Careers in Sociology

Society and Social Life

Sociology is the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies, and how people interact within these contexts. Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mob; from organized crime to religious cults; from the divisions of race, gender and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture; and from the sociology of work to the sociology of sports. In fact, few fields have such broad scope and relevance for research, theory, and application of knowledge.

Sociology provides many distinctive perspectives on the world, generating new ideas and critiquing the old. The field also offers a range of research techniques that can be applied to virtually any aspect of social life: street crime and delinquency, corporate downsizing, how people express emotions, welfare or education reform, how families differ and flourish, or problems of peace and war.

Because sociology addresses the most challenging issues of our time, it is a rapidly expanding field whose potential is increasingly tapped by those who craft policies and create programs. Sociologists understand social inequality, patterns of behavior, forces for social change and resistance, and how social systems work. As the following pages convey, sociology is an exciting discipline with expanding opportunities for a wide range of career paths.

This document (adapted from a booklet from the American Sociological Association) informs undergraduate students of the career opportunities that flow from a baccalaureate (BA/BS), master's (MA/MS), or doctoral (PhD) sociology degree, and includes information on:

- sociology as a discipline and profession
- sociological specialties
- career preparation
- job prospects for the sociology BA
- the common core of sociological careers
- graduate training in sociology
- the current outlook for sociology
- the American Sociological Association (ASA) and its resources.

It also highlights profiles of practicing sociologists and outlines the many benefits of student membership in ASA.

Sociology: A World of Opportunities

Most people who think of themselves as "sociologists" or have the word "sociologist" in their job title, have graduate training, but BAs in sociology apply the sociological perspective to a wide variety of jobs in such sectors as business, the health professions, the criminal justice system, social services, and government.

"What can I do with a BA in sociology?" As a strong liberal arts major, sociology provides several answers to this important question:

> A BA in sociology is excellent preparation for future graduate work in sociology in order to become a professor, researcher, or applied sociologist.
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> The undergraduate degree provides a strong liberal arts preparation for entry level positions throughout the business, social service, and government worlds. Employers look for people with the skills that an undergraduate education in sociology provides.
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> Since its subject matter is intrinsically fascinating, sociology offers valuable preparation for careers in journalism, politics, public relations, business, or public administration--fields that involve investigative skills and working with diverse groups.

Many students choose sociology because they see it as a broad liberal arts base for professions such as law, education, medicine, social work, and counseling. Sociology provides a rich fund of knowledge that directly pertains to each of these fields.

"What can I do with an MA or PhD degree in sociology?" With advanced degrees, the more likely it is that a job will have the title sociologist, but many opportunities exist--the diversity of sociological careers ranges much further than what you might find under "S" in the Sunday newspaper employment ads. Many jobs outside of academia do not necessarily carry the specific title of sociologist:

> Sociologists become high school teachers or faculty in colleges and universities, advising students, conducting research, and publishing their work. Over 3000 colleges offer sociology courses.
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> Sociologists enter the corporate, non-profit, and government worlds as directors of research, policy analysts, consultants, human resource managers, and program managers.
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> Practicing sociologists with advanced degrees may be called research analysts, survey researchers, gerontologists, statisticians, urban planners, community developers, criminologists, or demographers.
>
> Some MA and PhD sociologists obtain specialized training to become counselors, therapists, or program directors in social service agencies.

Today, sociologists embark upon literally hundreds of career paths. Although teaching and conducting research remains the dominant activity among the thousands of professional sociologists today, other forms of employment are growing both in number and significance.

In some sectors, sociologists work closely with economists, political scientists, anthropologists, psychologists, social workers, and others, reflecting a growing appreciation of sociology's contributions to interdisciplinary analysis and action.

Sociological Specialties: Many Paths to Understanding Society

As this publication suggests, people with degrees in sociology may enter many careers, and the options are increasing. What is common to all of these careers? Underlying sociological training is the commitment to understand human relationships in every kind of social group.

However, sociologists develop their interests in different ways. They pursue diverse specialty subjects within the field as a whole. Thus, sociologists may specialize in families, adolescence, or children; the urban community; education; health and medicine; aging and the life course; work and occupations; the environment, science, and technology; economics, social inequality, and social class; race relations, ethnicity, and minorities; sex and gender; sports; culture and the arts; politics, the military, peace, and war; crime, delinquency, law, and justice; social change and social movements; and any other area of human organization.

College and university courses reflect these interests, as well as research methods and theory building. Some of the most fascinating subjects explored by sociologists include:

> Sex and gender: Do men and women have different hiring, employment, and promotion experiences? This would be a research question for a sociologist specializing in how sex and gender affect the workplace.
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> Medical sociology: How is AIDS transmitted (and thus prevented) in different subgroups of the population? How has public opinion about AIDS shifted? These are the concerns of medical sociologists.
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> Organizations and occupations: Which management styles increase productivity and worker satisfaction would engage the attention of an organizational sociologist.
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> Racial and ethnic minorities: Do minority children get "tracked" within the public schools? Do minority parents get "cooled out" from participating in and knowing about the informal power structure within schools? Someone specializing in minority relations would explore these questions.
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> Family: Are children of divorced parents more likely to divorce, or to reject marriage themselves? What factors predict whether abused children would fare better in foster care or reunited with their birth family?

These would be possible subjects for a family sociologist. Any social phenomenon can be examined through the lens of different sociological standpoints. Indeed, a hallmark of sociological analysis is that it utilizes a variety of interconnected perspectives. Most sociological research and theory seeks to explain prevailing social behavior patterns and how they change over time.

ASA Sections: An Opportunity for Involvement and Networking

ASA has 39 Sections, or special interest groups, within the Association, formed of people who share a common interest in a particular area of sociology.

Sections sponsor sessions during the Annual Meeting and publish a newsletter for their members in order to communicate about special opportunities and activities relevant to that interest. Many have electronic listservs.

Sections offer an excellent opportunity for networking and exchanging information. Sections welcome student involvement and offer special programs, awards, and dues for student members. Interest in sections can shift over time, as sociologists face new challenges in studying and understanding society and social behavior.

The other ASA sections in addition to those listed in the chart include: methodology; sociology of education; sociology of law; theory; social psychology; peace and war; Marxist sociology; sociological practice; population, political economy of the world system; mental health, comparative historical sociology; political sociology; Asia and Asian America; culture; science, knowledge, and technology; sociology and computers; Latino/a sociology; alcohol and drugs; children; rational choice; religion; international migration, race, gender, and class; mathematical sociology; sociology of sexualities; and history of sociology.

Career Preparation: Making the Most of an Undergraduate Major

Success in most careers depends upon both long-term career preparation and short-term responses to changing circumstances. It is virtually impossible for anyone to anticipate fully what lies five years ahead, much less ten, twenty, or thirty years. Yet, because sociology gives students a broad liberal arts preparation, it can be viewed as a solid base for many career paths. In addition, students who have developed a relatively clear idea of their preferred career path can shape their undergraduate curriculum accordingly. Furthermore, basic skills in research design, data analysis, and conceptualization of problems will help BA graduates compete for jobs across all sectors.

The Liberal Arts Advantage.
A bachelor's degree in sociology provides an excellent liberal arts foundation for embarking on the wide range of career paths that many liberal arts majors pursue. Your undergraduate training in sociology can open a variety of doors in business and the human services. Sociology majors who enter the business world work in sales, marketing, customer relations, or human resources. Those who enter human services work with youths at risk, the elderly, or people experiencing problems related to poverty, substance abuse, or the justice system.

When we ask sociology majors who are already employed outside academic settings to reflect on their education with the wisdom of hindsight, they value most highly their undergraduate courses in social research methods, statistics, and computer skills. These courses help make BA undergraduates marketable, especially in today's highly technical and data-oriented work environment. In addition, sociology majors develop analytical skills and the ability to understand issues within a "macro" or social structural perspective. Learning the process of critical thinking

and how to bring evidence to bear in support of an argument is extremely important in a fast-changing job market.

Consequently, as a sociology BA, you have a competitive advantage in today's information society. The solid base you receive in understanding social change--as well as in research design, data analysis, statistics, theory, and sociological concepts--enables you to compete for support positions (such as program, administrative, or research assistant) in research, policy analysis, program evaluation, and countless other social science endeavors.

The well-educated sociology BA graduate acquires a sense of history, other cultures and times; the interconnectedness of social life; and different frameworks of thought. He or she is proficient at gathering information and putting it into perspective. Sociological training helps students bring breadth and depth of understanding to the workplace. A sociology graduate learns to think abstractly, formulate problems, ask appropriate questions, search for answers, analyze situations and data, organize material, write well, and make oral presentations that help others develop insight and make decisions. Sociology BA graduates have an advantage in understanding human behavior on three levels:

how individuals behave in organizations, families, and communities

the ways in which these social units function as groups

the wider social, political, and economic contexts in which decisions are made and in which groups function.

Linking to Other Majors and Minors.

You can amplify the power of your sociology major by taking a multidisciplinary approach. Employment analysts predict that the most successful people in the 21st century will be those who have been exposed to a wide variety of disciplines and have taken the time to study in some depth outside their field.

You can begin the process of multiplying your perspectives as an undergraduate major in sociology by planning a double major with criminal justice, economics, English, anthropology, a second language, political science, or education. Or, you can take a minor or concentration in computer science, business management, marketing, human services, law and society, social work, or pre-law--just to name a few possibilities. Work with your advisor to develop an integrated set of courses that will provide depth in one or more areas.

The Value of an Internship and Service Learning.

Internships during or just after the undergraduate years offer invaluable experience that can bring to life the sociological concepts and theories you study in books and in the classroom. You can sample potential careers, build your resume, and learn new skills during a well-chosen internship experience. Participation in an internship affords an excellent way to explore career options and help determine what aspects of sociology interest you.

A wide range of internships is available to sociology graduates. Whether you enjoy working with families or learning more about statistical methods to track population growth, you can find an

organization that will give you the opportunity to gain experience while you work toward their goals. Many agencies and institutions offer internships, and many colleges will provide college credits for internship experience. While some internships provide remuneration, many are unpaid. Remember that an internship will help pave the way to subsequent employment opportunities, so working without pay may well be worth your investment of time and energy in the long run. Data show that sociology students who take part in internships find it much easier to find employment later.

Courses that included service learning – volunteer work that is connected to the course topic – are also valuable for career testing and practical experience in applying sociological concepts, methods, and theories.

Profile 1: Staff Administrator in a Public Assistance Agency

Education: Through his undergraduate studies, William became interested in using his knowledge to serve people. William saw his BA in sociology as a tool for providing services to people in need in a large metropolitan area. With the help of his professors, he found an internship in an inner-city shelter for the homeless; after two semesters helping conduct a count of the area's homeless population, William decided to apply for a job with the city's Department of Human Services.

Current Position: William works as a program coordinator, drawing on his internship experiences and his undergraduate sociology courses in the family, social stratification, communities, and group dynamics.

Responsibilities: William's work includes routine processing of reports and legal forms, as well as extensive contact with clients and direct engagement with the problems of the poor, disabled, homeless, elderly, and minorities. He combines his efforts with other employees; using his knowledge of how human services and welfare systems work, he often acts as a trouble shooter by providing help to clients who might otherwise "fall between the cracks."

Benefits: William's job requires him to maintain contacts with other public and private agencies that affect the lives of the poor. For example, one of his friends from college now works on the staff of a large community mental health center, and another is involved in supervising rehabilitation for state penitentiary inmates. Like William, they are using their sociology BAs as a foundation for social service positions. All three receive satisfaction from being able to experience day-to-day accomplishments in helping others.

William's salary is commensurate with the wage scales of public sector employees generally. He could progress through Civil Service channels to a career of relative security. However, he is considering going back to school to earn a graduate degree, which would help him compete for administrative positions.

In order to develop an internship, ask yourself these questions:

"What are my talents, skills, interests, and areas of knowledge?"

"In what areas would I like to grow?"

"What are my strongest assets?"

"How can I make a meaningful contribution in a relatively short time?"

When you address these questions and are ready to search for an internship that will benefit both you and your "employer," the following strategies may help:

Volunteer your time and skills to an employer on a temporary or part-time basis in order to establish initial contact and lay the foundation for future work.

Contact your cooperative education, internship and/or service learning coordinator on campus for a listing of organizations that accept interns and for general advice on how to find an internship and derive the most benefit from it.

Contact your college or university sociology department for advice on internships. Organizations might send internship announcements to them and your professors may have contacts in the community. Sometimes college course credit can be arranged with the department.

Contact by letter and follow-up telephone call several nonprofit organizations, corporations, businesses, and government or educational agencies in the geographic location that interests you--the broader the net, the more likely someone will offer you an internship.

Write to the National Society for Experiential Education for the National Directory of Internships (latest edition). This publication lists opportunities in 75 fields of interest, by state, type of organization, and specific organizations. NSIEE, 3509 Haworth Drive, Suite 207, Raleigh, NC 27609-7229.

Join the American Sociological Association for information and networking opportunities at the national, regional, and state levels.

You can amplify the power of your sociology major by taking a multidisciplinary approach. Employment analysts predict that the most successful people in the 21st century will be those who have been exposed to a wide variety of disciplines and have taken the time to study in some depth outside their field.

Job Prospects for the BA Graduate

Given the breadth, adaptability and utility of sociology, employment opportunities abound for BA graduates. You can secure entry level positions in many of the areas previously mentioned in defining the scope of sociology. The following list of possibilities is only illustrative--many other paths may be open to you. Employment sectors include:

social services--in rehabilitation, case management, group work with youth or the elderly, recreation, or administration

community work--in fund-raising for social service organizations, nonprofits, child-care or community development agencies, or environmental groups

corrections--in probation, parole, or other criminal justice work

business--in advertising, marketing and consumer research, insurance, real estate, personnel work, training, or sales

college settings--in admissions, alumni relations, or placement offices

health services--in family planning, substance abuse, rehabilitation counseling, health planning, hospital admissions, and insurance companies

publishing, journalism, and public relations–in writing, research, and editing

government services--in federal, state, and local government jobs in such areas as transportation, housing, agriculture, and labor

teaching--in elementary and secondary schools, in conjunction with appropriate teacher certification.

Profile 2: Human Resources Manager in a Small Manufacturing Firm

Education: Carlos received a BA in sociology at a state university in the Arizona. He took a wide range of courses in sociology, social psychology, and business, and studied the sociology of minority groups and race relations.

Current position: Carlos was drawn to the business world where he wanted to apply his sociological insights. He started as an entry-level assistant in the Human Resources Department of a small company, but after five years Carlos moved up to H.R. Manager, a position with considerable influence over the company's personnel policies. He is involved with strategies and programs for hiring, training, promoting, and managing an increasingly diverse workforce.

Benefits: At first, Carlos earned an average entry-level salary, but access to in-service training helped him advance to a managerial position. He enjoys on-site athletic facilities and good medical benefits. Ultimately, Carlos may be promoted to an even higher position within the firm or seek advancement by joining another company. He enjoys contributing his insights into the complicated issues of gender and cultural diversity in the workplace.

Obtaining work experience before applying to graduate school might improve your chances of acceptance and make further education more meaningful. An entry level job might also help you sharpen your interests and decide future directions--continuing to climb the career ladder, changing fields, or furthering your education.

Some advantages accrue to entering the work force with a BA. Employers are often willing to train BA graduates in the specific skills and knowledge required for their workplace, so you could begin a good career by rising through the ranks. Many organizations might also invest in additional education or training for promising employees.

Graduate Training in Sociology

Many undergraduate sociology majors pursue graduate training in sociology in preparation for academic and practice careers in the discipline. A master's degree or doctorate will be essential for higher education teaching and advanced research or applied careers. Others choose graduate work in other fields such as social work, education, public health, business administration, and urban planning, not to mention law, medicine, and divinity school.

MA vs. PhD Degrees.
The Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD) is typically the highest degree awarded in sociology. The Master's degree may be either an MA (Master of Arts) or an MS (Master of Science). The master's degree, which takes from one to three years, can either be a step toward the PhD or an end in itself. It generally signifies sophisticated knowledge of the field's perspectives and methods, but does not necessarily indicate that any original research has been conducted. In some cases a thesis is not required or may be replaced by a practicum or other applied experience.

For those seeking to enter the applied world of research and program management, a master's degree in sociology may be excellent preparation. The PhD requires at least four or five years of study beyond the BA and signifies competence for original research and scholarship as evidenced by the completion of a significant research study called a "dissertation." This degree prepares individuals for careers in academic and applied settings.

For many positions within public agencies and the private sector, a master's degree suffices. For community college teaching, a master's degree may be acceptable, but a doctorate opens more doors. Teaching and research at the university level and high-level employment with good promotion prospects in non-academic research institutes, think tanks, private industry, and government agencies usually require a PhD.

Most graduate schools that offer the PhD also offer a master's degree as part of the program. However, some universities offer the master's only, and a few are exclusively devoted to the PhD. While many PhD students receive fellowships or use private means to study full-time, some must work part-time to support themselves. Fortunately, teaching or research assistantships often form part of the learning experience in exchange for a stipend or a tuition waiver.

New graduate students usually begin with courses quite similar in content to their undergraduate courses, although the work is more demanding and sophisticated.

Courses and Dissertations.
Graduate courses typically focus on basic theoretical issues, a wide range of research methods, and statistics. Many entering PhD students who did not major in sociology as undergraduates will find this work new to them. A year or so of courses usually culminates in an examination or major paper, and perhaps the awarding of an MA or MS.

Training then shifts to doing sociology and more interactive learning. Lecture courses give way to seminars as advanced students begin to conduct individual research in developing areas of specialization. At this point, the student is typically ready for some type of qualifying examination for the doctorate.

The final PhD requirement, the dissertation, must be an original piece of scholarship. It can take many forms and be relatively brief or very long. The dissertation should make a substantial contribution to existing scientific knowledge. Most departments require a formal proposal that must be approved by a faculty committee. This same committee often presides over the student's oral defense of the dissertation once it is completed, a ritual that marks the end of the student's training and the beginning of a career as an autonomous scholar.

Choosing a Graduate School.
Over 250 universities in the U.S. offer PhDs and/or master's degrees. Universities differ greatly in their strengths and weaknesses, the nature and structure of their curriculum, costs, faculty specializations, and special programs and opportunities for students.

Some graduate programs specialize in preparing students for applied careers in business, government, or social service. They may feature student internships in agency offices rather than traditional teaching or research assistantships. Others emphasize preparation for the professorial life. Departments continue to differ on requirements regarding language proficiency and statistical skills; whether they require a Master's degree en route to the PhD; and, if so, whether a Master's thesis is required or course work alone is sufficient. Some departments will be strong in your particular area of interest, and others will be weak.

Fortunately, you have a key resource for making your choice. ASA publishes the *Guide to Graduate Departments of Sociology*, which contains information on degrees awarded, rosters of individual faculty and their interests, special programs, tuition and fees, the availability of fellowships and assistantships, deadlines for applications, and the names, addresses, and telephone numbers to contact for further information and application forms. College libraries should have a copy of the *Guide*. One can also be ordered directly from the ASA Executive Office (ext. 389).

Consult with others as you develop a list of schools to which you want to apply. Undergraduate sociology teachers who know your strengths, weaknesses, and special interests may be able to guide you through this complex process toward a realistic choice. Most sociology teachers have friends and colleagues in various departments around the country (or otherwise know the

strengths of different departments). Even if they do not know anyone personally in a particular department, they should be able to help you make an informed decision. Also, make sure that you are exploring several options. Many departments have homepages which allow you to get a snapshot of departments, their faculty, their curriculum, and their specialty areas.

Early in your senior year or in the year before entering graduate school, you should begin to make contact with the schools you wish to consider. Most departments require you to fill out an application form, including a personal statement on why you want to pursue graduate work, why you chose sociology and that particular school. In addition, you will probably be asked to supply a transcript of your undergraduate record and several letters of reference. Many departments require applicants to take the nationally administered Graduate Record Examinations--a battery of exams on verbal and quantitative skills, and a subject exam in sociology. Because these examinations are administered on a fixed schedule in designated locations, you must apply to take them several months in advance; your college should have all the appropriate information and forms; they are also offered in computer-assisted formats.

Finally, take advantage of the opportunity to visit the departments you consider. Departments differ in specialties, availability of direct support, tone, style and environment. You are considering not just a set of courses, but a larger learning context and a town and region in which you may be living for the next several years. Therefore, if at all possible, you should try to visit the department in person or at least request all materials available to potential applicants.

Profile 3: Sociologist in a Health Center

Education: Mark earned his PhD in sociology after working as an Emergency Medical Technician throughout college. In graduate school he took courses in medical sociology, the sociology of mental health and illness, and sociology of health policy.

Current position: Mark holds a faculty and research position in a state-supported Health Science Center that includes schools of nursing, medicine, dentistry, public health, and allied health professions. He and other social scientists form a unit in the Department of Community Health. Mark's responsibilities include teaching future physicians, nurses, planners, and other health workers about the sociological aspects of health care organizations.

Responsibilities: Mark also consults with health agencies, providing data about the population groups to be served and about sociological aspects of the distribution of disease and illness. He conducts research on how patients with heart disease fare in their family and work settings after release from the hospital.

Benefits: Mark is well paid, better than most academics in the social sciences, and enjoys working with health professionals and providing them with fresh perspectives on how to improve medical services in a rapidly-changing market.