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Sociology: Practically Constitutional!

Florida's move to marginalize sociology is shortsighted, Jerry A. Jacobs writes.

By [Jerry A. Jacobs](#)



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Florida's [recent effort to marginalize sociology](#) is a shortsighted move to score political points while jeopardizing an important component of the nation's world-leading system of higher education. While Florida's Department of Education may have explained the decision to remove Principles of Sociology from the core curriculum in terms of protecting students from "[radical woke ideologies](#)," the need for sociologists is almost as old as the country. Indeed, decades before Florida became a state, counting the U.S. population was written into the Constitution.

Article 1, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution specifies that the population of the United States be counted every 10 years. In so doing, the nation's founders recognized the importance of tracking the changing U.S. population, foresight that would prove to be key not only to the task of apportioning congressional seats to the states but to tracking the many seismic shifts experienced by the U.S. over the last 200-plus years. The westward expansion, the profile of potential recruits for the Second World War, the advance of women into the workforce—the Census provided a source of key information on an ever-changing America. The need to count, analyze and summarize the evolving population of the United States led over time to the development and refinement of the field of demography, one of sociology's prominent specialty fields. The job of counting the 1890 Census grew so daunting that [punch-card technology was needed](#), and thus tabulating the U.S. population played a role in the development of modern computers.

Demographers, along with other sociologists, help us to chart the changing structure of American families, the aging of the population, the extent of immigration and complex patterns of social mobility. Sociologists help students better understand our diverse, complex and unequal society. Premedical students seek out sociology classes because medical school entrance exams now [include questions](#) about the socio-cultural experiences of their future patients.

The decennial census is now just one of a variety of surveys that sociologists, demographers and other social scientists use to document our evolving society. The [National Longitudinal Surveys](#) follow individuals over time to chart the key milestones in Americans' lives, from births and graduation to employment, marriage, parenthood and eventual retirement. The [American Community Survey](#), which collects information on a variety of topics from household structure to education and occupation, provides information on a yearly basis. Sociologists are increasingly scraping the internet and a range of new data sources to glean additional insights into the nature of our information-based society.

Businesses draw on demographic data and techniques to determine where economic opportunities might be found, where markets might be growing or where new housing units need to be constructed. Politicians draw on demographic data to gerrymander their voting districts to protect incumbents and to maximize the number of seats for members of their party. Demographic data have always been useful, but there has always been the potential for abuse.

Sociologists study racial inequality, among many other topics. But racial and socioeconomic disparities are not going to disappear if sociology is banished from the academy. Being against sociology makes about as much sense as being against meteorology because the weather report might reveal an impending heat wave or cold snap. Good news or bad, we need to know about the weather just as we need to know about what is happening in our society.

Sociologists work with economists to address problems of poverty, with medical specialists to analyze and improve the delivery of health care, and with educators to improve schools.

Sociologists connect with other faculty across disciplinary boundaries in a myriad of university-based applied research centers. The impact of marginalizing or zeroing out one discipline will be felt throughout the social sciences and universities more broadly.

This success of U.S. universities on the world stage stems in no small part from the fact that politicians have largely stayed out of their daily affairs. Whatever short-term political benefit some legislators might now seek in downgrading the standing of sociology, it will surely be outweighed by the long-term costs to our students, to our universities and to our society at large. For their part, sociologists undoubtedly could and should do a better job in articulating for the general public the practical value of our research and the body of knowledge that we have been painstakingly accumulating.

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