

NSF/SBE Research for 2020 and Beyond: Enhancing Fundamental Knowledge and Benefits to Society

Abstract

There are several important issues that will require attention from the next generation of SBE researchers. The NSF/SBE should respond rapidly and substantively to major social problems confronting both the nation and the global community. In particular, SBE should prioritize devoting resources to addressing the large racial/ethnic disparities that exist within the United States (U.S.). The United States (U.S.) population is undergoing major demographic changes, with the minority population increasing so rapidly that it is projected to comprise roughly half of the U.S. population by 2045. Furthermore, given the increasing interconnection of the global community, innovative research is also necessary to enhance knowledge that benefits the global community. Below we propose nine research agendas—five that address issues relevant to the U.S. and four with global relevance—that should be integral to NSF/SBE over the next several decades.

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There are several important issues that will require attention from the next generation of SBE researchers. The NSF/SBE should respond rapidly and substantively to major social problems confronting both the nation and the global community. In particular, SBE should prioritize devoting resources to addressing the large racial/ethnic disparities that exist within the United States (U.S.). The United States (U.S.) population is undergoing major demographic changes, with the minority population increasing so rapidly that it is projected to comprise roughly half of the U.S. population by 2045. Furthermore, given the increasing interconnection of the global community, innovative research is also necessary to enhance knowledge that benefits the global community. Below we propose nine research agendas—five that address issues relevant to the U.S. and four with global relevance—that should be integral to NSF/SBE over the next several decades.

I. Domestic Relevance

1) Schooling and Achievement Gaps

The racial/ethnic disparity in academic outcomes is arguably the most well known problem facing schools within the U.S. Disadvantaged minority youth are excelling at drastically different rates in schools than their White counterparts. The lower average test scores, grades, and college attendance rates among black and Hispanic/Latino students have persisted for decades and remain a vexing problem for parents, schools, and policy makers. Its implications can be felt at all levels of schooling and in the U.S. labor force. Barely half of Hispanic and black students have at least a high school education, compared to nearly 80 percent for whites and over 80 percent for Asians. Furthermore, the college enrollment gap was greater in 2006 than it was in 1972; 69 percent of white high school graduates in 2006 enrolled in college the next academic year, substantially more than their black (56%) and Hispanic (58%) counterparts. One-third of white adults aged 25 and older hold at least a bachelor's degree compared to only 13 and 19 percent of Hispanics and blacks, respectively. These points capture just some of the many facts indicative of the vast racial differences that exist in the American school system.

There are several questions SBE researchers should address given the current political climate. For example, to what extent is it possible to close gaps in academic performance across racial/ethnic groups without making major changes in the distribution of income and wealth? What are the limits of improved instruction and curriculum in reducing intergroup disparities in school outcomes, if any? Or to flip the question, if major changes did take place in income or wealth distribution, would there still be major performance differences across groups without changes in curriculum and instruction? What role does racialized tracking within schools play in producing intergroup differences in exposure to curriculum and instruction?

2) Changing of the U.S. Demography

What makes the minority achievement gap—and racial/ethnic inequality in general—even more alarming is the current demographic shift that is occurring in the U.S. Hispanics are now the fastest growing ethnic minority group and will comprise 25 percent of the student population by 2025. Whereas the U.S. population is expected to increase by 42 percent between 2010 and 2050, during this same period the Asian American population is projected to increase by 137 percent, and by 2050 Hispanics are projected to comprise nearly one-third of the total U.S. population. Over the next forty years Hispanics will be responsible for over 60 percent of the nation's population growth. Additionally, both Asians and Hispanics are ethnically diverse populations consisting of members from various countries.

When one considers that Hispanics continue to have lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, lower college preparatory course enrollment, and lower postsecondary attainment than whites and Asians, the impending demographic shifts may portend a future in which racial inequality on socioeconomic characteristics have more serious consequences than at present. Thus, understanding the social consequences of the changing ethnic demographics of the US, particularly the Southern states, with the growth of the Latino population and the host of issues involving immigration, identity, jingoism, and immigration policies should be among the primary concerns for SBE. Since race-neutrality is an essential component of the American “creed of opportunity,” then the factors that permit individuals to fully participate in the “American dream,” such as educational outcomes and other indicators of socioeconomic standing, should be unrelated to race.

3) Support for greater Diversity in the Academy

The NSF/SBE should continue to maintain the emphasis it has given in recent years to changing the demography of the academy to make it more representative of the nation's population as a whole. It is vital that the advisory panels and the proposal evaluation panels reflect SBE's commitment to diversity. It is also vital that scholars from underrepresented groups be encouraged to submit research proposals to the NSF/SBE and be included as members of interdisciplinary research teams that submit proposals. The NSF/SBE currently supports the *American Economic Association's Summer Economics Training Program for Minority and Disadvantaged Students*, *Thinking Like A Scientist* for high school students, and the *Diversity Initiative for Tenure in Economics*, a program to provide mentoring to junior scholars from underrepresented groups to aid them in the transition to tenure. These programs should receive continued support and be expanded to include other disciplines such as sociology and political science. Furthermore, SBE should add a program area specifically designated to advance the science of broadening participation in STEM and other fields, the methods and techniques for evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of programmatic efforts to create greater diversity in STEM and other fields, and the causes and consequences for the underrepresentation of women, minorities and persons with disabilities in STEM and other fields.

4) *Incarceration and Deincarceration*

It is well understood that the United States has one of the highest rates of imprisonment among the OECD countries. Given the evidence of adverse consequences and cost of high levels of incarceration for individuals, families, and communities, it is imperative that strategies be developed to reduce levels of imprisonment. SBE should also establish as a priority area for research the development of strategies for wisely conducted deincarceration.

5) *Economic Impact of Global Conflict*

A particular area of major research importance is the implications of the war on mental health, both for troops—who often have been subjected to combat trauma—and their families. In addition, it is important to study the consequences of demobilization for the overall performance of the economic crisis. For example, would special steps need to be taken to assist cities that depend heavily upon military bases as a foundation for their economies if and when the war winds down?

II. Global Relevance

1) *Global Economic Crisis*

While social scientists have devoted much time and effort to forecasting the timing and scope of economic downturns, they have not had much success with either goal. Researchers must provide answers to three major sets of concerns: 1) What is the scope and impact of the present crisis both within the United States and elsewhere? Who is likely to suffer the most, including adverse emotional and physical health effects for both adults and children? What interventions would best alleviate their distress? 2) What innovative policies should be introduced to lift us out of the current crisis? Are there viable options to supplement the standard Keynesian countercyclical mix of increased deficit-spending and low interest rates? 3) What steps can be taken to prevent the recurrence of a similar crisis in the future? Why had the belief that a crisis similar to that of the Great Depression could not happen again become so widespread? Is it possible to insulate the well-being of a nation's population from the exigencies of the actions of its stock exchange and investment bankers?

2) *Space Exploration and Settlement*

A more venturesome priority area that merits introduction into consideration for SBE concerns the economic and social implications of space exploration and settlement. Human exploration and settlement of other planets appears to be a real possibility in the near future (i.e. within the next 40 years). In 2007 Michael D. Griffin, a former NASA Administrator, stated that NASA aims to put a man on Mars by 2037. Another indicator that human settlement in space by mid-century is inevitable is the Annual International Space Settlement Design Competition held at NASA Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. The contest is an RFP that brings 12 teams of high school students from around the world to design a city in space that would be a home for over 10,000 people. The teams create a 40-page report that address technological and design issues, and are judged by engineers from the American Institute of Aeronautics and

Astronautics. Given this reality, researchers should begin thinking about the economic implications of access to new mineral resources, the social and emotional requirements for those who undertake the settler task, and whom would be selected for these settlement communities. For example, what would be the appropriate composition with regard to race, age, gender, and sexual orientation? What types of systems of governance should be employed? How will "deviance" be managed, particularly if someone could turn off the oxygen flow?

3) Disaster Response

Humane and effective response both to crises and disasters should be priority areas for the NSF/SBE. Previous research has not proven to be very effective in predicting the timing and devastation of natural disasters such as the tsunami in the south Pacific or Hurricane Katrina along the Gulf Coast. Social and behavioral research can be valuable in guiding emergency preparedness and the development of programs to address the long term effects of disasters. For example, New Orleans still is in the process of reconstructing its public school system (which has become a quasi experimental site for charter schools) and has a large segment of its population—both in the city and relocated to other parts of the country—that still is suffering from untreated post traumatic stress disorder and grief. We have inadequate knowledge about how best to rebuild damaged cities and communities and how best to meet the long-term needs of surviving victims of natural disasters.

4) Cyberspace and Journalism

The rise of the internet has led to a decline of the newsprint media. The implication of this shift for investigative journalism has not been explored. It is important to investigate the consequences for the politics of redness, the practice of democracy, and whether the rise of blogosphere is an adequate alternative to newspapers. Will television networks or internet journalism maintain the public interest in truth telling to the same degree? If not, what are the alternatives?

Conclusion

The areas of inquiry discussed above require interdisciplinary teams of scholars. For example, while the development of new policies pertinent to the demands created by the current economic crisis obviously is an area that must engage the economists, understanding how to prevent repetition of the part of investment brokers and mortgage lenders, the resurrection of an effective regulatory apparatus, and the identification of those most seriously harmed by the economic downturn needing the most substantial support and aid will require the expertise and insights from sociologist, social psychologist, political scientist, and cultural anthropologist. Effective research on long- term responses to natural disasters necessarily requires interdisciplinary inquiry. Therefore, NSF/SBE should give priority to proposals that bring together interdisciplinary teams of researchers in a manner that is organic to the project being undertaken. Strong proposals should indicate precisely how the distinctive disciplinary perspectives held by scholars on the team will be used and integrated to produces the final research product.

Best regards,

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