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## The Contribution of Sociology to the Emergence of Applied and Pre-professional College Majors

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# The Contribution of Sociology to the Emergence of Applied and Pre-professional College Majors

## Keywords

Sociology, Interdisciplinarity, Applied Fields, College Majors, Criminology, Criminal Justice, Communications Research, Management, Marketing, Academic Specialties

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## Comments

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## **The Contribution of Sociology to the Emergence of Applied and Pre-professional College Majors**

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### **Introduction**

This short essay was originally part of a longer analysis of disciplines and interdisciplinarity that has been published as *In Defense of Disciplines* (Jacobs, 2013). The sections that are included here could not be incorporated in the book due to space considerations. This discussion is part of a multi-pronged effort to show that disciplines are broad, dynamic, and internally differentiated. They also have played a large role in creating applied fields of study on college campuses. The essay focuses on the case of sociology, but a parallel analysis could be conducted for economics, biology, mathematics and a number of other arts and science disciplines. This discussion is relevant to Chapter 3 of *In Defense of Disciplines*, which highlights the dynamic nature of these fields. It is also connects with Chapter 9, which focuses on undergraduate education.

### **Academic Specialization: The Contribution of Liberal Arts Disciplines to the Rise of Applied Fields of Study**

Walter Metzger's fine history of the trajectory of academic fields in the United States distinguishes between two types of growth (Metzger, 1987). On the one hand, fields subdivide, first as they break away from natural and moral philosophy into their own specialties, and later as they divide into finer and finer subdivisions.<sup>1</sup> Metzger contrasts this with a parallel process that brings applied fields into the academy, either through "affiliation" or "dignification." In other words, established professional fields such as law and medicine come to be affiliated with the university, while over time less well recognized subjects become accepted as part of the university curriculum.

What Metzger's analysis misses is the ways in which arts and science disciplines helped to lay the intellectual foundation for the creation of applied fields as well as the multiplication of subdivisions within each field. Metzger's two processes are thus more intertwined than he allows. Indeed, it is the very success of the traditional academic disciplines that has helped to create the applied undergraduate fields with which they now compete for enrollment. Here again several examples will be presented from the field of sociology, which has been prolific in spinning off specialties, although sociology is by no means unique in this regard. Specifically, sociology has contributed the development of communications, marketing, management, and criminal justice, all burgeoning applied fields, each with undergraduate enrollments that surpass those of sociology.

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<sup>1</sup> Metzger refers to this process 'subject parturition.' The discussion follows the logic of Metzger's distinctions but not his precise terminology

## Communications

Social scientists over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century developed the techniques to conduct surveys of public opinion based on statistically representative samples. This led to the founding in 1947 of the American Association of Public Opinion Research and its international counterpart, the World Association for Public Opinion Research, and to the creation of the journal *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Public opinion research, however, did not become its own discipline in the sense that there are no undergraduates who major in public opinion, no separate academic departments of public opinion, and no doctoral degrees in this field. Instead, public opinion research contributed to the formation of two applied fields, communication and marketing, even while continuing to play a role in sociology, political science and psychology.

Sociologists with long enough memories celebrate the role that figures such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Herbert Hyman played in the development of public opinion research. In *The People's Choice* (1944), Lazarsfeld analyzed the factors shaping people's political decision making. Later, in an important book co-authored by Elihu Katz, Lazarsfeld suggested that information was dissemination via channels including newspapers, radio and the then new medium of television but was reinforced or confirmed as valid by trusted friends and associates who played the role of opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Because surveys were collected on samples of individuals who did not know each other, public opinion surveys were better designed for measuring the patterns of opinion that they were at tapping the role of social networks in the opinion formation process.

Sociology played an important role but by no means was the only influence on the formation of communication research. Communication today draws on many fields of research, including literary analysis, social psychology, and visual studies (Pfau, 2008)

By the end of the 1960s, communication emerged not only as a field of study but also as a major for undergraduates. The communications major incorporated journalism but also addressed communication issues in other settings as well, including business and nonprofit organizations. The number bachelor's degree recipients in the field of communications rose from just over 10,000 in 1971 to over 75,000 in 2008, which represents a rise from 1 percent to nearly 5 percent of undergraduate enrollments.<sup>2</sup>

Public opinion research continues to play a significant role in sociology in no small part due to the role of the General Social Survey (GSS) and its international counterpart, the International Social Survey Program. The GSS, which began as an annual survey in 1972 and has continued as a biennial survey since 1994, fields questions on a wide range of personal and political topics. More than 14,000 separate pieces of research have used this rich data base (National Opinion Research Center, 2011). But over time communications has become its own field with its own concerns (see Pooley and Katz (2008) for a brief history of the divergence of American sociology and communications research). More importantly, communications begins to produce its own PhDs and thus is in a position to hire its own faculty. In the early years of communications programs, faculty inevitably held degrees from various since there were few newly minted PhDs in communications. For example, in 1965, the College Blue Book listed only a handful of PhD programs in communication. Yet, before long, communications programs located at research universities sought to grant doctoral degrees, since graduate training programs are a sign that scholarship in the field is recognized as worthy of degree. Thus, by 2009, 65 PhD programs in communications were listed at research universities in the U. S.

The production of newly minted doctorates in communications puts this field in a position to hire its own as faculty. Data on faculty hiring patterns by discipline from the National Survey of

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<sup>2</sup> Before 1970, journalism rather than communication was listed as a major by the Department of Education, and sometimes journalism was reported as a branch of English.

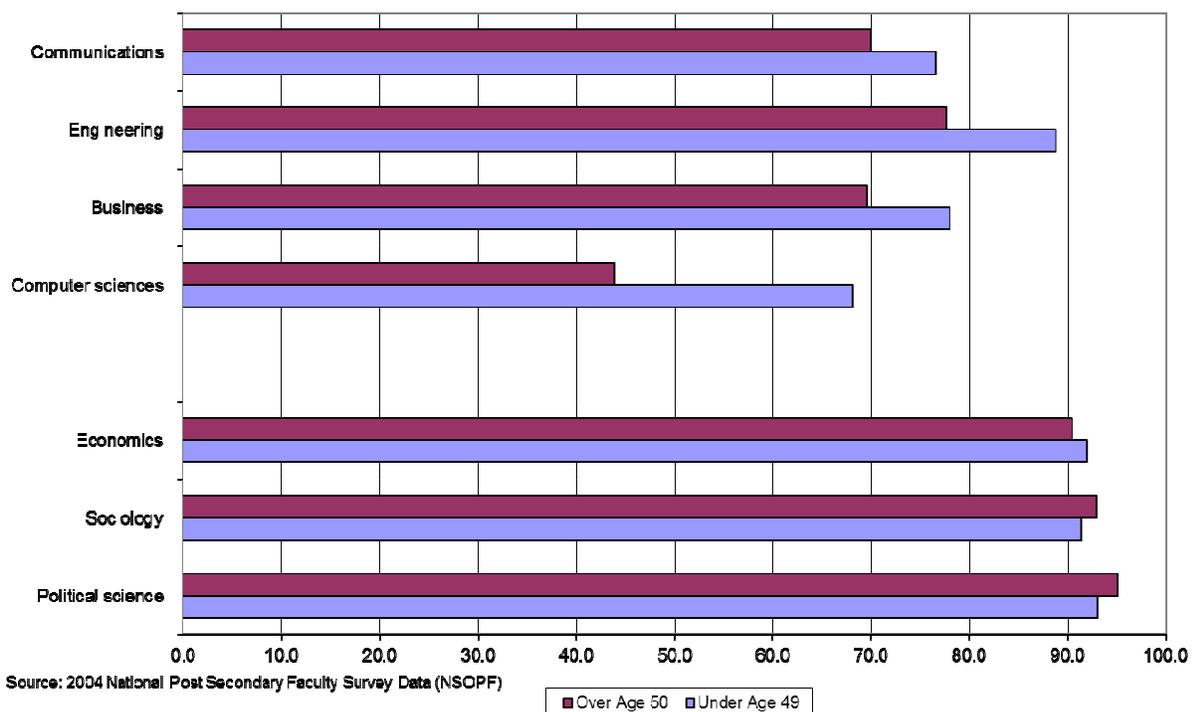
Post-Secondary Faculty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011) were consulted. By 2004, the year in which this survey was conducted, nearly 70 percent of faculty in communications programs had obtained their PhD in the field of communications. Thus, while sociology and other fields may continue to generate powerful ideas and interesting insights regarding communications processes, over time these will be incorporated into the field of communication only to the extent that faculty trained in communication accept these ideas and pass them along to their students.

Another facet of this point is that communications begins as an interdisciplinary field both intellectually and in terms of the training of its faculty. Over time, the faculty are increasingly drawn from communications departments, and this dimension of interdisciplinarity is lost. Communications as a field remains quite intellectually diverse, but this is principally because of the range of styles and approaches produced by communications PhD programs.

Figure 1 presents data on the field of communication along with several other fields discussed here. The data suggest that applied fields – business, communication, engineering and so on – tend to largely hire faculty from within. This level of self-recruitment (or doctoral-degree endogamy) in hiring is not as high as found in the liberal arts disciplines, but nonetheless has come to present the majority of faculty appointments in each field. The closure, or self-recruitment, is more evident among the younger faculty. Thus, over time, interdisciplinary fields that endure and succeed in opening their own departments tend to become closed employment fields.

Debates continue within the field of communication about its diverse intellectual roots. Herbst (2008) makes the case for communications a post-disciplinary field of inquiry. Rogers (1999) bemoans the continuing division of the field between interpersonal communication and mass communication. Leydesdorff, and Probst (2009) conducted a time series analysis of citation patterns and suggest that communications research is moving toward the establishment of a specialty of its own. Pfau's map of the field is more complex, as it includes nodes related to

**Figure 1. Faculty Hiring Closure by Age:  
Percent with Degree in Same Subject as Teaching Field**



qualitative and quantitative research, historical and critical perspectives and rhetorical analyses. The historical and rhetorical segments of communication research may be under-represented in the Leyesdorff and Probst map because this research tends to appear in books and other outlets not fully captured by the Web of Science data base.

Another consideration in mapping the field of communication is the many specialties in which students obtain degrees. As is discussed elsewhere at greater length (Jacobs, 2013), applied fields tend to splinter in a large number of degree programs oriented to particular employment opportunities. In the case of communication, degrees are currently offered in no less than 32 different fields, including journalism, media studies, radio and television, public relations, digital media and animation technology. Thus, while communications research is somewhat interdisciplinary, this tendency coexists with internal differentiation in the form of the splintering and proliferation of degree offerings.

### **Marketing, Management and Criminal Justice**

Sociology played a smaller role in the intellectual history of marketing research than did economics and psychology, according to Bartels (1976). Yet the issues in communication and marketing are quite similar: how do those who seek to influence opinion use channels of communication to reach their objectives. In the context of political communication, this may mean encouraging individuals to vote for a set of candidates, while in the business context, this may mean being favorably disposed to particular companies and products. The point here is that the development of the scholarly techniques of the social sciences played an indispensable role in the formation of contemporary marketing research. The rise of marketing as a field of study thus is not solely an aggrandizement of a subject formerly considered unworthy of serious academic consideration as Metzger's approach might suggest but rather emerged as a field of study in no small part due to the contribution of social science disciplines. Over 32,000 marketing degrees were awarded in 2008, more than the 28,000 conferred by sociology departments.

Organizational theory has played a prominent role in sociology dating back at least to the seminal contributions of Max Weber and Robert Michels. Weber argued that bureaucracies were the defining institution of modern societies. Yet the study of complex organizations has increasingly drifted away from sociology departments (Meyer, 1990). This has occurred in part because business schools can attract talented faculty by offering higher salaries as well as more credible access to businesses to study. Undergraduate students interested in organizations similarly are more attracted to a degree in management based in a business school than a degree in organizational studies located in a school of arts and sciences.

Since the 1970s, the number of students obtaining degrees in business has nearly tripled, rising from 115,396 in 1971 to 335,254 in 2008. In 2008, over 135,000 students obtained degrees in business administration and management, a total that slightly surpassed all of the social science enrollments located in the liberal arts.

As an emerging academic major, criminal justice has a slightly different trajectory. This field arose as an undergraduate major during the 1970s as a result of efforts to require police officers, parole officers and others involved with the criminal justice system to obtain college degrees. While criminal justice degrees *per se* were not specified, the degree requirement led to the proliferation of degree offerings at both two-year and four-year schools (American Sociological Association, 2010).

In 1969-70, the College Blue Book listed only one bachelor's degree program in the field of criminal justice. Taking criminology, corrections administration and "correctional science" together, a total of 15 bachelor's degree programs and 49 associates degree programs offered degrees in 1970. (Many of the associate's degree programs were located in community colleges in California.) By 1987, criminal justice degree programs had proliferated to 266 schools, along with 239 associate's degree programs. Today, some 785 schools offer degrees in criminal justice, in

addition to 96 criminology degree programs. This level of representation puts criminal justice well ahead of anthropology (462) and slightly ahead of computer science (601).<sup>3</sup> Another 700 programs conferred more than 14,000 Associates degrees in 2008. The term 'criminal justice/police science' typically refers to two year degrees, while the terms Criminal Justice Administration and Safety Studies include both 2 year and four year degrees. Criminology degrees are less common and tend to be located along with liberal arts degree programs.

Criminology has had its own scholarly association since the 1940s but has deep roots in sociology. Emile Durkheim, who is given as much credit as anyone for the formation of the discipline of sociology, wrote extensively about the roles and evolution of crime in modern society (1984 [1892]). W. E. B. DuBois did not sidestep the issue of crime in his *Philadelphia Negro* (1899), and the sociologists whose work became known as the Chicago school of sociology also focused extensively on issues of crime and delinquency (Sampson and Groves, 1989). As an undergraduate major, criminal justice more often includes a vocational dimension, while criminology tends to focus on the study of crime in a liberal-arts context.

Roughly 30,000 undergraduates receive degrees each year in sociology. Marketing and criminal justice are roughly the same size, while communications is roughly 80,000 and management is roughly 130,000. These applied fields, to which sociology has contributed, thus now greatly surpass sociology in enrollments,

Sociology has contributed to the intellectual underpinnings of a number of other fields as well, including women's studies, African-American Studies, Ethnic Studies more generally, Global Studies, and so on. Similarly, one could trace the role of that the discipline of economics has played in the development of business school programs, especially finance, as well as the increasingly dominant role that economics has played in public policy programs. The point here is not to attempt to trace the full extent of sociology's impact or to recount sociology's greatest hits but rather to put the traditional counterpoint between liberal arts and applied fields in a new light. Arts and science fields such as sociology have helped to create specializations that end up as distinct undergraduate majors and ironically end up competing with sociology for enrollments. In this sense, the liberal arts disciplines are often victims of their own accomplishments, as they succeed in providing the intellectual basis for applied fields which become competitors for students and other resources.

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