Consortium for Science, Policy & Outcomes
at Arizona State University

Memorandum: Design Choices for the Future of Social and Behavioral Sciences at NSF and Beyond

September 2nd, 2026

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Opinions here reflect those of the author and his analysis of comments made by participants at a Chatham House Rule event. For comments related to this report, please contact cspodc@asu.edu.

Executive Summary

The social and behavioral sciences play an important part in our science policy ecosystem for how science and broader society can solve problems and learn about the world and ourselves. Design choices about how to fund and organize social and behavioral sciences can matter significantly for society. Currently, the Social, Behavioral and Economic (SBE) Science Directorate at the National Science Foundation (NSF) is a key part of how the social and behavioral sciences are funded, integrated, and shaped. The FY 2027 budget requests to terminate the budget for an overall SBE directorate at NSF. This is not an advocacy memo but seeks to provide context and design considerations for consideration of the future of SBE and the social and behavioral sciences. The below memo summarizes ways in which both SBE and the social sciences can be misunderstood, how social and behavioral sciences provide key information needed to make progress on societal problems, and ways in which SBE could help orient research to help society.

CSPO convened a discussion-focused event that required participants to advocate for three alternative organizational goals and structures for future SBE funding and management. After assessing the ensuing discussion and our analysis, we provide key design considerations for what the future of SBE (as a research field and institution) should be at the NSF and beyond.

Key design considerations include the need to:

- Connect high-quality research to use through institutional design and boundary spanning.
- Some SBE disciplinary capabilities need to be preserved from methods, data and workforce capabilities
- Integrate SBE without reducing social science to a service role – holistic analysis is valuable.
- SBE directorate can be a needed hub for interaction across the social sciences
- Increased public participation in informing SBE and shaping interdisciplinary research agendas at NSF and beyond are worthwhile.
- Consider how to define basic vs applied social sciences

Workshop Discussions and Approach

Titled 'Social and Behavioral Science for Solving Global Futures Problems,' CSPO held an invite only conversation on July 13, 2026 with thirty participants ranging from academia, non-governmental organizations, science societies, former government staff as well as practitioners that use social science to help solve practical problems for society. The goal of this CSPO Conversation was to help ideate options and principles for the future of social and behavioral science funding at NSF and beyond. The event was focused on considering design and policy principles for the social and behavioral sciences within the U.S. government's broader science enterprise.

The speakers and commentators at the event provided historical context and discussed the science policy implications of the FY 2027 President's Budget Request that proposed eliminating the National Science Foundation's Directorate for Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE) and its programs. The historian Mark Solovey's book, *Social Science for What? Battles over Public Funding for the 'Other Sciences' at the National Science Foundation*, provided some key background context for the event, as framed in Pirtle's review of the book.

The event was held under the Chatham House Rule, which stipulates that ideas can be shared from the event but that they cannot be attributed to an individual. The event was not meant to produce consensus views and statements below should be viewed as representing individual commentators. Pirtle, as memo author, synthesized and performed a plausibility assessment of claims mentioned here, but does not fully endorse all points made.

On nomenclature: in general, when referring to the specific organizational structure of the NSF SBE directorate or specific science funded by SBE, I will use the acronym SBE with appropriate context. When talking about the importance of social and behavioral sciences in general, I will use that phrase, thus distinguishing the two.

NSF's SBE Directorate: By the Numbers

NSF's website for SBE describes its underlying divisions as follows:

- Division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences (BCS): Promotes investigation of psychological, linguistic, anthropological and geographic sciences, including human origins, brain development and learning, and archaeology.
- Division of Social and Economic Sciences (SES): Invests in the study of how societies, organizations and economies function, including how decisions are made, how institutions function and how scientific and technological progress are pursued.
- SBE Office of Multidisciplinary Activities (SMA): Cultivates interdisciplinary research and training in the social, behavioral and economic sciences, including capacity-building at minority-serving institutions, international collaborations and the ethical conduct of scientific research.
- National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES): Collects and reports data on the science and engineering workforce, U.S. competitiveness in science and technology and the progress of education in these fields.

For FY 2027, the SBE budget is proposed to go to zero, with the disbandment of SBE as a directorate, and the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NSCES), is proposed to continue but reduce to $44M.[1]. All facts here are from the President's Budget Request.

Measure	SBE excl NCSES	NCSES	Total SBE
FY2024 actual operating level	**$216M**	$74M	**$290M**
FY2025 current plan	**$150M**	$74M	$224M
FY2026 Proposed Budget	**$50M**	$44M	$94M
FY2027 Proposed Budget	**$0M**	$44M	$44M

For our purposes we will separate out the budget for the statistic tracking program called NSCES which is proposed to continue existing but at a reduced budget. The current SBE annual budget for programs appears to have been reduced to $50M based on the FY2026 President's Budget Request, which is a reduction from its $216M annual budget in FY2024**.** It should be noted that SBE funds basic social science disciplines as well as more cross-cutting thematic research.

Value and Misconceptions about SBE and Social and Behavioral Sciences

Our event began with a series of talks and commentaries from experts on the SBE directorate, the role of SBE-funded research in informing several societal challenges, and audience discussion. The following reflect my view of key points and insights from the conversation about the role of SBE and the social and behavioral sciences as they exist today.

The Need for Social and Behavioral Sciences in Solving Societal Problems

- Current U.S. government priorities to help the American people require social science. The Gold Standard Science Executive Order includes behavioral and social science as an area where excellence is needed[2].
- Delivering on outcomes for all Americans requires that science and engineering activities engage with people, institutions, and policy, which are core within social science research methods.

[1] The FY2024 request proposed $360.60 million for the SBE Directorate, consisting of $120.41M for Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, $121.83M for Social and Economic Sciences, $28.12M for Multidisciplinary Activities, and $90.24M for the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES). So the proposed research/program side excluding NCSES was $270.36M. Congress ultimately gave NSF substantially less than requested. NSF had requested $11.355B overall but received $9.06B. NSF's resulting FY2024 Current Plan allocated $290.29M to SBE as a whole. NSF's later budget documents break that $290.29M explicitly into $216.22M for "SBE Programs" and $74.07M for NCSES. The FY2026 Proposed budget was as shown, but I was not able to confirm what the final appropriated value for SBE was for this FY as it was not called out in appropriation.

[2] The Gold Standard Science Executive Order's call for interdisciplinary science implies that social science should be a part of many complex problems. Reference Section 2(b): "Scientific information" means factual inputs, data, models, analyses, technical information, or scientific assessments related to such disciplines as the behavioral and social sciences, public health and medical sciences, life and earth sciences, engineering, physical sciences, or probability and statistics. This includes any communication or representation of knowledge such as facts or data, in any medium or form, including textual, numerical, graphic, cartographic, narrative, or audiovisual forms."

- Some have claimed that the majority of the scientific workforce is politically 'liberal', which can create challenges for scientists being seen as trusted partners in solving problems, and increases the potential for science funding to become political targets.

What are the SBE sciences? Addressing misunderstandings

- SBE provides core funding to social and behavioral science disciplines such as economics, psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and related fields.
- SBE as a directorate has already been partnering significantly with the other NSF directorates to provide needed social science expertise on major solicitations and to enable interdisciplinary research efforts, and it has the potential to do even more collaboration there.
- Misconceptions exist about the role that social sciences may play in complex problems. Efforts to just 'bolt on' additional social scientists onto an existing research agenda are less likely to succeed.
- Separate SBE from metascience: Metascience, sometimes called science of science, is valuable and the recent White House report, *Science: a New Golden Age*, has called for every major science agency to create a metascience unit to help increase benefits from funded research. This is a quite different function from what SBE does today and combining the two might cause friction.
- Just as the natural sciences are recognized to have freedom to pursue curiosity-driven research without the need to always focus on applications, so too should some social sciences be free to research for curiosity's sake. But there are no guarantees or easy answers to justify how much funding should be available for such work.

SBE Successes Noted at the Workshop:

Several workshop participants highlighted the impact of sciences funded by SBE. Social and behavioral sciences play a key role in the broader science policy enterprise and are important at shaping how science can serve society. Examples include:

SBE making research contributions that span new fields:

- Game theory and auction design shaped the U.S. approach to allocating radio spectrum. Decades of fairly fundamental work in game theory and auction design, including NSF-supported research by Robert Wilson and Paul Milgrom, eventually became the basis for the FCC's system for allocating radio spectrum. Those auctions have generated more than $120 billion in federal revenue.
- SBE supported early gains in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) which greatly helps industry and society. Early NSF investments through Geography and Spatial Sciences helped develop GIS methods that are now widely used across engineering, geology, biology, public health, disaster response, and urban planning.
- Other claims also highlighted that SBE research made significant benefits for cybersecurity research, supply chains, technological adoption, program evaluation, and many other domains often treated as primarily technical.

Why behavioral science matters:

- Better hurricane forecasts do not produce better outcomes unless people receive, understand, trust, and act on warnings. SBE research has examined risk communication, evacuation decisions, and the design of warning systems.
- Similarly, supply-chain resilience depends not just on identifying critical materials, but on understanding how firms respond to shortages, sunk investments, uncertainty, and policy incentives.
- National-security research supported by SBE has also examined why vigilance declines in tasks such as baggage screening and military surveillance, how humans work with AI in complex decision environments, and the ethical and policy problems associated with information system vulnerabilities for space systems.

Three Potential SBE Futures for Participant Deliberation

In order to encourage participant deliberation and exploration of alternatives for the future of SBE, CSPO developed three scenarios for the future of SBE and how it is organized. These scenarios were created based on exploring a few potential high-level functional goals for what U.S. funding of social and behavioral science should pursue and achieve. This section describes the scenarios and the next discusses participant inputs about them.

Scenario 1, Preserve and Reform the Current SBE Directorate, has two main functional objectives for SBE research. One is to support high-quality research in the core SBE disciplines, which therefore feeds into a significant amount of methods, data collection, and future research. It also funds some more applied work across various areas, including collaborations with other directorates that are meant to advance broader national capabilities. In this sense, the SBE Directorate as it exists today has both a disciplinary function and an applied, or societal, function. The scope of which societal problems it helps contribute to is based on decisions made by SBE leadership, as well as NSF leadership, attempting to connect that work toward outcomes.

Scenario 2, Remodel SBE for applied social science, involving an increased applied social science function, involves NSF being used toward many more targeted problems. The exact scope of how this could be accomplished was left open to tables to implement. Perhaps NSF would be more collaborative with other agencies, but the clear intent is that it would be an applied-benefits organization. This scenario was left undescribed in terms of the details of how solicitations and other activities would be framed.

Scenario 3, Organize research by domain or public mission, casts the focus of analysis as solving global futures problems that are transdisciplinary in nature. These problems can require a mix of various kinds of research that could be roughly categorized as basic and applied. The driving function of this model would be to assume that there needs to be holistic and functional integration of various scientific activities, including tie-ins into practice and execution by mission agencies

Scenarios 2 and 3 explored options that were seen as potentially significant alternatives to the current SBE. It should be noted that these three design options could be in principle implemented simultaneously, with existing SBE organizational structure and funding continuing, expanding applied social science work, and also more deeply encourage domain-based research approaches.

Table 1: Notional SBE Futures Scenarios, provided by CSPO for discussion purposes

	SBE Future Title	Core Function	Description
1	**Preserve and reform SBE**	Excellent Research in SBE disciplines Shape interdisciplinary research efforts to help address social and behavioral insights	Retain a dedicated directorate and its disciplinary programs, while strengthening cross-directorate research, public connection, and the links between investigator-driven work and societal outcomes.
2	**Remodel SBE around applied social science**	Specific help in problem-solving and resolving societal issues	Keep an SBE organization, but shift its center of gravity toward mission-oriented research, decision support, science and innovation policy, and evaluation. Challenge programs, empowered program officers, and partnerships with mission agencies or philanthropy could connect research more directly to use.
3	**Organize research by domain or public mission**	Enable research and project activities in domain areas (such as transportation, computing, etc) to holistically work together to make progress and solve problems.	Eliminate SBE as a separate directorate and embed social and behavioral research across NSF, other mission-focused government agencies, and theme-based portfolios such as agriculture, transportation, health, or resilience. A coordination office or percentage set-aside could help maintain cross-cutting attention

Design Tradeoffs, Risks and Benefits of Different SBE Futures

Event attendees were randomly assigned to one of three scenarios and asked to develop an implementation approach and to advocate for it. In total there were six groups with two groups focused on each scenario. The exercise was not a vote, and table arguments should not be read as endorsements. The participant claims suggest potential pitfalls and opportunities that could apply to each scenario, and suggest key tradeoffs that exist.

Table 2: Highlighting Participant Observed Strengths/Challenges with Each SBE Future

	SBE Future Title	Participant Observed Strengths to Scenario	Participant Observed Risks and Limitations
1	**Preserve and reform SBE**	This model preserves intellectual cohesion, methods, data, expertise, and training pathways. A central home can also convene communities and support sustained collaboration across NSF, leading to interdisciplinary collaborations across directorates.	It can be unclear to what end reform should aim. Potentially focusing SBE research on being ready for use in societal problems could be of value. SBE could also be assigned an unfair burden to prove public value that the rest of the NSF may not face.
2	**Remodel SBE around applied social science**	The model could produce more visible progress on public problems, faster learning with users, and stronger feedback between research and implementation. One group strongly focused on how to empower project managers to be boundary spanners, to work with societal groups to try to tie research to outcomes.	Who defines what is basic or applied, and how can this be done without politicizing research? A strong applied turn could weaken foundational research, career pathways, and long-term capability. It also raises hard questions about who selects missions, how political cycles shape portfolios, and whether SBE should evaluate programs across all of NSF.
3	**Organize research by domain or public mission**	Working in a domain model could help make progress on integrated societal problems and not relegate social science to an instrumental role. Integration could place human and institutional dimensions closer to technical decisions, increase mission relevance, and disperse support across a wider and potentially more resilient funding base. Groups assumed that for Social and behavioral sciences to have impact, then significant new funding sources outside NSF would have to be explored.	Dispersal could fragment knowledge communities, duplicate effort, remove a convening hub, and leave curiosity-driven work or workforce development without a durable sponsor. Philanthropies and universities cannot be assumed to replace federal research infrastructure. Both tables advocating for this scenario assumed that some new funding for social sciences had to be unlocked from other parts of government.

A key tradeoff and tension that was discussed across all scenarios was the way in which loss of research leadership in the core SBE disciplines could have negative impacts. One participant claimed that funding the core SBE disciplinary sciences are "necessary but not sufficient." Preserving the disciplinary core is necessary to sustain methods, expertise, data, and future researchers that help in some societal problems. However, they felt it was not sufficient to ensure that federal research is connected to public missions or used effectively, and more was needed to ensure benefit to society.

Despite random assignment and required advocacy, the groups identified ways in which social and behavioral research can benefit society while deploying it more ambitiously. Embedding researchers

throughout government may deepen integration, but distributed projects do not by themselves maintain disciplinary communities. As was commented and affirmed by multiple participants, social science cannot simply be sprinkled across technical programs and expected to reproduce the knowledge base which SBE funding currently enables.

The discussion also revealed a separate institutional demand for enabling SBE to support an applied mission model: an entity or function that works across domains, connects research with contexts of use, evaluates outcomes, and supports learning across programs. Participants often projected that demand onto SBE.

Important Institutional Capabilities for SBE

Based on discussion and comments during the scenario advocacy and our analysis, the following design considerations are worth highlighting separate from the SBE futures scenarios, highlighting capabilities that may be worth preserving:

- **Connect high-quality research to use through institutional design.** Boundary-spanning organizations (which connect researchers with external groups such as policymakers or users), empowered program officers, coproduction with users, and better incentives matter greatly, regardless of the organizational construct for funding SBE.
- **Some SBE capabilities need to be preserved**: Methods, longitudinal data, disciplinary networks, and training pipelines require stable institutional support.
- **Integrate SBE without reducing social science to a service role.** Social and behavioral researchers should help frame problems and produce knowledge, not merely translate findings from projects and other technical fields.
- **SBE directorate can be a needed hub for interaction across the social sciences** and can also provide a focal point for partnering with other NSF directorates on how to seriously encode social sciences as a core part of new disciplines.
- **Increased public participation in informing SBE and shaping interdisciplinary research agendas at NSF and beyond are worthwhile.** Public participation through structured citizen forums can help identify priorities, test whether outcomes are meaningful and build accountability for SBE science while still enabling the high research quality from existing peer review.

One event participant not involved in receiving SBE research funds but who cares about innovation policy noted that a potential doubling or tripling of the SBE budget against its FY2024 budget of $216M per year could be worthwhile. SBE currently is funded at $150M and is proposed to go to zero.

Questions for Policy Consideration

- Should there be a federal institution dedicated to sustaining core social and behavioral sciences disciplines, shared methods, data, and next generation of researchers? What should the role of philanthropy and universities be? There are risks and tradeoffs across any funding approach and the loss of SBE's current leadership will have implications for the U.S. ecosystem.
- If supporting an applied SBE model, who defines the goals? What makes basic social science vs applied social science? Where will responsibility for metascience, evaluation, cross-agency coordination, and knowledge use reside?

- How will social and behavioral expertise be part of broader public missions to benefit society, shaping problem definition and program design?
- What evidence will Congress and others use to judge success beyond grants awarded and publications produced? SBE research has shown that more holistic measures of success and detailed case studies can be needed to measure outcomes.

This draft synthesizes themes from a CSPO conversation held under the Chatham House Rule. It does not attribute individual remarks and should not be read as a consensus statement.

For any questions following this event, please contact cspodc@asu.edu.

Appendix 1: About CSPO and Global Futures Approaches to Science and Engineering

About the Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcomes at ASU:

For over 25 years, CSPO has been devoted to enhancing the capacity of public policy to link scientific research to beneficial societal outcomes. The Consortium creates knowledge, cultivates public discourse, and fosters policies to help decision makers and institutions grapple with the immense power and importance of science and technology as society charts a course for the future. More information and a sign up for future CSPO events is at cspo.org.

Global Problems Require Moving Beyond Disciplinary Siloes:

Through its Global Futures Laboratory, ASU has been a leader in approaching complex global systems and the major problems facing the world in food, water, and energy. Each of these areas inherently involves societal and technical components that cannot be addressed in isolation. Solving these major problems requires natural science, engineering, and social science skills working in tandem through a comprehensive, holistic approach to problem-solving. The Global Futures approach seeks to solve these problems through innovation, focusing heavily on deployment and real-world solutions.

About the author:
Zachary Gallagher Pirtle, Ph.D. is the Deputy Director of the Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcomes at Arizona State University and a Professor of Practice in the Rob Walton College of Global Futures. This role began on May 4th, 2026. Previously he was a civil servant, engineer and policy entrepreneur at NASA Headquarters from 2010 to 2026.

Appendix 2: CSPO Historical Points and Provocations used to Inform the Event

The following points were shared with event participants and provide important historical context on the science policy context for social and behavioral sciences. They were in part framed as (at times conflicting) provocations in order to highlight key tensions in science policy that must be considered when approaching science policy topics with the scale of the current SBE budget situation. These are reproduced verbatim from the framing document shared before the event.

1. Whether to include social science as part of NSF's scope was a contentious issue at the foundation's founding, with Senator Harley Kilgore and Vannevar Bush debating it. While generally seen as an opponent of social science, Bush's report for President Roosevelt, Science, the Endless Frontier, stated: "it would be folly to set up a program under which research in the natural sciences and medicine was expanded at the cost of the social sciences, humanities, and other studies so essential to national well-being….Science cannot live by and unto itself alone."
2. There has been a challenging cultural history on the relationship between social science and the rest of the sciences funded by NSF. One historian documented how early social science

programs sought to emulate quantitative approaches used in the physical sciences, in ways that sometimes led to lower quality science.

3. The strength of the foundational social sciences provides seed corn for more applied applications of social science insights for society.
4. Federal funding for a given area of science is never a given right, and discussions about whether funding research is worth the cost to the federal government can be important for maximizing the positive societal outcomes from the federal government.
5. Delivering on outcomes for all Americans requires that science and engineering work engage with people, institutions, and policy, which are core within social science research methods.
6. Some have claimed that the majority of the scientific workforce is politically 'liberal', which can create challenges for scientists being seen as trusted partners in solving problems, and increases the potential for science funding to become political targets.
7. NSF's Science of Science and Innovation Policy (SciSIP) program was created to fund research on better ways to fund science and engineering research to lead to better outcomes and help guide science and innovation policy. More of this specific work could be a strength.
8. The NSF SciSIP program (later renamed the Science of Science: Discovery, Communication and Impact (SOS:DCI) program) developed a substantial body of research, but relatively few of those tools have been utilized by other parts of the federal government in order to improve outcomes from science and engineering. This is a potential opportunity.
9. Recent efforts in metascience, the empirical study of how science works, have strong interconnections to the Science of Science Policy tradition and encompass many varieties. See Gustetic and Watney (2026).
10. The Gold Standard Science Executive Order's call for interdisciplinary science implies that social science should be a part of many complex problems. Reference Section 2(b): "Scientific information" means factual inputs, data, models, analyses, technical information, or scientific assessments related to such disciplines as the **behavioral and social sciences**, public health and medical sciences, life and earth sciences, engineering, physical sciences, or probability and statistics. This includes any communication or representation of knowledge such as facts or data, in any medium or form, including textual, numerical, graphic, cartographic, narrative, or audiovisual forms. (bold added)
11. The 2018 Evidence Act (Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act) requires many federal agencies to create evaluation and learning agendas to understand their programmatic and societal outcomes, which should involve social science. Many federal agencies today spend significant resources pursuing these activities.
12. Connecting engineering and science to solving Global Futures problems requires a workforce trained in social science concepts and analytical approaches.
13. There can be many ways to fund and manage social science: several management approaches were used in the past and across various NSF directorates.
14. With respect to TIP's major goals to do "use-inspired, solutions-oriented research that has directly impacted people's everyday lives," social science funding is likely necessary to achieve those goals.

Appendix 3: CSPO-developed SBE Futures

The followed describes the scenarios as written and assigned to the six participant groups for discussion, developed based on examining the literature. Participants were encouraged to deviate from the scenario assumptions as written and to explore making new assumptions that would be needed in order to make the scenario potentially viable. While forced to brainstorm and advocate for the scenarios in the meeting, this was for discussion purposes and not reflective of the participants' views. Results of discussion shown above.

Scenario 1: Reform the Current SBE Model: preserve core social science research while strengthening SBE's role and activities in connecting research and outcomes.

- Retain an SBE directorate and support for disciplinary social sciences.
- Better demonstrate the value of SBE research.
- Increase interdisciplinary collaboration across NSF directorates, bringing SBE expertise to other directorates
- Strengthen links between curiosity-driven research and societal outcomes.

Scenario 2: Remodel SBE to an Applied Social Science Model; focus funding on applied work and embed social science expertise across NSF research domains to enhance knowledge use and application

- Keep an SBE directorate but focus funding on applied research meant to help with problems
- Focus on providing applied science support to mission-oriented research across NSF and perhaps rest of US government.
- Less or no funding for sustaining individual social science disciplines.
- Support areas such as science of science policy, evaluation, decision support, and innovation policy.
- Potential use of philanthropy through a structured foundation to enable greater synergy between NSF and others

Scenario 3: Domain-Based / Global Futures Model, with no SBE. Embed social sciences anywhere where major public mission exists in holistic approach.

- Assume that no SBE exists, and that support for social science research may come from other directorates, other government agencies, philanthropies or universities themselves. (Group can propose this)
- Can potentially consider social science at other agencies as part of a Global Futures-like push toward holistically solving problems without separating social sciences from engineering and physical sciences.
- Attempt to support the full research spectrum, from curiosity-driven through applied science research and beyond.