

# WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

## Because It Is in the National Interest, Both in Interdisciplinary Work and on Its Own

*By Daniel Lipinski, Ph.D., United States Representative, Illinois' Third District, U.S. House of Representatives  
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As a scientist, it is easy to become absorbed in the field or even subfield you are studying and simply focus on the value of your own research within that area of study. Looking back at my time as a political scientist, I understand how easy it is to have that narrow focus and not look at the broader impacts. But today, as the value of federal funding for scientific research is being challenged in Congress, scientists can no longer afford to do this. This is especially true for social scientists.

I serve on the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, and for more than eight years I have been Chairman or Ranking Member of the Research and Technology Subcommittee which has oversight over the National Science Foundation (NSF). I authored the last long-term reauthorization of the NSF and continually fight for increased funding for this top-notch agency, which is emulated around the globe and has helped the U.S. lead the world in scientific research. While NSF funding for all sciences has slowed greatly since 2011, social science research has been specifically targeted for cuts. In the House, we have seen attempts to defund social sciences by eliminating funding for the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences (SBE) Directorate at the NSF. All of my colleagues on the Science Committee can attest to the fact that I have consistently and passionately made the case for the value of social science research by laying out numerous examples of how it has benefitted our nation. These include:

- ◇ Helping us strengthen the weakest link in cybersecurity – human factors – and determining how changes in behavior can eliminate vulnerabilities.
- ◇ Research into cross-cultural, non-verbal communication, which has helped the army improve the way it trains its soldiers and lessened conflicts with foreign citizens.
- ◇ A better system of matching kidney donors with patients that has saved lives, developed by experts in game theory and market dynamics.
- ◇ Research on the effects of technology on distracted driving, which is helping inform lawmakers and automakers on how to save lives on the road.

Perhaps a better understanding of the value of social science research to our nation is breaking through to the public, because now we are hearing a new argument for slashing funding for the SBE directorate at NSF: if social and behavioral science research adds value to an interdisciplinary initiative, the other NSF directorates participating in the initiative could fund that element of the project. Therefore, we don't need to fund SBE. There are at least two problems with this approach.

First, if SBE funding is gutted, progress in the social sciences will slow, and its community of experts will shrink, along with its capacity to add value to other research initiatives. In the long term, America's capabilities in cybersecurity, medicine, military planning, disaster preparedness and aid, and countless other fields will suffer. For interdisciplinary research to be transformative, the core research it draws from must be strong.

Second, NSF only supports the highest quality SBE research, guided by the expertise of the scientists in the SBE directorate. If those positions are cut and SBE research is supported only as an add-on to other projects, the quality of the research will inevitably suffer. And an engineering program officer, no matter how good they are in their field, cannot be expected to have the expertise to assess the social science component of a proposal.

I believe we should encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, but we must also maintain support for core social science research. **That's because social science research is in the national interest, not just for the value it adds in interdisciplinary work but also because of the value it produces on its own.**



*Dan Lipinski is a proud native of Illinois' Third Congressional District, which includes parts of the southwest side of Chicago, southwest Cook County, and northeastern Will County. Now in his seventh term, Rep. Lipinski has distinguished himself as a champion of the middle class. He is a leader on transportation issues, the promotion of American manufacturing, job creation through research and technological innovation, strengthening Buy American laws, restoring fiscal responsibility, and honoring America's veterans and seniors. He has earned a reputation as a legislator who brings people together to solve problems, even during historic congressional gridlock. Lipinski is the most senior member from Illinois on the Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, serving on three subcommittees: Aviation; Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials; and Highways and Transit. On the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, he is the third most senior Democrat and serves as Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Research and Technology, and also sits on the Subcommittee on Energy. Prior to serving in Congress, he taught American Government at the college level, including at the University of Notre Dame.*



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