four-year period. Both studies compared managers with college degrees in the humanities and social sciences with those having degrees in business, math and science, and engineering. The managers were given a variety of tests in order to assess eight characteristics: administrative skills, interpersonal skills, intellectual ability, advancement motivation, work involvement, stability of performance, independence of others, and nonconformity. These were later combined into a measure of general effectiveness. In both studies the humanities and social science majors rated significantly higher in general managerial effectiveness than did graduates in each of the other three categories (Howard, 1986:539–44). Although they scored high in all categories, they were especially strong in interpersonal skills. The one area in which humanities and social science majors were weak was in quantitative ability. However, they rated highest overall in general mental ability and were very strong in verbal ability.

In the studies at AT&T, assessors also rated the likelihood of advancement for each manager. In addition, researchers measured the actual rate at which managers progressed. Assessors in the long-term study predicted that humanities and social science majors would be more likely to attain middle-management levels than would majors in any of the other groups. Differences in the more recent study were less pronounced but showed the same general pattern. Humanities and social science majors also fared well in terms of actual advancement. No
significant differences were found in the rate of advancement over the four-year period of the more recent study; however, in the long-term study, humanities and social science majors attained higher levels of management than majors in each of the other categories after four and eight years. They retained the highest position after twenty years, but only their difference from math and science majors was statistically significant (Howard, 1986:539–44).

Despite their potential for long-term success, liberal arts graduates have had difficulty obtaining entry-level jobs in recent years. Employers have tended to favor graduates who have the specific skills and knowledge needed at the entry level. At the same time, students have migrated out of the liberal arts and into business and other majors more narrowly focused on career preparation. In response to this trend, many undergraduate departments of sociology have developed curricula in applied sociology.

This raises several questions about the sociology curriculum. Is the traditional liberal arts program adequate to prepare students for entry-level work? Does the trend toward applied programs compromise the strengths of liberal arts education? What kinds of applied components could strengthen the traditional curriculum? These are the questions we will address in this article.

Our conclusions are based on a survey of undergraduate sociology majors who graduated between 1965 and 1985 from St. Cloud State University. During these years the sociology department offered a traditional liberal arts major. Social work became a separate major in the early 1970s; an applied major was added in 1983. However, no majors in the applied program had graduated in time to be included in this survey. Thus, our academic program was rather typical of sociology programs at that time. It emphasized general rather than career-specific skills and knowledge.

In this report we focus on two types of findings from our survey of graduates. First, we examine measures of occupational success. These include income and level of authority. We use these findings to assess whether our graduates display the pattern of long-term success characteristic of liberal arts graduates in the AT&T study. Second, we present responses to several open-ended questions that deal with how graduates evaluate their sociology education. These include questions on useful courses, advice to current students, and changes recommended in the sociology program. These findings show the shortcomings of the traditional liberal arts degree as perceived by our graduates. They also suggest the kinds of practice components that would be most effective in addressing these shortcomings.

Methods

During the summer of 1985 we sent questionnaires to sociology majors who graduated between 1965 and 1985 from St. Cloud State University. We were
unable to obtain addresses for about 20 percent of the graduates. Of the 800 graduates whom we contacted, 42 percent (335) returned questionnaires. The sample size and response rate are relatively large for a survey of graduates (see Hedley and Adams, 1982). Recent graduates were slightly more likely to respond. Sixteen percent of respondents graduated since 1980, compared to 11 percent of all graduates. Respondents were very representative with respect to gender and grade point average, however.

On the questionnaire we asked graduates to provide information on their five most recent jobs since graduation. We coded the level of authority for each job from the job titles. We also asked graduates to report their current incomes. Four open-ended questions asked respondents to evaluate their undergraduate education. These asked them to list those courses they had found most useful, to list the courses they wished they had taken, to give advice to current sociology majors, and to recommend changes in the sociology program.

Findings

At the time of the survey, over 40 percent of our graduates held jobs in which they exercised some degree of managerial authority. Early graduates held positions of greater authority than did recent graduates. Table 1 shows that 54 percent of the 1965 to 1969 graduates held jobs with some authority, compared to only 29 percent of the 1980 to 1985 graduates. Early graduates were more likely to be male and to work in business, characteristics associated with higher levels of authority. Even with these factors controlled, however, the relationship between level of authority and year of graduation is statistically significant (see Table 2).

Table 1. Level of Authority by Year of Graduation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Management</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Management</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Besides exercising greater authority, early graduates also had higher incomes (see Table 3). The mean annual income of 1965 to 1969 graduates in 1985 was over $35,000 compared to slightly more than $15,000 for 1980 to
Table 2. Standardized Regression Coefficients for Authority Level and Income on Selected Independent Variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Authority (n = 252)</th>
<th>Income (n = 235)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authority level</td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>.114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of Graduation</td>
<td>-.167*</td>
<td>-.277***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (Business)</td>
<td>.334***</td>
<td>.366***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree (Yes)</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>.154**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship (Yes)</td>
<td>-.019</td>
<td>.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap of one year or more in work experience (Yes)</td>
<td>-.078</td>
<td>-.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade point average</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (Female)</td>
<td>-.038</td>
<td>-.121*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.05  
** p<.01  
*** p<.001

1These were staff, coordinator, supervisor, assistant department manager, department manager, assistant director, director, and area manager.

2Dummy variables.

1985 graduates. Those working in business attained high incomes sooner than those working in other occupations. Recent graduates made no more in business than they did in other professional-level jobs. However, in all cohorts that had been out of school for at least five years, those in business jobs averaged over $40,000 a year—substantially more than other graduates.

These results illustrate the practical value of a sociology degree. Mirroring what Howard (1986) found for liberal arts majors at AT&T, our graduates tended to start low and advance rapidly. We found this pattern to be strongest for those working in business. Because the link between rewards and performance is especially strong in business, this supports the conclusion that sociology majors have the skills needed for long-term success.

Over time, our graduates have been successful in attaining high levels of authority and income. Their education in sociology has paid off in this sense. But we also found evidence that our program did not do as much as it could to prepare students for careers in sociological practice. The major limitation that we found with our program is that it did not prepare our graduates well for entry-level work. Liberal arts programs stress the general skills that are important for long-term success. However, they provide few of the technical skills
that employers seek in entry-level workers. Table 4 shows that a substantial percentage of our graduates found nonprofessional first jobs. This was especially true for recent graduates. Over one-third of those who graduated between 1980 and 1985 took nonprofessional first jobs. In all cohorts, females were much more likely to take nonprofessional first jobs than were males. In the most recent cohort, 47 percent of the female graduates took nonprofessional first jobs, compared to 12 percent of the males. Whatever the long-term advantages of our liberal arts program, then, it clearly was not doing a good job of preparing graduates for entry-level work.

Several items on our questionnaire help to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of our program. We asked graduates to tell us which courses they found most useful, which courses they wished they had taken but did not, what advice they had for current sociology majors, and what changes they would recommend in the sociology program at SCSU.

Table 5 shows that graduates most often listed as useful the sociology and psychology courses they had taken. Statistics and methods were the most frequently mentioned sociology courses. Recent graduates were less likely to list psychology courses than were early graduates. This reflects a decline in the popularity of psychology as a double major or minor after the 1970s. Useful courses also varied somewhat by occupation. Psychology courses and sociology courses other than statistics and methods were cited most by those in the human services and least by those in nonprofessional jobs. Those in business jobs listed business courses more than twice as often as any other type of course.

When we asked graduates what courses they wished they had taken, they most often cited business courses (Table 5). Nearly three-fifths of those working
in business jobs wished they had taken more business courses. Graduates with other occupations also cited business courses more often than any other type of course. Except for those in the human services, math and computer science courses were mentioned second most often.

Overall, Table 5 shows that graduates found the courses in our traditional liberal arts curriculum useful. On the other hand, the courses they wished they had taken center more on technical and vocational skills. They found the traditional curriculum lacking in this respect.

The same pattern appears in the advice that graduates had for current students. Table 6 lists the most common types of advice. One of these, "get a broad education," reassures students of the value of their liberal arts degree. Most of the others stress career-specific knowledge and skills. For example, students were advised to attend graduate school, intern, specialize outside of sociology, engage in career planning, take business courses, and develop skills.

The response, "do not major in sociology," evokes similar sentiments, but is much more negative in tone. Over one-sixth of those responding to the question listed this response. Those in nonprofessional jobs were most likely, and those in business and the human services least likely, to advise against a major in sociology. We suspect that most who gave this response were unhappy with their jobs and felt that their education in sociology had not done enough to prepare them for a specific career.

We also found other occupational differences in the advice of graduates. Those in the human services listed field experience more often than any other response. Obtaining a broad education was stressed most by those in business. Career planning was mentioned most often by those in other professional jobs. Finally, the most popular advice of nonprofessional workers was to obtain a graduate degree. We found this last bit of advice to be especially cogent. Not one of our graduates with an advanced degree was working in a nonprofessional job.

Table 7 summarizes the changes that graduates recommended in the sociology program at SCSU. The most popular of these were to place more emphasis
on field experience, career assistance, and applications and careers. These suggestions are quite similar to the results described above. Once again, our graduates were calling for a greater emphasis on applications and career preparation.

**Conclusion**

Our findings support those of other studies on college graduates. Alumni of liberal arts programs tend to possess the general skills that lead to long-term career success. However, they often lack specific skills that employers seek in entry-level workers. On the whole, our graduates were doing quite well after
they had been out of school for a while. However, recent graduates were not.
They had low incomes and little authority in their jobs. Many, especially
women, were working in nonprofessional jobs.

Not surprisingly, our graduates displayed some ambivalence toward the
sociology major. When we asked which of their college courses were most
useful, sociology courses topped the list. Many advised current students to get
a broad education, as they had. On the other hand, most felt that their education
placed too little emphasis on career preparation. They suggested more emphasis
on applications, field experience, career planning, and placement.

Table 6. Advice to Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advice</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate school</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship/field experience</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialize outside of sociology</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career planning</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get a broad education</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not major in sociology</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take business courses</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect little</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop skills</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 132.6

*Up to two responses were coded for each respondent. A total of 374 responses were
coded for 282 respondents; 53 did not respond.

Table 7. Changes Recommended in Sociology Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field experience</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career assistance</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application and Careers</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add courses</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve teaching</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More statistics, methods, research experience</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill development</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 117.4

*Up to three responses were coded for each respondent. A total of 209 responses were
coded for 178 respondents; 157 did not respond.
These suggestions, in fact, are exactly the kinds of changes that many departments have been making in recent years. We conclude that our graduates would heartily endorse the trend toward applied programs in sociology. They would see such programs as easing the transition from school to work. At the same time, our graduates also see the value in their liberal arts education. We believe that few of them would be willing to trade this for a strictly technical education. The comments of our graduates are quite consistent with previous research on liberal arts majors, such as the AT&T study. Liberal arts majors tend to be more successful in the long run, but they can expect more problems in the early stages of their careers. These problems can be minimized if they acquire the technical skills sought by employers. A sociology program can go only so far in providing these skills before it sacrifices the benefits of a liberal arts education. The key is to find the proper blend of academic and practice components. Our goal in the remainder of this article is to offer suggestions as to how this may be done.

**Implications: Strategies for Blending Academics and Practice**

In this section we discuss ways to build a practice emphasis into the undergraduate sociology program. We draw our ideas from three major sources: the comments of our graduates, recent changes in our program at St. Cloud State University, and the literature on career development.

Two central themes in our discussion are integration and planning. We believe that students are best served by a program that not only includes academic and practice components, but systematically integrates them. Integration will help to clarify the purpose of the program for both students and faculty. Students will better appreciate the value of each part of their program. This should aid them in communicating their strengths to employers and give them more confidence in their job search. Integration also will assist faculty in planning. Through careful planning, faculty can ensure that departmental resources are not spread too thinly. By making full use of university and community resources, the department can concentrate its efforts on tasks that cannot be met elsewhere.

We take as our starting point the traditional liberal arts program and ask how practice components can be integrated with it most effectively. We group our suggestions into three categories: curriculum, field experience, and advising.

**Curriculum**

Many sociology departments have introduced applied curricula in recent years. These range from single courses in applied sociology to full-fledged programs (Howery, 1983). Some applied programs build upon a substantive
strength within the department, most commonly criminology or social welfare. Others focus the applied component outside the department. Ultimately, all programs must do this to some extent. Because sociology majors pursue a wide range of careers, sociology faculty must rely on outside resources if they are to serve the needs of all their students.

Regardless of which approach a program stresses, its value to students depends a great deal on how well it integrates the academic and practice components. Both of these must be taken seriously. If this is not the case, students and faculty may regard one of the components as unimportant. A program devoted too exclusively to practice may imply that academic sociology is irrelevant to the real world. A program devoted too exclusively to academics (for example, one that places the practice component entirely outside the department) tends to support the same view. In either case, students may overlook aspects of their education that are quite useful and may have trouble defending their degree to employers.

A concern with practice should be spread throughout the curriculum, but without crowding out academic concerns. Our Applied Sociology major at St. Cloud State, for example, includes both academic and practice components. Besides the theory, methods, and statistics core, we require students to choose some electives from courses that are more applied in nature and some electives from outside this group. To be included in the applied group, a course must meet at least one of three criteria: it must (1) provide knowledge of social policies, (2) sharpen applied research skills, or (3) involve students in problem-solving exercises such as case studies or community change efforts. Another way that we inject practice concerns into our curriculum is by using practitioners as adjunct faculty and guest speakers. Finally, our students take an applied sociology course and an internship in their senior year. These courses focus largely on connecting the academic and practice aspects of our program, both those within the department and those outside.

Field Experience

Job-related experience gives students an edge in seeking employment after graduation. This is especially true for sociology majors. Employers are more likely to take a chance on a broadly-trained graduate if that graduate has shown competence in a work-related setting. Supervised field experience also gives students an opportunity to connect their academic education to the world of work. It not only sharpens work-related skills, it can show students that what they already know is useful. Field experience, then, will be most valuable to students when it is closely linked to their academic education. Just as practice concerns should be included in the academic curriculum, academic concerns should be included in the practice curriculum.
Faculty have the greatest degree of control over those types of field experience that are part of the regular curriculum, such as internships and independent study. They should use this control to link academics to practice. Through well-designed, closely supervised internships, faculty can help students translate their academic knowledge into practical uses.

Faculty should also seek out other opportunities for their students to acquire field experience. Department-based research centers provide an excellent resource for students to build their skills. Community organizations may have short-term applied projects for students. Students may be able to find part-time and summer jobs that allow them to gain career-related experience while in school. Student and community organizations also offer opportunities to practice work-related skills. Many such opportunities exist. Faculty encouragement probably will result in more students taking advantage of them.

Advising

Both career and academic advising are crucial in preparing undergraduate sociology majors for careers in practice. As a liberal arts discipline, sociology does not prepare students for any career in particular. Effective advising can make up for the lack of career direction in the sociology major. It can inform students about the range of careers available, preventing them from narrowing their options too soon. Once they have explored these options, advising can help them to narrow their career choices and identify areas in which they need to supplement their education in sociology. Finally, advising can suggest different ways to acquire career-related skills, whether within or outside the university.

Sociology majors do not have the luxury of waiting until they are seniors before they decide upon a career. If they do, they may find that they don't have time to acquire needed skills. Unfortunately, many students decide on their sociology major late in their academic careers. In addition to the normal advising process, there are other ways to encourage students to plan early. One option is to construct a handbook for prospective majors that stresses the importance of career planning. Our handbook at St. Cloud State describes the career relevance of sociology and targets programs and courses elsewhere in the university that make the sociology degree more marketable. Another option is to require a career planning course early in the major.

To supplement early planning, students need advising in several other areas as they near graduation. Well-planned internships will give students an edge in competing for jobs. Students also need advice about how to write resumes, cover letters, and requests for letters of recommendation, and about how to get the most out of job and informational interviews. These topics are probably too time-consuming to be handled through individual advising. Instead, they could
be dealt with in an applied sociology course or through workshops sponsored by the department or the sociology club. Not all of these tasks need be performed by sociology faculty. For example, the placement and counseling offices may offer career planning help for students. Many colleges also offer general courses in career planning that can be quite helpful to students. Nevertheless, some control over advising must remain in the department in order to ensure that the specific needs of sociology majors are met. Faculty advisors, then, must be informed about careers, programs of study, and opportunities for field experience that may benefit their students.

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