

# Underfunded and under-resourced:

## COSSA's fight to keep social science research on the political agenda

Since 1981, the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) has worked in defence of social sciences in the United States, holding out against attempts to cut, eliminate or otherwise compromise federal social science research programmes. Made up of more than 100 organisations and through lobbying of state representatives on Capitol Hill, COSSA is well placed to ensure that social science research remains on the agenda, and as the key to solving some of today's most complex problems, and that's where it needs to stay.

The social sciences, or the study of society and human behaviour towards, and influence on, the world around us, remains one of the most underfunded research sectors in the United States. This is despite the potential for its contribution to the fields of economic growth, political choice and human happiness, amongst many other things.

Executive Director of the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA), Wendy Naus, believes that social and behavioural sciences are the key to tackling worldwide issues such as crime, natural and man-made hazards, educational and healthcare inequality and business efficiency. In this interview, *Research Features* caught up with her to find out how COSSA is ensuring that social and behavioural science research does not fall by the wayside as it has done in the past.

*Hi Wendy! Can you tell us more about your role as Executive Director of COSSA?*

COSSA is a non-profit advocacy organisation working to promote sustainable United States government funding for social and behavioural science research. I joined COSSA in 2014 during a particularly challenging time for the social and behavioural science research community. Our sciences were under assault by a couple of lawmakers who were looking

to prioritise government funding for research away from the social sciences.

As COSSA Executive Director, I represent the shared interests of our community to policymakers in the United States Congress and within the Executive Branch and White House. I am also responsible for the day-to-day operations of COSSA and the engagement of our member institutions and associations.

*Can you tell us more about COSSA's history, advocacy, mission and core principles?*

COSSA has roots dating back to the late 1960s when an informal group of social science associations would meet occasionally to exchange information and discuss concerns. In 1981, in response to large budget cuts to the social and behavioural science research programmes at the United States' National Science Foundation (NSF) proposed by President Reagan's administration, the associations formalised their relationship into a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy organisation.

Today, COSSA represents a diverse constituency, serving as a united voice for a broad network who care about a successful and vibrant social science research enterprise. Our present membership includes professional associations and scientific societies representing the various social and behavioural science disciplines, research



centres and institutes and United States colleges and universities. (More on our membership can be found here: [www.cossa.org/members](http://www.cossa.org/members)).

COSSA's advocacy and outreach efforts seek to: promote and protect social and behavioural science programmes administered by agencies across the United States federal government; increase the visibility and use of the social and behavioural sciences by policymakers in Congress and at federal agencies; inform the social and behavioural science research community, other stakeholders and the general public about government actions; and mobilise our community to take action when needed.

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We consider social and behavioural science to be part of the 'S' in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) enterprise and, though often misunderstood and underappreciated, social and behavioural research makes meaningful contributions to nearly every aspect of human life.

*Social and behavioural science research has never been more timely and important – why is this and is there enough funding supporting these areas of research?*

So many of the immediate challenges facing the United States – and the whole globe frankly – require solutions based

on sound, reliable science. Social and behavioural science research provides an evidence base that policymakers can use to produce science-backed strategies for addressing issues such as crime prevention, hazards resilience, healthcare for the underserved, ensuring the safety of our armed forces, access to effective

early childhood education and improved efficiency of American businesses. More specifically, findings from social and behavioural science help answer complex, human-centred questions such as: How to convince a community in the path of a tornado to heed warnings; What are the best strategies for slowing the HIV/AIDS epidemic, or more recently, the Ebola crisis; and How to support counter-terrorism efforts and prevent conflict.

Unfortunately, United States government funding for our sciences has not kept pace with the need for answers. The NSF, for example, supports about a quarter of all United States federally-funded basic scientific research conducted at American colleges and universities and is the largest single funder of university-based basic social and behavioural science research. Only about 5% of the total NSF budget of \$7.5 billion (2017) goes toward social science research, yet it supports around two-thirds of total federal funding for academic basic research in the social and behavioural sciences (excluding psychology). Looking at the United States research enterprise more broadly (which totals about \$37.9 billion), we estimate that less than 5% (\$1.9 billion) is invested in social and behavioural science.

*Can you tell us about the annual Science Policy Conference and Social Science Advocacy Day and what this involves?*

Heading into its fourth year, the COSSA Science Policy Conference and Social Science Advocacy Day brings together more than 100 social and behavioural scientists (i.e., COSSA members and other stakeholders) from around the



Wendy Naus became the fourth Executive Director of COSSA.

stakeholders head to Capitol Hill in multidisciplinary groups to meet with elected officials. The meetings allow advocates to share stories about how social science is helping people in the lawmaker's home state.

Past conferences have sought to equip the social science community with messages and tools they can use to engage with policymakers and the public, even when they are not in Washington, D.C. Topics have included the use of social science by the media, the importance of social science to private industry and tactics for effectively communicating the value of such research.

*COSSA work closely with the broad community of members, organisations, federal agencies and congressional colleagues who all care about the future of the social and behavioural sciences – why are these collaborations so important?*

## Unfortunately, United States government funding for our sciences has not kept pace with the need for answers.

United States for a day of discussion about federal policy impacting our sciences. It is followed by the only annual, coordinated advocacy day in support of all of the social and behavioural sciences, in which researchers and other social science

We are fortunate to work alongside a wide array of partners. First and most important are our members, who provide us with expertise and direction on the issues facing their individual disciplines. At COSSA, we aim to provide our community with resources they can use

that support social and behavioural science research. Decisions are made, felt and influenced by many different organisations within and outside the government. Focusing your advocacy and engagement activities on only one sector can significantly limit your impact.

to effectively advocate on behalf of their field. Constituents (i.e. voters) make the most influential advocates. We also work as part of numerous coalitions that advocate for specific issues or federal agencies ranging from agricultural statistics to STEM education. Participation in coalitions is an effective way to amplify your message and to show solidarity on an issue.

Lastly, we work directly with federal agencies and congressional colleagues

*During your time as Executive Director at COSSA, are there any personal achievements that you are particularly proud of?*

Over the last few years, I have worked to modernise COSSA and social science advocacy and to raise the visibility of our sciences within the STEM sector. In addition to enhancing the effectiveness of our own advocacy, though, the broader United States scientific community has become active in defending social science. In recent years, national associations and societies representing broad fields of science (e.g., computer science), higher education associations, university presidents and corporate heads, have all spoken out publicly about the federal government's necessary role in funding social and behavioural science research.

Another significant achievement for COSSA is our new 'Why Social Science?' initiative, which since 2017, has been working to promote the value of social and behavioural science research to public audiences, encouraging its widespread use in tackling challenges

of national importance. The primary home for the activity is a new COSSA microsite ([www.whysocialscience.com](http://www.whysocialscience.com)), which serves as a centralised hub for social science information written for a lay audience. The central feature of the site is a blog where guest contributors share exciting developments in the social sciences. In 2017, pieces from a diverse set of contributors were published, from non-social science disciplines, voices from outside the scientific community and even officials working in United States government agencies.

*What further work can be done to support these areas of research? What does the future hold for COSSA?*

The challenge to our community as we look to the future will be balancing the need to stay proactive in our outreach and advocacy while playing defensively as discrete attacks arise. We have to resist the urge to be lured in by negative rhetoric and instead advocate for social and behavioural science on our terms. The true value of COSSA is the opportunity for what

may otherwise be dispersed disciplines to come together for a common cause to pursue shared goals. I am excited to see what our future has in store.

• **For further information about COSSA and their work, please visit their website at [www.cossa.org](http://www.cossa.org).**

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