

# When Sociology is on the Chopping Block: Demonstrating Departmental Value in the Face of External Threats

Updated March 2018

*This handout was originally developed for a session at the 2015 ASA Department Chairs Preconference led by Kris DeWelde, Director and Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, Professor of Sociology, College of Charleston. [deweldek@cofc.edu](mailto:deweldek@cofc.edu)*

---

Our current higher education environment is one in which threats to degree programs come in myriad forms and from unexpected sources. It is critical to be appropriately responsive to the source of the threat (e.g., legislators, board members, community leaders, media, administrators) and always with attention to the institutional context.

The lists below are not exhaustive. They are meant to help you brainstorm possible avenues for responding to attacks. Keep in mind that not all the information and data you gather will be used in a response, but it likely will be important to have more to draw from than you'll ultimately need.

## **Things to consider:**

If the threat is external to the institution, work with administrators in crafting responses and presentation of material – do not work at cross-purposes with your university/college leaders. They may be your strongest allies in this context. Give them everything they might need to help defend your program. Be a resource!

- Also, while we may understand and appreciate the value of a liberal education, many external constituents in positions of power are less sympathetic to this, and focus instead on the “bottom line.” Intangible benefits (e.g., engaged citizens for a robust democracy) may not sway these decision makers. Further, legislators and board members are especially interested in how graduates contribute to your state's economy, and not necessarily how they are earning awards as graduate students at top-notch institutions elsewhere.

If the threat is internal, leverage existing relationships with community partners, faculty in other departments, and the contributions of the department/program to the university (e.g., Student Credit Hours, General Education courses, required courses for other majors).

- Consider your institutional mission, and how your department contributes: Are the faculty and/or students contributing to the diversity of the institution? What is the impact on grants and awards? Is the scholarship being produced interdisciplinary, globally focused, community engaged? Are faculty doing public sociology, influencing public perception of key social issues (maybe even local concerns)? What kinds of community service are faculty and students participating in? How would your local area be impacted negatively without Sociology students and faculty (perhaps service-learning and internships are relevant to consider)? How would cutting the program impact public opinion and/or fundraising?

Sociology programs often cost less than others at your institution (salaries, resources). In fact, sociology departments are often in positions of effectively subsidizing other programs. Explore this angle.

### External support:

The ASA is a resource – call and reach out to them directly, especially the Departmental Resources Group: <http://www.asanet.org/drg>. They are more familiar with this kind of threat than we who are encountering it for the first time. Reports and briefings have excellent and practical data (links below).

- It may be useful to make the point that faculty with national networks connect students to the labor force. ASA has a strong national network for faculty and students. Consider also your regional organizations.

Reach out to the American Association of University Professors.

- Explore the AAC&U reports on the benefits of liberal education, or success of liberal arts majors. Recent Hart & Associates reports indicate skills employers want ([https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2013\\_EmployerSurvey.pdf](https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf)).

### Data sources (consider using a combination of national- and local-level data):

Explore PayScale.com. If you can gather salary information for your graduates, consider:

- How close in dollars to the median are your graduates' salaries?
- Is your program more impressive than most in terms of percent growth?
- Which so-called "practical" majors does your program outperform? (But, if other programs are under threat, try not to throw each other under the bus!)
- See <http://www.payscale.com/college-salary-report/common-jobs-formajors/social-sciences>

Community & Population Survey has discipline-specific data on careers and majors.

- Show the range of careers that Sociology graduates at all levels go into. How might those careers contribute to *your* state's economy?
- Keep in mind that many studies looking at income after graduation combine social work with sociology. That tends to bring down the overall salary averages. Disaggregate when possible, or point this out.

Search archives of *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* for information and data.

- Look more broadly at other disciplines--for example Geography has in the past often been targeted for closure.

See Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce:

<https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/from-hard-times-to-better-times/>

Review Academically Adrift (2011) Arum & Roska. For example, they provide data showing that scores from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (standardized exam) increase for students who have taken

more social science courses. Higher scores on the CLA translate into better outcomes post-graduation, lower debt, etc. (See also: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/01/25/next-phase-academically-adriftresearch-links-low-cla-scores-unemployment> )

While technically not a Humanities discipline, links can be made: *Surprise: Humanities Degrees Provide Great Return on Investment* <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffreydorfman/2014/11/20/surprise-humanities-degreesprovide-great-return-on-investment/>

The American Medical Association now includes sociology-specific questions on the MCAT. They seem to understand that in order to provide health care to all, doctors need to know something about diverse cultures and marginalized populations. You can find information on how to support pre-med students prepare for the MCAT and build department resilience at the same time on the ASA website's page <http://www.asanet.org/teaching-learning/department-leaders/mcat-and-sociology>

Collect data on your graduates. Even if your institution has an alumni relations office, the data you may need may not be that which they track (e.g., salaries just after graduation and then 5-10 years out). Develop a mechanism for keeping in touch with students. For example, have them create LinkedIn pages before graduating, create a Facebook alumni page, maintain a newsletter that features their accomplishments regularly. Track where they attend graduate school, and the outcomes of those departments. Students (current and former) also can be outstanding advocates if testimonials or statements are desired.

With the heavy emphasis on STEM fields/ majors, it may be useful to remind administrators that sociology is, in fact, a STEM discipline. See: [http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/feb13/vp\\_0213.html](http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/feb13/vp_0213.html)

### **Useful links to explore:**

What Top Employers are Looking for in Today's Economy and why Business Schools need to rethink their Curricula <http://www.hult.edu/blog/survey-of-senior-business-leaders-reveals-ongoing-deficit-of-job-ready-mba-grads-press-release/>

The Major Pipeline: Linking College Majors to Occupations <http://www.unc.edu/~ncaren/majors/>  
(Really cool infographic!)

ASA Briefs & Articles [www.asanet.org/research-and-publications/research-sociology/research-briefs/jobs-careers-sociological-skills-early-employment-experiences-2012-sociology-majors](http://www.asanet.org/research-and-publications/research-sociology/research-briefs/jobs-careers-sociological-skills-early-employment-experiences-2012-sociology-majors) (There are many reports here that are specific to undergraduate programs, graduate programs, faculty, etc. These are especially useful!)

*Communicating Social Science* by Sally Hillsman [http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/feb15/vp\\_0215.html](http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/feb15/vp_0215.html)

*Searching for a Job with an Undergraduate Degree in Sociology* by Margaret Vitullo  
[http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/septoct09/job\\_0909.html](http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/septoct09/job_0909.html)

Why Majors Matter

[https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2011/06/16/connor\\_essay\\_on\\_why\\_majors\\_matter\\_in\\_how\\_much\\_college\\_students\\_learn](https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2011/06/16/connor_essay_on_why_majors_matter_in_how_much_college_students_learn)

**Note:** *These resources were compiled with suggestions from members of Sociologists for Women in Society's listserv, Margaret Vitullo of the ASA, Glenn Whitehouse, former Associate Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Florida Gulf Coast University, and many other colleagues.*