

**Remarks to the Consortium of Social Science Associations**  
**Senator Elizabeth Warren**  
**November 4, 2013**

*As Prepared for Delivery*

Thank you for inviting me here today. I am very pleased to be speaking to a group that recognizes the value of academic research and is willing to get out there and fight to defend it.

You may not know this about me, but I am a former social science researcher myself. Thirty years ago, as a baby law professor, I received a National Science Foundation grant to support an extensive empirical research project on the causes of consumer bankruptcy. My coauthors and I constructed a massive data set of U.S. bankruptcy filings and analyzed that database to determine what was pushing families over the edge financially. Over time, we expanded and developed that project so that today the result of that grant – the Bankruptcy Data Project – is still up and running, still collecting new data. As a young scholar, I turned in a whole new direction because of support from the NSF, and my coauthors and I created a database that has permitted more than a dozen other scholars to produce ground-breaking research as well.

Through this project, we exposed one of the great misconceptions that many academics and policymakers had about bankruptcy. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of the time, we showed that the main driver for bankruptcy isn't irresponsible spending – though that is sometimes part of it. The main drivers of bankruptcy are major life events: a medical problem, a lost job, or a family breakup. Starting with that work, I went on to explore the increasing economic vulnerability of America's once-strong middle class. Without initial government support, the Bankruptcy Data Project would not have allowed us to understand the economic risks that are increasingly crushing our middle-class families.

My experience is just one out of so many NSF grantees who have used their funding to change how we think about the economy, human behavior, our communities and our political structure.

Our country faces some tough challenges today. We are falling behind our economic competitors in educational achievement. Families are increasingly being squeezed by stagnant wages and the rising cost of housing, health care, and education. Americans are getting older, putting pressure on our labor market, healthcare system, and retirement plans. Health costs for everyone are through the roof – and, even as we pay more, our health outcomes are no better than any other industrialized nation. These are just a few of the major issues chipping away at our middle class and threatening our economic stability.

As a country, we owe it to our children to address these problems. For a lot of problems out there, we know what to do. We know we need to invest more in rebuilding our infrastructure. We know we need a farm bill and to maintain food stamps. We know we need to fix our broken immigration system.

But in a lot of areas, we don't have all the answers. And what we need is not just political will – but rigorous social and behavioral sciences research to provide insight into key questions –

- How do we best overcome the effects of poverty to ensure that all children get an education?
- Can we reduce illness by getting more Americans to engage in healthy behaviors?
- How do we encourage young people to save for retirement?

Social and behavioral research is a key part of finding the answers to these and a whole lot more questions that underpin some of our most pressing issues.

Politicians from both parties have an intuitive understanding of the value of government support for research – at least when it comes to more technical disciplines. For decades, biomedical research that is funded by the NIH has enjoyed broad, bipartisan support. The same is true for physics and engineering research underwritten by the National Science Foundation or decades worth of grants from the Defense Department. In each of these instances, there is a national consensus around government support for basic scientific research, because everyone understands that our economy and our society thrive as a direct consequence of our improved understanding of the world around us.

Although it isn't always recognized, the same is true for social and behavioral science research. Social science research is a compass for policymakers. When we face a public policy challenge, thoughtful, high-quality research points us in the right direction. As a result, our economy and society improve when we have rigorous social science research. Just think of some of the impact that research studies have had:

- Research taught us that having pediatricians talk to parents about reading can have a meaningful effect on a child's vocabulary.

- Research taught us that reminder systems for patients increase compliance with drug prescriptions – and that reminder systems for doctors increase the number of life-saving cancer screenings that they perform.
- And research convinced the federal government to drastically simplify the application for college student financial aid by showing the challenges families face in completing the forms.

Last week, I called for a doubling of our investment in scientific and biomedical research, and for more year-to-year certainty for the funding of those investments. I focused on the National Institutes of Health, and the way the NIH seeds valuable biomedical research that leads to new treatments and innovations in healthcare. But NIH also supports behavioral and social science research, because we recognize that understanding the behavioral factors that affect health is just as important as developing new drugs. And all of our scientific research – whether funded by the NIH, the NSF, or other agencies – is critical to our advancement.

Social science research is part of that equation. Put simply, if we want to make sound choices for the future – choices that are based on facts and science, not assertions and assumptions – choices that will actually solve our most pressing problems, and not just make us feel good about doing something – we need research in economics, law, education, sociology. Otherwise, we're just doing some very expensive guessing.

Given the central importance of such work to the effectiveness of policymakers, you might expect that there would be broad support for this work. And yet, federal support for social sciences research is constantly under attack.

There are some in Congress who see this research as unnecessary and superfluous, and it has become a perennial target for budget cuts in the eyes of some lawmakers. Just this year, Congress passed a spending bill that limited NSF funding for political science research only to those projects certified as "promoting national security or the economic interests of the United States."

That's a sympathetic restriction on an easy target – if you don't think too hard about it. But Congress would never presume to tell the NIH what biomedical research projects are and are not worth funding. Congress would never prevent the Defense Department from funding physics research that didn't have an immediate, pre-determined military application. And Congress would never tell the NSF not to support university chemists out of fear that they might discover something that some policymakers might prefer not to know.

For whatever reason, these sorts of restrictions, based in politics and not fact, are frequently discussed when it comes to this sort of work. But those restrictions make as little sense for social science as they do for technical disciplines. Knowledge is knowledge; discovery is discovery. No one should have an interest in perpetuating ignorance.

Over the long term these targeted efforts to cut our investment in social science research will threaten the ability of Congress to make good decisions by cutting off the pipeline of rigorous analysis that is necessary to help identify what policies will and won't work. Put simply, when policymakers tie the hands of social science researchers, they are tying their own hands as well.

Support for research is the starting point for all of our innovations, and the federal government must maintain its commitment to funding research in the social sciences. If we want to be able to respond to the challenges that face us in a rapidly changing world, we must have a strong research community that can partner with policymakers to build solutions.

Social science research is critical to developing a safer, stronger America. I applaud the Consortium for fighting for the social sciences, and I am proud to join you.

Thank you.