

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

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Because Social Scientists Must Have a Seat at the Table: Reflections from COSSA's 2023 Social Science Advocacy Day

Contributors: Deborah Carr, Boston University; Nicole R. Stokes, Penn State University; and Brenna Tosh, Cornell University

On April 24-25, 2023, over 50 social and behavioral science researchers, students, and advocates from 11 different states participated in [Social Science Advocacy Day](#). This annual event, organized by the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA), brings together advocates from across the country to discuss with Members of Congress and their staff the importance of funding federal agencies and programs that support social and behavioral science research. This year was COSSA's first in-person Social Science Advocacy Day since 2019. Below are reflections from three advocates who participated: Brenna Tosh, an undergraduate student at Cornell University; Dr. Nicole R. Stokes, Dean for Social Sciences and Professor of Sociology at Pennsylvania State University at Abington; and Dr. Deborah Carr, professor of sociology and director of the Center for Innovation in Social Science at Boston University.

Tell us about your experience as part of COSSA's Social Science Advocacy Day.

"I had a wonderful experience at COSSA's Social Science Advocacy Day. I was part of a three-person team from Boston University. At our visits, we learned about the work of each office, and the public policy interests of both the staffer and the Representative they work for. This gave us the opportunity to describe the relevant research that we and our colleagues are doing – covering a range of topics including incarceration, climate change, older women's economic precarity and more. We followed up the next day by sharing with them relevant research findings and papers. We were especially fortunate that each and every office we met with was a strong and vocal supporter of the social sciences, including funding for NIH and NSF."

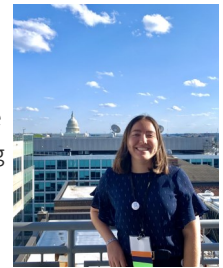


— Deborah Carr, Ph.D.
Professor of Sociology and Director,
Center for Innovation in Social Science,
Boston University

"The confidence and experience-boosting nature of the event is really rewarding, and a trip to experience Washington, DC on more than just a tourist experience stays with you forever."

— Brenna Tosh

"I felt really supported throughout my experience being a Social Science Advocate with COSSA. From the informational webinar, the weekly communicative emails that made me feel confident and prepared, to the engaging bonding activities that happened on the in-person training day, every step was thoughtful and impactful. I always felt welcome to ask any questions that were on my mind, no matter the level. What aided to this feeling was the community that came out for COSSA's Advocacy Day; everyone was very excited and grateful to have a space to talk about their work and participate in their government in a really intimate way. Lots of laughs and stories were shared among us which was really special."



— Brenna Tosh
Undergraduate Student,
Cornell University

"My experience was extremely positive as the COSSA Team took care of every detail to make sure that we made efficient and impactful use of our time with our state representatives. I learned a lot from my social science colleagues and from our political representatives about the issues impacting our states locally and our country nationally; Specifically, how social science research can help lawmakers to address these issues and challenges using data informed and proven measures."



— Nicole R. Stokes, Ph.D.
Dean for Social Sciences and Professor of Sociology,
Pennsylvania State University at Abington

Why do you believe this advocacy work is important?

“It’s important for us, as social scientists, to demonstrate to policy makers that their work to uphold federal research funding is valued and valuable. We can convey to them precisely what our federally funded research found, and how it might inform policy. We can also underscore that federal funding is essential to building a pipeline of future researchers, as research assistants are often funded by our federal grants.” — *Deborah Carr*

“I have participated with other advocacy activities with different organizations before, but I believe what makes COSSA’s work unique and different is that we are offering expertise and information to our political leaders. This demonstrates in a very tangible way the need and value of social science research among policy making and governing.” — *Nicole R. Stokes*

“This advocacy work is important on so many levels, which is another way that it is so special. Students can always benefit from speaking activities, and you get plentiful practice in a group setting by attending meetings with congressional office staff! This is also very encouraging because of the uplifting team members you experience it with. Further, as a student it is imperative that you learn which disciplines your areas of study cover; by learning how integrated the social sciences are into your field, you can look at what you study in a new way. Lastly, this advocacy work makes you realize how what you eventually will contribute to society through your studies is impacted by our federal government, and how in turn trends in our government affect you. Since it’s so hands-on and region-specific, this advocacy work is uniquely suited to inspire students who might not yet understand all of the ways their own hard work is worth it.” — *Brenna Tosh*

What did you find most beneficial about your participation in Advocacy Day?

“As social scientists, we often focus very heavily on developing a compelling theoretical framework for our research, or conveying the sophistication of our methods. However, meeting with policy makers reminds me that we need to be mindful of the potential real-world impacts of our work. My participation also reminds me of how policy work and research are mutually influential – policy changes or debates can spark research ideas, just as research results can inform policy.” — *Deborah Carr*

“I benefited in a number of ways but it was fantastic to share time and expertise with social scientists who are passionate about what we do and who want to share their / our expertise with our political leaders to affect social change and impact public policy. As a political sociologist, this is the work I find most meaningful—the opportunity to work within our systems of government to affect change as engaged citizens.” — *Nicole R. Stokes*

“I was especially struck by the opportunity I had to access my congressional representatives. Standing in the same offices they work in, talking with their staff who inform the work they do and positions they take, and walking the halls and sidewalks of Capitol Hill was captivating and enlightening in a way that other experiences just can’t match!”

— *Brenna Tosh*

“My participation also reminds me of how policy work and research are mutually influential – policy changes or debates can spark research ideas, just as research results can inform policy.”

— *Deborah Carr*

Did you learn anything new, helpful, or exciting from your participation?

“I learned a lot about the behind-the-scenes workings of DC, and came away with great respect for our legislators and the bright, focused staffers and fellows who work with them.”

— *Deborah Carr*

“I greatly appreciated the help and guidance from our university government relations colleagues. It was a wonderful window into their work and to see how colleges and universities can work with political leaders on a day-to-day basis. — *Nicole R. Stokes*

“I learned just how dedicated to their districts that Senators and House Representatives are. It was really fun to see the flags of my hometown universities shown in the office of my home representative, for instance. In conversations with office staff and the COSSA team during training, I walked away with a stronger sense of what certain offices are concerned with over others and why they must prioritize certain topics. That in turn awarded me a greater sense of the complicated nature in which our government has to operate. With that, it was exciting to meet so many hopeful and kind office staffers who were insistent on spreading the message of the importance of the social sciences.”

— *Brenna Tosh*

Would you encourage other social scientists and students to engage in advocacy on behalf of the social sciences?

“Yes!!! This is not only an incredible chance to meet other budding or long-time professionals in your field, but you get to travel back home knowing you made your voice heard directly to our elected officials. The confidence and experience-boosting nature of the event is really rewarding, and a trip to experience Washington, DC on more than just a tourist experience stays with you forever. Our government is not as out of reach as you may think!” — *Brenna Tosh*

“Absolutely. This is a great experience for everyone from seasoned senior scholars to undergraduates. Avery, the BU undergraduate who participated, told me “the opportunity to go and speak about a field of research that I’m passionate about to receptive policymakers and experts was wonderful.” Another benefit is that it provides social science students a glimpse into career paths in government. I was very impressed by how smart and insightful the staffers were and learned that they come from a range of academic backgrounds including law degrees, PhDs in the social sciences and medial degrees.” — *Deborah Carr*

“I would highly recommend more social scientists to engage and participate. We are living in contested times with many large-scale social, political and economic challenges to solve domestically and internationally. Social Scientists must have a seat at this table to bring science and data informed decision making into the room as we seek to meet these challenges. Support for social science research is critical for us (as a society) to tackle these challenges with people-centered solutions. — *Nicole R. Stokes*

Brenna Tosh is an incoming senior at Cornell University studying China & Asia-Pacific Studies and Government. Tosh is from Southern California and while she normally attends school in New York, she spent this previous spring semester in Washington, D.C. taking classes and working as COSSA’s intern.

Dr. Nicole R. Stokes brings over 25 years of academic and administrative experience along with a personal and professional commitment to promoting equity to her current role as Division Head (Dean) for Social Sciences and Professor of Sociology at Pennsylvania State University at Abington. Stokes is a political sociologist, with scholarship consisting of three distinct areas of research—citizenship studies and the nation-state; international migration; and political systems, nationalism, and public policy. Stokes is also a peer reviewer for the following academic and professional journals: *Teaching Sociology* (Sage); *Gender and Society* (Sage); *International Sociology* (Sage); *Perspectives on Politics* (for the American Political Science Association) and *To Improve the Academy: Journal of Educational Development* (Wiley). Stokes serves on several boards and committee, including the American Council on Education Women’s Executive Leadership Council, Forum on Education Abroad, Delaware Valley-Philadelphia Chapter of the Fulbright Alumni Association, and the Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences.

Dr. Deborah Carr is a professor of sociology and director of the Center for Innovation in Social Science at Boston University. She has published widely on later-life health and family relationships, including more than 100 articles and chapters and several books. Her latest book, *Aging in America* was published by University of California Press in 2023. She is principal investigator of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) and a co-investigator on or advisor to several national surveys of aging. She is former editor-in-chief of *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* (2015-2020), and current editor-in-chief of *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (2022-2025). Carr received the 2022 Matilda White Riley Distinguished Scholar Award from the American Sociological Association section on Aging and the Life Course. Her work has been featured in the *New York Times*, CNN, and other media outlets. She received her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



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