Sociology Graduate School Requirements and Competitive Advantages

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Abstract

This study examines the admission requirements of Canadian Master of Arts in Sociology programs. A content analysis was performed on a sample of 58 programs based on information provided on department and university websites. Admission requirements centred on high grade point averages, strong letters of support and prior academic and research experience as indicated in a Curriculum Vitae, samples of work or a statement of intent. Results revealed admission preferences for applicants with minimum entrance grades of 80%, an honours degree, prior courses in research methods, statistics and social theory, and a demonstrated research focus. In addition to maintaining high grades, our findings suggest that undergraduates planning to pursue a Master's degree in sociology should aim to incorporate substantive courses early on in their programs of study and take advantage of other opportunities to develop research skills, networks and training.

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Introduction

In today's highly credentialed society, the number of individuals choosing to pursue a post-secondary degree is steadily increasing. Between 1974 and 1998, the number of undergraduate degrees awarded by Canadian universities grew by 40 percent (Guppy, Greer, Malette, & Frank2017). Data from the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS) indicates that 64.1% of Canadians aged 25 to 64 have post-secondary qualifications and just over 25% of Canadian adults have a university degree (Statistics Canada, 2016). When it comes to the social and behavioral sciences including law, 44 439 individuals were awarded undergraduate degrees in 2014, another 6 327 individuals earned a master's degree and 1 272 were awarded a Ph.D. (Statistics Canada, 2014). Current estimates suggest that more than 200 000 Canadians now hold an undergraduate degree in sociology (Guppy, Greer, Malette, & Frank, 2017). As more Canadians pursue graduate degrees in sociology, the admissions process becomes increasingly competitive. Understanding the requirements and preferences of sociology graduate programs would be beneficial to undergraduates and administrators of undergraduate programs who hope to tailor courses and programs of study to maximize potential for graduate school admission.

In response to the competitive nature of graduate school admission a growing body of literature is devoted to advising students how best to prepare for graduate studies through the identification of core admission requirements. This work is largely written by scholars and academic professionals who have firsthand knowledge and experience with university admissions processes. Within this field, four standard core admission requirements can be identified with regularity including: High previous academic performance, research or field-related experience, letters of recommendation and personal statements (Asher, 2008; Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012; Neimeyer & Stevenson, 2008). While admission requirements may include

additional components that vary across specific programs and fields of study, these four core requirements are considered universal for graduate degree programs (Kaplan, 2011). Given the importance of these core requirements, much of the literature advising students in this area focuses its attention on these general factors discussed in more detail herein.

Previous successful undergraduate academic performance is one of the most essential or most highly-weighted factors for admission into graduate school. Selection committees rely upon an applicant's undergraduate grade point average (GPA) as an objective measure of intellectual ability and self-discipline (Kaplan, 2011). A GPA is a standardized measure of the average grade point a student achieved based on the total number of courses taken. Final marks in percentages out of 100 or letter grades are first converted into a grade point number that typically ranges from 0 (for a failing mark) to 4 (for a mark that represents an A or 90 percent and above) and then totaled and divided by the overall number of grade points. Most graduate programs require a minimum GPA of 2.7 to 3.0 (corresponding to an unstandardized grade of about a B- or 72 - 75%) while the expectation is considerably higher for more competitive programs (Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012).

Notwithstanding, it is also recognized that undergraduate students in general tend to have lower grades in their first and second years (or that grades tend to steadily increase over time for high achievers). Thus, admission committees often focus more on the GPA obtained in the third and fourth years of an undergraduate's academic career and/or place more weighting on grades achieved in courses relevant to students' majors or chosen fields of study (Kaplan 2011). Finally, although meeting the expected GPA standard is an important core requirement, admissions experts emphasize that acceptance or rejection of an applicant is not solely dependent on grades (Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012; Neimeyer & Stevenson 2008). Those with high GPAs are not

automatically accepted into graduate programs and those with lower grades may be able to make up for this limitation in other areas such as relevant research or field-related experience (Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012; Niemeyer & Stevenson, 2008).

Having relevant research or field-related experience is also viewed as a core component of successful entry into a graduate program. According to admissions professionals, research experience demonstrates that an applicant has already acquired some of the skills and abilities relevant to the graduate school environment (Asher, 2008, Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012; Neimeyer & Stevenson, 2008). Criteria that can highlight an applicant's research capabilities include serving as a research assistant to a professor, participating in an honors program wherein the student has written up an extensive theory- or research-based project, and/or carrying out an individual study-based research project (Asher, 2008). Additionally, having one's research published in an undergraduate journal and/or disseminating research findings in a professional setting further reflects the academic potential of an applicant (Asher, 2008; Kaplan, 2011). Serving as an assistant to a professor in the form of test proctoring, grading, or lab assisting are also activities that are highly regarded by most admissions committees (Asher, 2008, Kaplan, 2011). Field-related experience can also be an asset. Relevant internships, paid employment, or volunteer-based experiences can demonstrate the commitment and practical knowledge of an applicant (Asher, 2008; Mumby, 2012). Such activities are usually highlighted in letters of recommendation, personal statements, and/or in an applicant's resume or Curriculum Vitae (Asher, 2008; Kaplan, 2011; Niemeyer & Stevenson, 2008).

Strong letters of recommendation constitute the third universal requirement for gaining admission into a graduate program. Guide books advising students in the application process emphasize the importance of obtaining quality letters of recommendation from previous

undergraduate professors and field-related professionals (Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012; Niemeyer & Stevenson, 2008). Members of graduate admissions committees sometimes view these letters as even more important than prior academic performance (Purdy, Reinehr, & Swartz 1989). As opposed to grades, recommendations constitute a more subjective, detailed and personalized source of information that can assist admissions committees in evaluating a candidate's suitability for the program (Mumby, 2012; Neimeyer & Stevenson, 2008). Reference letters typically speak beyond grades to describe an applicant's character traits, skills and potential from the view point of an academic professional who is familiar with the student and their work (Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012; Neimeyer & Stevenson, 2008). Recommendations can also highlight any relevant previous research, field, service or volunteer-related experiences that the prospective applicant has obtained (Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012; Niemeyer & Stevenson, 2008). Most programs require 2 or 3 letters of recommendation from previous professors or field-related professionals (Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012).

Lastly, submitting a personal statement or letter of intent is also considered a universal requirement for graduate school entry. Like letters of recommendation, personal statements constitute another highly detailed and subjective source of information used by selection committees to assess applicants (Asher, 2008; Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012; Neimeyer & Stevenson, 2008). Personal statements allow prospective graduate students to express their individual style, values and writing capabilities (Neimeyer & Stevenson, 2008). This short essay also gives applicants the opportunity to convey why they want to attend graduate school, what their research interests are and why they feel they would be a "good fit" for preferred programs (Asher, 2008). Here, applicants can also describe any relevant research or field-related experiences to demonstrate the skills and abilities they have acquired (Asher 2008). Note that it

is also recommended that students highlight their individuality and any life obstacles that they may have had to overcome. Uniqueness is viewed as a crucial element of successful personal statements (Asher, 2008; Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012; Neimeyer & Stevenson, 2008). Some graduate programs require a more open-ended personal statement, while other programs ask that applicants develop their statement based on specific questions provided ahead of time (Asher, 2008; Kaplan, 2011).

Despite the consensus regarding core requirements for graduate studies, there is limited information in the literature pertaining specifically to programs in sociology. Instead, much of the social science-based literature is directed at psychology graduate program requirements (e.g., see Cashin & Landrum, 1991; Landrum & Clark 2005; Lawson, 1995; Lawson, Reisinger & Jordan-Fleming, 2012; Purdy, Reinehr & Swartz, 1989; Smith, 1985). Landrum and Clark's (2005) review of admissions criteria for 573 graduate programs in psychology concluded that letters of recommendation are the most essential criteria followed by personal statements and grade point average. They also found that that 52.2% of programs rated prior research experience as highly important. Additionally, Lawson, Reisinger, and Jordan-Flemming (2012) examined undergraduate courses preferred by psychology graduate programs and found that statistics and research methods were the most commonly cited. Specifically, of the 429 psychology-based graduate programs examined, 91.8 % preferred applicants to have previously taken a course in statistics while 74.4 % indicated a preference for an earlier course in research methods. Interestingly, while most students are aware of the universal admissions criteria, they view GPA and courses taken as more important than research experience and letters of recommendation (Cashin & Landrum, 1991).

In contrast to the discipline of psychology, there is little known about the core admission requirements or their relative importance for those pursing graduate degrees in sociology. A review of the literature revealed mainly peer-reviewed studies on career trajectories after obtaining an undergraduate degree (e.g., see Guppy, Greer, Malette, & Frank, 2017; Spalter-Roth, Senter, Stone, & Wood, 2010; Vaughan, 1979). For example, Guppy, Greer, Malette, and Frank (2017) found that female graduates tend to hold positions in the community service, social work, teaching, and administration professions while males are more apt to be employed in the criminal justice system and the private sector. Research that exists on sociology graduate programs tends to focus on student experiences and expectations while in the programs (e.g., see Davis, Bissler & Leiter, 2001; Korsching & Peter, 2007; Shulman & Silver 2003; Warnock & Appel, 2011). Shulman and Silver (2003), for example, examined the informal culture of sociology graduate programs while Warnock and Appel (2011) looked at the academic and financial challenges faced by working-class sociology graduates compared to their more privileged counterparts. While these studies are important to understanding the graduate school experience, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the specific admissions requirements for such programs. The purpose of present study is to identify the key features of admissions criteria for sociology graduate programs in Canada. This information may be useful to future students who wish to develop competitive skills early on in their undergraduate programs and to graduate school advisors who can help guide sociology majors towards courses and opportunities that will make them more competitive for graduate studies.

Method

Sample and Sample Selection

Since pursuing a Master's degree is the first step of graduate school, only M.A. programs were included in the study. This purposive sample consisted of 32 Canadian universities that offer Master of Arts (M.A.) programs in sociology. The sample was obtained by first searching the Canadian Sociological Association's (CSA) website which provided a list of the various sociology departments found across the country. This list also indicated whether the departments offered B.A., M.A., or Ph.D. programs and provided a link to the department's website. A second search was conducted using the website *universitystudy.ca,* a data base with information on 97 Canadian universities and their available programs (Universities Canada, 2017). The data base was cross-referenced to locate any additional M.A. programs that might exist but not be listed on the CSA website.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

All M.A. in sociology programs with the term *sociology* in the title were included. All program types were included in the sample such as thesis-based, course-based and major research-based programs. If a department offered multiple sociology-based M.A. programs, each program was included in the sample. Programs in various sub-disciplines such as M.A. in criminology, social justice, or women's studies were excluded from the sample.

Units of Analysis

The units of analysis for this study were 58 M.A. in sociology programs (N = 58) offered at 32 different Canadian universities. This includes: University of Alberta (N = 2, Thesis & Course Based), Acadia University (N = 1, Thesis), Dalhousie University (N = 1, Thesis), Brock University (N = 3, Thesis, Major Paper & Co-op), Carleton University (N = 3, Thesis, Research

Essay & Course Based), University of Guelph (N = 2, Thesis & Major Paper), Lakehead University (N = 2, Thesis and Research Paper), Laurentian University (N = 2, Thesis and Essay Based), McMaster University (N = 3, Thesis, Major Research Paper & Course Based), Nipissing University (N = 2, Thesis & Major Research Paper), University of Ottawa (N = 2, Thesis & Research Paper), University of Calgary (N = 1, Thesis), Queen's University (N = 2, Thesis & Essay Based), University of Toronto (N = 2, Research Paper & Course Based), University of Waterloo (N = 3, Thesis, Research Paper & Course Based), University of Western Ontario (N = 2, Thesis & Course Based), Wilfred Laurier University (N = 2, Major Research Paper & Course Based), York University (N = 2, Thesis & Research Paper), University of Windsor (N = 2, Thesis & Course Based), Concordia University (N = 2, Thesis & Research Essay), Université Laval (N = 2, Research Internship & Thesis), McGill University (N = 2, Thesis & Research Paper), University of Lethbridge (N = 1, Thesis), Université de Montreal (N = 1, Thesis), University of Regina (N = 1, Thesis), University of Saskatchewan (N = 2, Thesis & Research Paper), University of British Colombia (N = 1, Thesis), Simon Fraser University (N = 1, Thesis), University of Victoria (N = 2, Thesis & Major Research Paper), University of Manitoba (N = 1, Thesis), University of New Brunswick (N = 1, Thesis) and Memorial University (N = 2, Thesis and Major Research Paper).

Coding Procedures

Data for each program was obtained by examining the publicly available information located on the department websites. Websites were accessed through the links provided by the Canadian Sociological Association and *universitystudy.ca.* The admissions requirements for all M.A. programs meeting the inclusion/exclusion criteria were recorded. If the information was not located on the department website, a broader search was conducted through the university's

general website. Data regarding the admissions requirements for each program was coded for the following variables: Type of program(s) offered, minimum grade requirement and what it is based on, preference for honours, and previous courses that are listed as important or required including research, statistics courses and theory courses. Admission requirements were also analyzed in terms of the type of core requirements that must be submitted by applicants. These variables include a Curriculum Vitae, a sample paper, and the number of required references. Additional admissions criteria recorded included whether applicants are required to contact faculty members, list faculty members as potential supervisors, and if applicants' research interests are noted as an important consideration.

Main Variables

     Type of program was categorized as listed on the department website into: Thesis-based, major research paper-based (including both major research paper-based and research paper-based programs), major research paper with co-op, research internship, essay-based (including both essay-based and research review essay-based), or as a course-based program. *Minimum grade requirement* for each program was categorized as 70% and over, 76% and over, 80% and over, 85% and over, or 90% and over (as depicted on the program site). If a grade was listed as a grade point average, a standard sociology GPA grading scale was used to determine the corresponding percentage. For programs that listed a minimum GPA that fell outside of the standard range (e.g., 4.33), the grade point was converted to a percentage using the grading scale of that university. Additional criteria pertaining to *what the minimum grade requirement was based on* was also categorized as listed on the website including whether it was based on a cumulative average, the last 2 years of a degree, the last 20 courses or the last year. A preference for applicants with an *honours degree* was measured as present or absent based on the whether the program

information explicitly denoted a preference in any of its descriptors. Similarly, the *research, statistics, and theory course requirements* were also coded as present or absent based on whether the program indicated that these prior courses were important or necessary for admission.

In terms of the paperwork that must be submitted, the presence or absence of a *Curriculum Vitae* and *sample paper* were determined based on whether they were specifically listed as a requirement for admission. The number of academic references that must be provided was also recorded and categorized as indicated on the website. If the number was not specified it was coded as not listed. We also noted whether applicants were asked to *contact department faculty members* directly ahead of time regarding potential academic supervision. This variable was categorized as present if the department website specifically recommended or required applicants to contact faculty members. We also coded whether applicants were required to *list potential faculty supervisors* in their application or statement of intent. Lastly, each site was also examined to determine whether an *applicant's research interests* were listed as an important determining factor for admission.

Results

Of the 58 Canadian M.A. programs examined, 81% (N = 47) comprised a research-based component such as a thesis, major research report, research paper with co-op or research internship (see Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency of MA Program Types

Program Type

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Thesis Based	30	51.7	51.7	51.7
	Major Research Paper	15	25.9	25.9	77.6
	Major Research Paper w/co-op	1	1.7	1.7	79.3
	Research Internship	1	1.7	1.7	81.0
	Research Review/Essay Based	4	6.9	6.9	87.9
	Course Based	7	12.1	12.1	100.0
	Total	58	100.0	100.0	

Slightly more half of the programs required an entrance grade of 80% or above (N = 29). As indicated in Figure 1, only 5.2% of programs (N = 3) listed a minimum grade of 70% or higher and 3.4% (N = 2) required the most competitive minimum grade of 90% or higher to gain entrance. Just over half of the programs (51.7%, N = 30) based the minimum grade requirement on all undergraduate courses (i.e., the cumulative average obtained over the entirety of the degree) while slightly more than a third (36.2%, N = 21) of programs focused on the most recent courses taken (i.e. those grades obtained in the last 2 years of their degree).

Figure 1: Minimum Grade Requirements
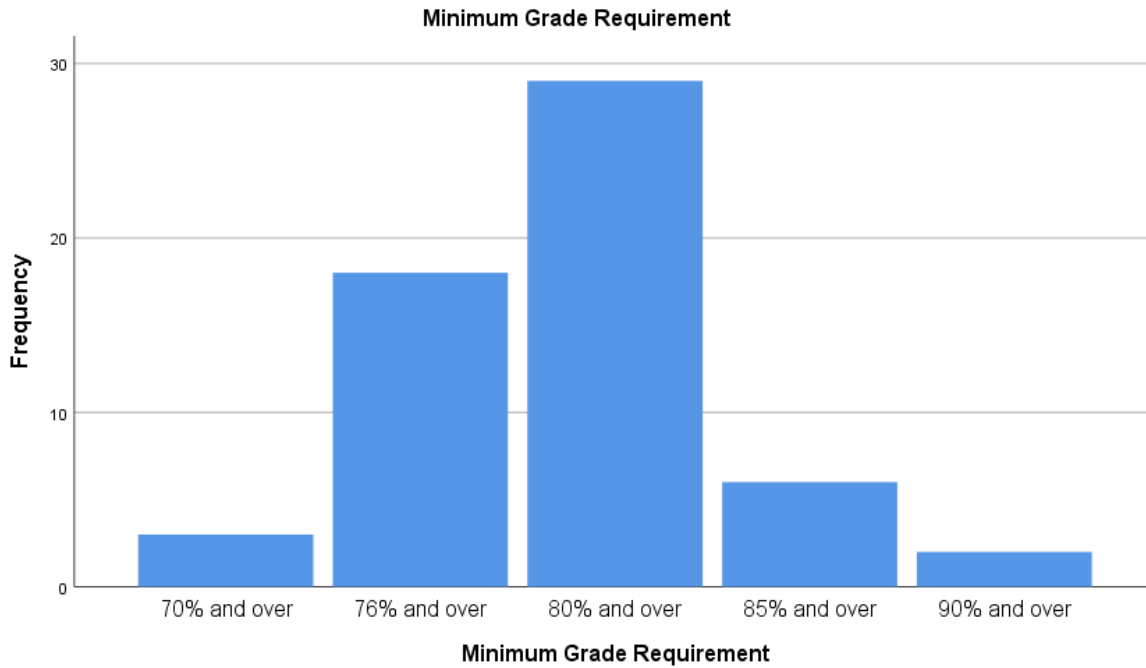
In terms of a specific focus on prior research experience, applicants with an honours degree were strongly preferred for entrance into sociology graduate programs. As indicated in Figure 2, 67.2% (N = 39) of the programs examined specified a preference for students who have graduated from an honours program (see Figure 2 below). Furthermore, 27.6 % of the programs (N = 16) indicated that having taken a prior research methods course was an important or necessary factor for admission. The same number of programs listed a social theory course as important followed by 22.4% noting the importance of a prior course in statistics (N = 13).

Figure 2: Frequency of Programs Preferring Applicants with and Honours Degree
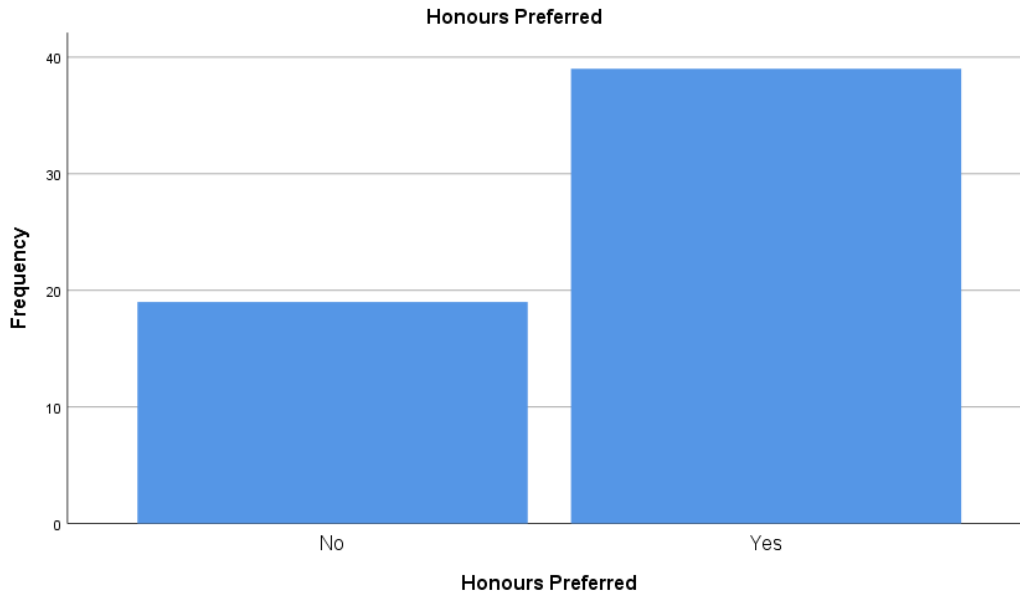
Sixty-seven percent of sociology-based M.A. programs requirement applicants to submit a Curriculum Vitae. Additionally, most programs (62.1%) required applicants to submit a sample of previous academic work such as an essay or research report. Applicants were also asked to provide a minimum of 2 letters of recommendation (58.6%) with some programs requesting 3 (39.7%). Additional considerations when preparing an application included contacting department faculty members concerning research interests and listing faculty members as potential supervisors. The results revealed that 36.2% (N = 21) of programs required or recommended that applicants contact faculty members ahead of time regarding potential supervision and 56.9% (N = 33) were expected to list potential supervisors in their personal statement. Notably, 93.1% (N = 54) of the programs indicated that the applicants' research focus as indicated in a personal statement or letter of intent were an important factor in determining acceptance into graduate studies.

Discussion

The results of this study provide useful information regarding the admission requirements for Canadian sociology programs. Specifically, the results confirm the importance of obtaining good grades and securing quality letters of recommendation to optimize chances for successful entry into a Canadian Master of Arts Program. Findings indicate that most M.A. programs in sociology are highly competitive requiring successful applicants to have prior overall grade point averages of 80% or more. Although the literature suggests an emphasis on grades from the last 2 years of an applicant's degree (e.g., Kaplan, 2011), the results of this study point to a greater importance of maintaining a high GPA throughout the entirety of an undergraduate degree. While this study cannot determine whether letters of recommendation are more important than grades, all sociology programs required at least two supporting letters from previous professors suggesting that students who are planning to pursue a Master's degree in sociology should communicate this intention to their professors early on. Since letters of recommendation are a more subjective and personalized account of an applicant's attributes, building a professional relationship with one's professors can help to establish a more detailed and accurate recommendation (Mumby, 2012; Neimeyer & Stevenson, 2008). Given the focus on research, letters of support are especially relevant for students who have undertaken research with the referees such as an independent study or honours project that can be expanded up in the recommendation.

The present study also highlighted the merits of taking substantive undergraduate courses and developing a research focus early on. About one in every four programs listed theory, statistics, and/or research methods courses as necessary or important in an applicant's course history. Consistent with the earlier work by Landrum and Clark (2005) which emphasized the

relevance of prior research experience for psychology graduate programs, most of the M.A. graduate programs in sociology list research interests as an important admission consideration. Moreover, students with an honours designation are highly preferred. Given that honours programs typically involve an extensive research-based project, these findings further substantiate the importance of prior research experience for admission into Canadian sociology M.A. programs. Previous research experience continues to be an important predictor of the skills and abilities that are necessary to succeed in a graduate school environment (Asher, 2008; Kaplan, 2011; Mumby, 2012; Neimeyer & Stevenson, 2008). Most Canadian M.A. programs in sociology include a research-based component such as a thesis or major research report. Beyond describing personal research interests, programs also tend to recommend or require applicants to ascertain how their research interests fit within the program. For example, applicants are either required to contact faculty about their research interests and/or to list potential research supervisors in their submissions.

Given the demonstrated focus on research, students who want to increase their chances of getting into a program of their choice should plan to build research into their programs of study early on as an undergraduate. Research experience can be obtained by enrolling in an honours program or by taking an independent study course, by seeking out research-related opportunities such as field studies or research assistant positions and by taking courses with research-related curriculum. Sociology majors should also strive to have their research disseminated in professional settings such as poster presentations, conference talks, or publications in undergraduate journals that can be listed in their Curriculum Vitaes and personal statements as evidence of their potential to succeed in research at the graduate level (Asher, 2008; Kaplan, 2011). Lastly and most importantly, students need to strive to articulate a well-developed

research focus for the future academic pursuits and then determine which M.A. programs and

supervisory faculty might best serve these interests.

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