

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

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Because We Need to Show Up to Have Our Voices Heard: Reflections from COSSA's 2024 Social Science Advocacy Day

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On April 8-9, 2024, over 60 social and behavioral science researchers, students, and advocates from 18 different states participated in [Social Science Advocacy Day](#). This annual event, the 10th annual organized by in 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 prioritizing funding for federal agencies and programs that support social and behavioral science research. Below are reflections from three advocates who participated: Emma Southern, an undergraduate student at American University; Dr. Laura Widman, Associate Professor of Psychology at North Carolina State University, and the founder of Teen Health Research, Inc.; and Dr. Aaryn L. Green, Interim Director of Research, Professional Development, and Academic Affairs at the American Sociological Association.

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

"Attending the COSSA Social Science Advocacy Day has been one of the highlights of my professional career. I've attended in-person 3 times now and I enjoy it more every time. It is amazing to walk the halls of Congress and get to share our passion for social sciences with our state representatives. I've also found the day of training before the day on the Hill to be really valuable. Wendy Naus, COSSA's Executive Director, has an amazing ability to simplify the really complex government budget process to make it understandable."

— Dr. Laura Widman



"Advocacy Day has truly been the highlight of my internship so far. As the current COSSA intern and an undergraduate student studying in DC, I was assigned to work with advocates from other states (I was placed on the teams for Minnesota and Ohio). I greatly enjoyed my time working with my team, learning from their experiences and backgrounds and hearing about their perspectives as residents of other states with their own specific issues. The two-day Advocacy Day programming gave us a balance of training, networking, and boots-on-the-ground advocacy, all of which I appreciated as a first-time advocate. I was most excited to be in the room where it happens after reading and writing about these issues throughout my college career." — Emma Southern



"My experience as an advocate during COSSA's Advocacy Day was exciting and impactful. Starting the event with a day's worth of sessions helped us to understand the task at hand and how to map out the stories we wanted to tell. As we listened to and connected with colleagues and COSSA staff, and heard from those working in government relations, I began to feel more confident and comfortable in the way I could advocate for support for the sciences and specifically my discipline of sociology. Of course, getting to watch the eclipse and attending a reception where I got to engage fellow advocates was a huge plus! This was my second time participating in an advocacy day, and the first with COSSA. Getting to visit Capitol Hill where historical decisions are made is exciting in and of itself; however, having the opportunity to join in on the action and draw clear connections between social research and policymaking was extremely important and rewarding. Speaking with staffers not only put a face to the mysterious idea of those who work "on the hill," but it reminded me of the relevance that the social sciences have to all human behavior and interaction. The overall experience was well-organized, enjoyable, and left me with wanting to do more."

— Dr. Aaryn Green

Why do you believe this advocacy work is important?

“I cannot emphasize enough the importance of face-to-face (or at the very least, personal) interactions on any topic, but especially for conversations with people in positions of power. Whether an expert or a layperson, a seasoned professional or a student, people value being heard when they advocate for something that is important to them. Communication will always be the foundation of solving problems, so it is essential that people have opportunities both to speak up and to listen. Advocacy work highlights pressing issues which may otherwise go unresolved or undiscussed, and it is indicative of the level of support a group or course of action has. Just like the social sciences, advocacy work is fundamentally rooted in our shared humanity.” — *Emma Southern*

“When you are on the Hill and see the many organizations and individuals who are trying to get their voices heard, it is a reminder that we have to show up and make sure our voices are also included. It's important that we share the way social sciences can benefit human lives and solve big problems.”

— *Dr. Laura Widman*

“Advocacy work is important because it bridges the gap between research and policy. So many social scientists entered their disciplines because of a genuine interest to better understand society, and to work to improve it. Still, there are not many opportunities for us to be trained on how to take the work from our disciplines and communicate it to the public or to those who influence the decisions that shape our lives. Conversely, so many politicians and policymakers see and discuss societal problems every single day, but haven't been given the tools, language, and resources to make evidenced-based arguments that champion solutions to these issues. In our meetings on the hill, we asked what policymakers needed from us, and so often what they were looking for was something that we could provide. Social science advocacy helps to close this mismatch, making it so that research reaches policy and that policy is informed, created, and carried out in real and beneficial ways.” — *Dr. Aaryn Green*

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

“Participating in Advocacy Day made me feel like I was part of something bigger than myself, as cliché as that might sound. COSSA's values of funding research and supporting the use of evidence to draft policy are simple but often taken for granted in politics. Advocating for these values felt purposeful and important for long-term and sustained progress. In a less abstract sense, I quite enjoyed meeting such a diverse range of people with expertise in different fields but who shared a common goal and interest.” — *Emma Southern*

“For me, the most beneficial part of participating in this event was getting to connect with fellow social scientists in a meaningful way and inviting others in to understand what it is we do. The conversations we had reminded me that the work I do is shared work and that as I advocate for continued support, there are so many others who are doing the same. As a sociologist and someone who has participated in and cares about activism, I know that this type of coalition building is key for sustaining society. It's also revitalizing to be around like minds, with shared interests.” — *Dr. Aaryn Green*

“I have loved developing personal connections with the staffers I've met. I felt supported and valued in every meeting, with staffers often asking how they can support our work and showing genuine interest in the research we are conducting.” — *Dr. Laura Widman*

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

“One thing I value from these trips is the ability to learn more about the work of my colleagues. It's exciting to hear about some of their latest research and realize what a difference they are making in our state and country.” — *Dr. Laura Widman*

“I gained a lot more insight into the agencies and offices that fund different kinds of social sciences. I also was able to gain a better understanding of the balancing game of funding, and how the things that so many of us researchers take for granted, like the Census, can easily get left out of the funding conversations if we don't openly advocate for them.” — *Dr. Aaryn Green*

“Absolutely! In addition to finally finding my limit when it comes to walking for a day in heels, I deepened my understanding of the budgeting process of the federal government and its many intricacies. I was reminded of the significance of personalization and sincerity, even when working with people whom you may not know well or with whom you may not see eye-to-eye. I also got a better picture of the daily work completed in congressional offices that do not draw the attention of the camera but are nevertheless essential for functionality.”

— *Emma Southern*

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

"I think it's extremely important for social scientists to engage in advocacy. There is social science research that engages with every aspect of human society. Therefore the policies that are being made to influence our lives must be informed by our work. As social scientists, we sometimes take for granted the information that we have been given access to, but our positionality comes with a responsibility to help advocate for improvements on all levels. As we continue to work, we should always aim to make impact. I would encourage those who can to do an advocacy day to really understand the importance of the social sciences to policy." — *Dr. Aaryn Green*

"I would encourage everyone to engage in advocacy on behalf of the social sciences because the social and behavioral sciences are prevalent in all aspects of our lives. Specifically, though, social scientists should be a part of this advocacy because they hold the unique position of being both the expert and the most directly affected community. Do not be discouraged if you are still a student or if your expertise is niche or if you feel limited in any other way—every voice matters, and you add a new perspective to the conversation!" — *Emma Southern*

"YES!! I would highly recommend attending an advocacy day! I remember feeling a bit anxious during my first trip, but that anxiety was unnecessary. The COSSA staff does a great job in preparing everyone for the day on the Hill and the meetings are always friendly. We need to show up and have our voices heard to ensure social science funding is prioritized!" — *Dr. Laura Widman*

Emma Southern is a senior at American University, graduating this May with a Bachelor of Art in Interdisciplinary Studies (Communication, Legal Institutions, Economics, and Government) with minors in History and Literature and a certificate in Community-Based Research. During her final semester as an undergraduate, she has worked at COSSA as the Government Relations and Public Policy Intern. After graduation, she plans to stay in the D.C. metropolitan area.

Dr. Aaryn L. Green, PhD, is the Interim Director of Research, Professional Development, and Academic Affairs at the American Sociological Association (ASA). Prior to joining ASA, she worked in student affairs and diversity, equity, and inclusion, and worked as a diversity and equity consultant for various educational and health organizations. Dr. Green completed a Postdoctoral Fellowship at John Carroll University and was a visiting lecturer of sociology at Case Western Reserve University. She is a three-time alum of the University of Cincinnati, where she received her BA, MA, and PhD, all in sociology.

Dr. Laura Widman is a licensed Clinical Psychologist, an Associate Professor of Psychology at North Carolina State University, and the founder of Teen Health Research, Inc. Dr. Widman's work is focused on adolescent sexual communication and the use of technology-based interventions to improve sexual health among young people. She has published nearly 100 research articles and her work has been featured in outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, and the *NBC Today Show*. Dr. Widman is also a co-author on the best-selling undergraduate human sexuality textbook, *Our Sexuality*.



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