

January 13, 2023

Sethuraman Panchanathan, Director
National Science Foundation
2415 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22314

CC: Daniel Reed, Chair, National Science Board
Arati Prabhakar, Director, White House Office of Science & Technology Policy
Denice Ross, U.S. Chief Data Scientist, White House Office of Science & Technology Policy
Alondra Nelson, Deputy Director, White House Office of Science & Technology Policy
Kei Koizumi, Principal Deputy Director, White House Office of Science & Technology Policy
Jamie Keene, Deputy Director, White House Domestic Policy Council
Peggy Carr, Co-Chair, NSTC Subcommittee on Equitable Data
Rajesh Nayak, Co-Chair, NSTC Subcommittee on Equitable Data
Shalanda Young, Director, U.S. Office of Management & Budget
Karin Orvis, U.S. Chief Statistician, U.S. Office of Management & Budget
Sabeel Rahman, Associate Administrator, OMB Office of Information & Regulatory Affairs
Margo Schwab, Desk Officer for NSF, OMB Office of Information & Regulatory Affairs
Emilda Rivers, Director, NSF National Center for Science & Engineering Statistics
John Finamore, Chief Statistician, NSF National Center for Science & Engineering Statistics
Rhonda Davis, Head, NSF Office of Equity & Civil Rights
Amanda Greenwell, Head, NSF Office of Legislative & Public Affairs

Dear Director Panchanathan:

We, the undersigned 1,700 scientists, are writing to express our grave concerns over NSF's National Center for Science & Engineering Statistics' refusal to support LGBTQ+ scientists by making necessary changes to its data practices and its significant misrepresentations of its own pilot data made to the U.S. Office of Management & Budget (OMB). Among us are Nobel laureates, members of the National Academies, university officials, and a broad range of constituents across the U.S. scientific workforce. We ask that NSF adopt inclusive sexual orientation and gender identity questions for its 2023 national workforce surveys, as well as publicly disclose the results of its pilot research into the viability of these questions in a transparent manner.

LGBTQ+ people are estimated to be [20% less represented](#) in STEM fields than statistically expected, and are [less likely](#) than non-LGBTQ+ people to major in STEM, persist in STEM, earn STEM degrees, and be in STEM occupations. LGBTQ+ scientists experience [more career barriers and workplace harassment](#) than non-LGBTQ+ scientists, even when controlling for other demographic and career-related factors. Yet NSF, NIH, Congress, and the White House are helpless to act because NSF is unwilling to properly collect the necessary data. Only NSF's workforce data can shape national policies, determine eligibility for diversity funding, and allow researchers and policymakers to fully understand and address LGBTQ+ disparities.

In 2018, NSF [committed](#) to piloting a sexual orientation question and an expanded gender question beyond binary categories. After years of delays and even [NSF's attempt to leave out sexual orientation from the pilot](#), NSF has [now completed](#) the work and made its decisions.

Stunningly, NSF has decided to abandon collecting sexual orientation data altogether. It has justified this move with flawed analyses, inappropriate benchmarks, and selective reporting of its own pilot data to OMB (see [Appendix](#)). An accurate analysis of the available pilot data clearly supports NSF adopting a sexual orientation question for its surveys (see [Appendix](#)). In brief, respondents overwhelmingly reported feeling comfortable completing NSF's sexual orientation question. Quality assessment metrics, such as item non-response (INR) and breakoff rates, showed that the sexual orientation question (e.g., INR: ~2%) performed better or on par with NSF's race question (INR: 2.33%) and far better than NSF's salary (INR: 6.30%) and earned income (INR: 4.54%) questions. It even performed better than the Department of Education's sexual orientation question that was adopted six years ago (INR: 3.4%).

For gender, NSF piloted a less inclusive design ('male', 'female', 'transgender', 'neither') as well as a more inclusive design ('male', 'female', 'transgender', 'gender non-conforming', 'non-binary', 'genderfluid', 'genderqueer') that would allow respondents to check all that apply and write in alternatives. NSF has decided to move forward with the less inclusive design ('male', 'female', 'transgender') but revise it so that respondents can check all that apply and write in other options. The revised measure is less considerate of the breadth of gender minority identities, and more expansive options would allow non-binary and other gender minority respondents to feel included in NSF's data collection process. The rejection of the more inclusive measure is poorly justified, with NSF claiming identifiability concerns that are easily resolved through aggregation and suppression techniques that NSF already uses (see [Appendix](#)). We ask that NSF strongly reconsider adopting the more inclusive design for its surveys, especially given that its quality assessment metrics were excellent: INR and breakoff rates were virtually 0% (see [Appendix](#)). NSF has an opportunity to be a leader in federal data collection on inclusive gender.

NSF's [attempts first to omit](#) the sexual orientation item from the pilot despite an [earlier public commitment](#), followed now by misleading analyses and the decision to abandon the item in spite of its excellent methodological performance, suggest NSF has some unstated concern against collecting these data. Such evasive actions are an affront to NSF's obligation to ensure LGBTQ+ equity in its programs and opportunities and work in good faith to improve its sexual orientation and gender identity data practices, as directed by [Executive Order 14075](#). This decision also places NSF far out of sync with its federal counterparts like the Census Bureau, Department of Education, Department of Justice, and CDC, who have all collected these data for years and already vetted the sexual orientation question that NSF is considering through extensive testing.

We in the scientific community can only speculate as to why NSF's National Center for Science & Engineering Statistics has been so hesitant over the past four years to make the necessary changes to its data collection processes to support LGBTQ+ scientists. But the evasiveness NSF has shown in moving to collect sexual orientation data is easier to understand in light of signs of its broader negligence, as described in [Congress' letter to NSF](#) about NSF leadership's "disturbing" responses to sexual orientation-based harassment and significant deficiencies in ensuring a safe and inclusive workplace for sexual minorities. It gives the appearance of a broader climate at NSF that is hostile

toward sexual minorities and unwilling to take the most reasonable of steps to ensure their equity in the scientific workforce.

NSF's misleading, flawed, and what appear almost plainly anti-LGBTQ+ actions in this matter also fly in the face of NSF's stated Diversity and Inclusion [mission](#), NSF's Congressionally mandated 'Broadening Participation' [goals](#), and additional directives requiring NSF to advance the equity of underserved communities ([Executive Order 13985](#)) and prevent discriminatory practices against LGBTQ+ Americans ([Executive Order 13988](#)).

We ask that NSF:

- Adopt a sexual orientation question for its 2023 national workforce surveys, and correct its reported analyses to OMB.
- Strongly reconsider using the more inclusive version of the expanded gender question for its 2023 national workforce surveys.
- Publicly release its pilot results in an open and transparent manner to restore trust and confidence in NSF's National Center for Science & Engineering Statistics.

NSF must take these steps to abide by its [stated commitment](#) to “[expand] the opportunities in STEM to people of all racial, ethnic, geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, sexual orientations, gender identities and to persons with disabilities”. Everyone who wishes to contribute to science must be enabled to pursue their scientific potential. NSF must ensure and advance the equity of LGBTQ+ scientists.

Signed,

Jon Freeman, Associate Professor, Columbia University
Ramy Abbady, Graduate Student, New York University
Andrew R. Abela, Assistant Director, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
Erin F. Abernethy, Courtesy Post-doc, Florida International University
Janquel D. Acevedo, Incoming Graduate Student, New York University
Nicole Adams, Postdoc, Michigan State University
Hannah M. Adams, Graduate Student, Scripps Institution of Oceanography
Jonathan M. Adams, Research Health Sciences Specialist, VA Puget Sound Healthcare System
Katie N. Adams, NSF Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Purdue University
Jonathan Adler, Professor of Psychology, Olin College of Engineering
Emily A. Aery Jones, Postdoctoral Scholar, Stanford University
William Agnew, VP External Partnerships, oSTEM
Sam J. Ahler, Phd Student, University of Colorado Boulder
Belinda Akpa, Joint Associate Professor, University of Tennessee
Abeda Alam, Software Engineer, Pantheon Platform
Analia Albuja, Science Fellow, Northeastern University
Nathan Alexander, PhD Candidate, University of Illinois
Zuhayra Ali, alumni, The University of Texas at Dallas

Diana R. Alkire, Program Analyst, National Institute on Drug Abuse
Heidi Allen, Associate Dean for Research, Columbia University
Kiersten E. Allison, Research Coordinator II, UF/Engineering
Jorge Almodovar, Associate Professor, University of Arkansas
Nicholas P. Alt, Assistant Professor, Occidental College
Liz Alter, Assistant Professor, California State University Monterey Bay
Gregory M. Alushin, Assistant Professor, The Rockefeller University
Samir AlviZbaydi, Graduate Student, The Ohio State University
Hilary Alwood, Graduate Student, Baylor University
Anthony Theodore Amato, graduate student, university of victoria
Daniel K. Amoah, Research Assistant, University of Ghana
Katelyn Amstutz, Graduate Student, Ohio State University
Hazel J. Anderson, Ph.D. Student, Michigan State University
Leif D. Anderson, Graduate Student, University of Toronto
Ian Anderson, Graduate Student, University of Southern California
Arthur Andrews, Associate Professor, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Audrey Angelos, Systems Engineer, Heirloom
Ashley Angulo, Assistant Professor, University of Oregon
Shelley L. Anna, Professor of Chemical Engineering, Carnegie Mellon University
Mary E. Anzovino, Associate Professor, Georgia Gwinnett College
Derek A. Applewhite, Professor of Biology, Reed College
Sean Arayasirikul, Associate Professor, University of California, Irvine
Joel Armas, Undergraduate Student, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Emily Arndt, Lead Applied Researcher, Bridgestone Americas
Audrey M. Arner, Graduate student, Vanderbilt University
Haley E. Arnold, Undergraduate Student, McDaniel College
Sophie Arnold, Graduate Student, New York University
Pragya Arya, Graduate Student, University of Southern California
Steven Ascolillo, Project Coordinator, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Ashwini Ashokkumar, Postdoc, Stanford university
Ashwini Ashokkumar, Postdoc, Stanford university
Olivia E. Atherton, Assistant Professor, University of Houston
Lauren Y. Atlas, Investigator, National Institutes of Health (NCCIH, NIMH, NIDA)
Stats Atwood, Graduate Student, Princeton University
Scovia Aweko, Graduate student, Purdue University
Yarrow Axford, Associate Professor, Northwestern University
Tala Azar, Graduate Student, University of Pennsylvania
Gaiane Azatian, Manager, Thermo Fisher Scientific
Flavio Azevedo, Researcher, University of Cambridge
Jean Badroos, Graduate student, Caltech
Eun Bae, Graduate Student, Palo Alto University
Zachary Baeza, Forensic Scientist, NM Department of Public Safety
Jacqueline Baeza-Rubio, Undergraduate researcher, University of Texas at Arlington
Spencer Bagley, Associate professor, Westminster College (UT)
April H. Bailey, Assistant Professor, University of New Hampshire
Daniel S. Bailis, Professor, University of Manitoba
Kellan E. Baker, Executive Director and Chief Learning Officer, Whitman-Walker Institute
Michelle A. Baker, Dean and Professor, Utah State University
Leah L. Baker, Undergraduate Student, Montana State University
Brandon Bakka, Graduate Student, The University of Texas at Austin

Tara L. Bal, Assistant Professor, Michigan Technological University
Emily Balcetis, Associate Professor, New York University
Christopher Baldassano, Assistant Professor, Columbia University
Ian C. Ballard, Postdoctoral Scholar, University of California, Berkeley
Bryn Bandt-Law, Graduate Student, University of Washington
Caitlin L. Banks, Postdoctoral Fellow, Kennedy Krieger Institute & Johns Hopkins University
Emmie Banks, Graduate Student, Emory University
Alexis T. Bantle, Graduate Student, University of California, San Diego
Katie L. Barnes, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin, Madison
Rebecca T. Barnes, AAAS STP Fellow, NSF & Belmont Forum
Carolyn Barnes, Graduate Student, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Christopher J. Barr, Instructional Laboratory Supervisor, University of Michigan
Charles J. Barrows, Lecturer, University of Washington
Amanda R. Barry, Graduate Student, DePaul University
Ramón S. Barthelemy, Assistant Professor of Physics and Astronomy, University of Utah
Nick Barts, Assistant Professor, University of Central Missouri
Johannah Bashford-Largo, Graduate student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Jillyan Baskin, Graduate Student, University of Vermont
Dani S. Bassett, J. Peter Skirkanich Professor, University of Pennsylvania
Yasmine Bassil, PhD Candidate, Emory University
Anna C. Baum, Graduate student, Lehigh University
Laura K. Baumgartner, Instructor, Front Range Community College
Rani I. Bawa, Graduate Student, The Ohio State University
Mark Baxter, Professor, Wake Forest University School of Medicine
Rachel Bayles, Information Systems Security Officer, University of Colorado
Jordan T. Becker, Postdoctoral Associate, University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
Jaime Becker, Assistant Managing Editor, Theory & Society
Rachel L. Bedder, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Princeton University
Jacob Bedke, Graduate Student, Johns Hopkins University
Mariana J. Bednarek, Graduate student, DePaul university
Garrett F. Beeghly, Graduate Student, Cornell University
Sara M. Beery, Assistant Professor, MIT
Andrew Begel, Associate Professor, Carnegie Mellon University
Abby Beilman, Student, Clark University
Oded Bein, Postdoctoral researcher, Princeton University
Will J. Beischel, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Université de Sherbrooke
Sky L. Bela, Graduate, Lehigh University
Michele Belanger-Bove, Director of Brand Partnerships, STAT News
Nathan E. Bell, Director of Governance and Special Projects, American Educational Research Association
Aaron C. Bell, Researcher; Data Scientist, Frontier Development Lab; Sumitomo Corp.
Michael J. Bellecourt, Inclusive Development Advisor, U.S. Agency for International Development
Laura E. Bellows, Visiting Scholar, University of Virginia
David Bender, Graduate Teaching Fellow, Temple University
John M. Bennett, Graduate Student, Stanford University
Tessa M. Benson-Greenwald, Postdoc, University of Pittsburgh
Ayali Sophie H. Benyaish labarre, Medical student, Brown University
Stephanie A. Berg, PhD Candidate, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
Cory A. Berger, Graduate Student, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution
Halle M. Berger, Graduate Student, University of Connecticut
Elliot T. Berkman, Professor of Psychology, University of Oregon

Rose Bern, Graduate Student, UC Davis
Miranda Bernard, Postdoc, Duke University
Rafael C. Bernardi, Assistant Professor, Auburn University
Katharina Bernecker, Senior Research and Teaching Assistant, University of Zurich
Alice Berners-Lee, Postdoctoral Fellow, Harvard University
Michael J. Bernstein, Professor, Penn State University
Cameron W. Berry, Postdoctoral Scholar, Stowers Institute for Medical Research
Megan L. Bertholomey, Assistant Professor, Allegheny College
Carolyn Bertozzi, Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of Chemistry, Stanford University
Vania S. Bessos, BA of Science, University of California San Diego
Genia Bettencourt, Assistant Professor, University of Memphis
Robert L. Bettiker, Professor of Clinical Medicine, Temple University Lewis Katz School of medicine
Mrunal Bhagwat, Lab Technician, Heirloom Carbon Technologies
Himali Bhandari, Graduate Student, DePaul University
Bharat Bharat, Graduate Student, University of Miami
Anirudh S. Bhateja, Graduate alum, Rice University
Dhaval M. Bhatt, Grad Student, Dartmouth College
Jacob Bhoi, Graduate Student, Northwestern University
Hana Gabrielle R. Bidon, Technology's Systems Business Associate, Wells Fargo
Monica Biernat, Distinguished Professor, University of Kansas
Alyssa G. Billington, Graduate Student, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign
Spencer D. Bingham, Graduate Research Assistant, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Pamela J. Bjorkman, Professor, California Institute of Technology
Allyson M. Blackburn, Doctoral Student, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Lorette Tara Blagg, Assistant Policy Researcher and Graduate Fellow, RAND Corporation
Scott D. Blain, Research Fellow, University of Michigan
Daphne R. Bloom, PhD Student & NSF Graduate Research Fellow, University of Pennsylvania
Paul A. Bloom, Postdoctoral Research Scientist, Columbia University
Kyle Blount, Assistant Professor, University of Illinois Springfield
Isaac M. Blythe, Doctoral Candidate, University of Michigan
Stephanie L. Bogart, Senior Lecturer, University of Florida
Andrew Bolibol, Graduate student, Harvard University
Darla Bonagura, Graduate Student, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Adrienne S. Bonar, NSF GRFP 2021 recipient, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Paul Bones, Assistant Professor, Texas Womans University
Ross Bonifacio, Undergraduate student, New Jersey Institute of Technology
Breanna Boppre, Assistant Professor, Omitted
Shruti Bora, Research Psychologist, TerraBlue XT
lauren borland, Graduate student, Oregon State University
Joseph Borrello, Biomedical Engineer, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Elizabeth R. Boskey, Instructor, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
Jordon D. Bosse, Assistant Professor, Northeastern University
Thomas Botch, Graduate Student, Dartmouth College
Rachel Bour, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Kai Bovik, Student, The University of Texas at Austin
Jenny A. Bower, Graduate Student, University of Vermont
Faith J. Boyer, Graduate Student, Auburn University
Evan A. Boyle, Postdoctoral scholar, University of California San Diego
Benjamin J. Brack, Graduate Student, Princeton University
Kelly K. Bradbury, Associate Professor, Utah State University

Dakota L. Brandenburg, Graduate Student, Indiana University - Bloomington
Connor A. Brandenburg, Senior Research Associate I, Takeda
Erin Bransom, Data Science Analyst, Allen Institute for AI
Emma Brase, Graduate Student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Nadia Brashier, Assistant Professor, Purdue University
Gloria Bravante, PhD, Medical Writer
Wolfgang Breitenbach, Former Alumni, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
Max Brenner, Undergraduate Student, The University of Texas at Dallas
Caleb J. Bridgwater, Graduate Student, Georgetown
Arthur P. Brief, Presidential Professor Emeritus, University of Utah
Nina A. Briggs, PhD student, Queen's University Belfast
Natalie H. Brito, Assistant Professor, New York University
Julia Brokaw, Graduate Student, University of Minnesota
Colleen E. Bronner, Associate Professor of Teaching, University of California, Davis
Hayley Brooks, Graduate student, University of Denver
Robin Isadora Brown, Graduate Student Worker, University of Virginia
Molly Brown, Associate Professor, DePaul University
Matthew C. Brown, Postdoctoral Fellow, National Severe Storms Laboratory (NSSL)
Wyatt Brown, Graduate Student, Virginia Commonwealth University
Sean Brown, Graduate Student, West Virginia University
Jonah W. Brown, Graduate Student, The University of Tennessee - Knoxville
Jazmin Brown-Iannuzzi, Associate Professor, University of Virginia Psychology Dept
Claire E. Brundage, Mechanical Engineer, Heirloom Carbon
Axel T. Brunger, Professor of Molecular and Cellular Physiology, Stanford University
Astra Bryant, Assistant Professor, University of Washington
Erin Bryant-Ross, Director of Accessibility, oSTEM, Inc.
Ron Buckmire, Professor, Occidental College
Jessica M. Budke, Associate Professor, University of Tennessee
Morgan Buerke, Graduate Student, University of Southern Mississippi
Christina E. Buffo, Graduate Student, Georgia Institute of Technology
Rémi Buisson, Assistant Professor, University of California Irvine
Monica M. Burdick, Director, Translational Bioscience R&D, Alpha Phase Engineering
Wesley B. Burford, Graduate Student, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center
Eric Burkholder, Assistant Professor, Auburn University
Brooke Burrows, Research Staff, Columbia University
Melissa A. Burt, PhD Candidate and NSF GRFP Fellow, Virginia Tech
Michael W. Busch, Research Scientist, SETI Institute
Laura A. Bustamante, Postdoctoral Fellow, Washington University in St. Louis
Lakesha Butler, Chief Diversity Officer, UF Health
Ryan S. Buzdygon, Director of Operations, HepatoChem Inc.
Emily Byrd, Graduate student, University of Virginia
Andrew M. Byrne, Associate Professor, California Polytechnic State University
Caitlin Cahill, Associate Professor, Pratt Institute
Michelle A. Calabrese, Assistant Professor, University of Minnesota
Jimmy Calanchini, Assistant Professor, University of California Riverside
Frannie Calkins, Graduate student, University of Nebraska - Lincoln
Francisco A. Calvache Meyer, Ph.D. Candidate, Vanderbilt University
Maria C. Camacho, Postdoctoral Associate, Washington University in St. Louis
Joseph P. Campanale, Research Associate, UCSB
Kelsey Campbell, Data Scientist, Gayta Science

Cody Campos, Undergraduate student, CU Boulder -oSTEM
Christina Capozzoli, Lab Manager, Columbia University
Carlos Cardenas-Iniguez, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Southern California
Jacob T. Carlin, Research Scientist, University of Oklahoma
Cheryl L. Carmichael, Associate Professor, Brooklyn College, CUNY
Robert W. Carpick, John Henry Towne Professor, University of Pennsylvania
Alfredo Carpineti, Chair, Pride in STEM
Angie Carter, Associate Professor, Michigan Tech University
Breanna P. Caruso, Graduate Researcher, Oregon Health & Science University
Jaime J. Castrellon, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Pennsylvania
Daniel Castro, Assistant Professor, Washington University in Saint Louis
Charley A. Catalano, Graduate Student, MIT
Lindsey Cathcart, Education and Prevention Manager, NAISMA
Erin Cech, Associate Professor, University of Michigan
Deborah Cesarini, Research Associate, Duke University
Martin Chalfie, University Professor, Columbia University
Elizabeth Chan, Graduate Student, University of Toronto
Benny Chan, Professor, The College of New Jersey
Michelle Chan-Cortés, Graduate Student, Johns Hopkins University
Kimberly E. Chaney, Assistant Professor of Psychology, University of Connecticut
Fred Chang, Full Professor, University of California, San Francisco
Cindy Chang, Clinical Psychology Postdoctoral Research Fellow, VA San Diego/ UCSD
Janet Chang, Research Associate, Icahn School of Medicine
Richard Chang, Graduate Student, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Pauline Charbogne, Director of Scientific Operations, Yale University
Khaled Chelby, Grad student, Queer in Ai
Joshua C. Chen, Graduate Student, Rice University
Brandon Chen, PhD student, University of Michigan
Anna M. Chen, Graduate Student, NYU Langone Health
Shuquan Chen, Graduate Student, Columbia University
Jacqueline Chen, Associate Professor, University of Utah
Kaidi Chen, Graduate student, University of Connecticut
Sarah Chen, Undergraduate Student, University of Dallas
Brian Cherinka, Astronomical Data Scientist, Space Telescope Science Institute
Sapna Cheryan, Professor, Univ Washington
David Chester, Associate Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University
Wesley Chiang, Graduate Student, University of Rochester
Vic Shao-Chih Chiang, Student, UMass
Vincent Chim, Undergraduate Student, Stanford University
Wei-Chun Chin, Professor, University of California, Merced
Rocco Chiou, Assistant Professor, University of Surrey
Katriel E. Cho, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Ami Choi, Research Astrophysicist, NASA Goddard Space Flight Center
Jonathan J. Choi, Graduate Student, Duke University
Megan K. Chong, Graduate Student, UCSF
Jason C. Chow, Associate Professor, University of Maryland
Katherine Choy, Mechanical Engineer, Heirloom Carbon
Shawn Christensen, PhD Candidate, University of California Davis
Tee S. Chuanromanee, PhD Candidate, University of Notre Dame
Jason J. Chung, Graduate student, Western University

Maggie Chvilicek, Graduate student, University of Utah
Mina Cikara, Associate Professor, Harvard University
Andrei Cimpian, Professor, New York University
Isabella Cisneros, Undergraduate Student, University of Chicago
Kori-Anne Citrin, Graduate Student, Max Planck Florida Institute
Meté Civelek, Associate Professor, University of Virginia
Shaylyn M. Clancy, PhD Candidate, University of Virginia
Shannon M. Clancy, Graduate Student, University of Michigan
Mac Clapper, Post-Bacc Research Fellow, University of Texas at Austin
Kolin Clark, Graduate student, Washington university in St. Louis
Morgan D. Clark, Graduate Student, Brown University
Kaitlyn R. Clark, Graduate Student, Virginia Institute of Marine Science
Aaron Clauset, Professor, University of Colorado Boulder
Patricia Clayton, Associate Professor, Wake Forest University
Rachel Cleetus, Policy Director, Climate and Energy Program, Union of Concerned Scientists
Maria Cleveland, Postdoctoral Fellow, Queens University
David V. Clewett, Assistant Professor, UCLA
Sara A. Cloonan, Research Associate, Arizona State University
Daniella Cluver, Grad student, University of Nebraska- Lincoln
Suzanne S. Coble, Assistant Professor, University of Arkansas at Little Rock
Anisa M. Codamon, Graduate Student, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Anna Coerver, Graduate Student, University of California, Berkeley
Ernest Coffey, Executive Director, Scientific Operations, Allen Institute for Immunology
Shane R. Coffield, Postdoctoral Associate, University of Maryland
Aaron Cohen, Lab Manager, Columbia University
Tyler Cohen, PhD Fellow, New Mexico Inst. of Mining and Technology
Jonathan Cohn, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Texas A&M University
Ellen G. Cohn, Associate Professor, Florida International University
Shana Cole, Assistant Professor, Rutgers University
Elisabeth Collins, Graduate Student, Boston Collins
Scott M. Collis, Department Head and Senior Fellow, Self
Felipe Augusto M. Comelli, Researcher, PUC-SP - Brazil
Gary L. Conboy, Vice President, Oncology Development Operations, Bayer Pharmaceuticals
Kent Connell, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Michigan
Patrice K. Connors, Assistant Professor, Colorado Mesa University
Daniel Conroy-Beam, Associate Professor, UC Santa Barbara
Clare Conry-Murray, Associate Professor of Psychology, Saint Joseph's University
Lynn Conway, Professor of Electrical Engineering, Emerita, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Paul Conway, Associate Professor, University of Southampton
Jaime J. Coon, Assistant Professor of Biology, Earlham College
Rachel Cooper, Graduate Student, University of Central Florida
Haley Cooper, Grad Student, UNC Charlotte
Clarissa Cortland, Assistant Professor, UCL School of Management
Brandi Cossairt, Lloyd E. and Florence M. West Endowed Professor, University of Washington
B. Ethan Coston, Associate Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University
Eduardo Cotilla-Sanchez, Associate Professor, Oregon State University
Kathryn L. Cottingham, Professor, Dartmouth College
Robert Jason Cottrell, Lead Research Analyst, Unaffiliated
Aeran O. Coughlin, Graduate Student, Duke University
Alison Cox, Assistant Professor, University of Northern Iowa

Christian Crandall, Professor, University of Kansas
Elliot Creager, Graduate Student, University of Toronto
Michelle Creech-Eakman, Professor, New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology
Jacob Crocker, Graduate Student, Cal Poly Humboldt
M.J. Crockett, Associate Professor of Psychology, Princeton University
Megan R. Croom, PhD Student, University of Utah
Jazlee J. Crowley, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Daniel Cruz-Ramirez de Arellano, Associate Professor of Instruction, University of South Florida
Winston H. Cuddleston, PhD candidate, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Kaitlin L. Cuddleston, Graduate student, Yeshiva university
Wolf Cukier, Undergraduate Student, Princeton University
Nicole Curtis, Graduate Student, UIC
Clarissa R. de O. Cyrino, Graduate student, University of Utah
Catherine Czajka, Graduate Student, Virginia Institute of Marine Science
Sneha D M, Graduate Student, University of North Carolina, Charlotte
Bruno da Rocha Azevedo, Senior Scientist, Eikon Therapeutics
Konrad R. Dabrowski, Graduate Student, Temple University
Andrea L. Daleuski, Undergrad, WGU
Marymegan Daly, Professor, Ohio State University
Becca Damante, Scientist
Zoe Damon, Project Coordinator, San Diego State University Research Foundation
Felix Danbold, Assistant Professor, University College London
Jeffrey Dangermond, Retired, Retired
Emily A. Daniel, Graduate Student, University of Kansas Medical Center
Shar Daniels, Graduate Student, University of Delaware
Karen Daniels, Professor, North Carolina State University
Scott P. O. Danielsen, Postdoctoral Associate, Duke University
Akanksha Das, Graduate Student, Miami University
Aniruddha Das, Associate Professor, Dept of Neuroscience, Columbia University
Mauna R. Dasari, Government Grants Officer, California Academy of Sciences
Lila Davachi, Professor, Columbia University
Joanne Davila, Professor and Chair, Stony Brook University
Delaney Davis, Ph.D., UNTHSC
William E. Davis, Associate Professor, Wittenberg University
Megan M. Davis, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Kacie K. Davis, Professional Research Assistant, CU/LASP
Hilary Rose Dawson, PhD student, University of Oregon
Jessica De Freitas, Graduate Student, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Kristen DeAngelis, Professor, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Lillian DeCostanza, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Cayla M. Dedrick, Graduate Student, Penn State
Kristin DeFife, Retired, Retired
Anthony DeGraffenreid, Senior Scientist, Pharmalogic
Thomas Degroat, Graduate Student, Rutgers University
Marc Deisenroth, Professor, University College London
Christina DeJong, Associate Professor, Director of Graduate Studies, Michigan State University
Christina Del Carpio, Graduate Student, GRFP Fellow, UCLA
Aaron DeLaRosa, Unit Computing Specialist, Rutgers University
Paul H. Dell, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Chris DelRe, Postdoc, Harvard University

Dasani K. DelRosario, Undergraduate Research Intern, Emory University
Sarah Dembling, Graduate Student, San Diego State University/UC San Diego
Dustin W. Demoin, Director of Radiochemistry, Eckert & Ziegler Isotope Products
Nina L. Denne, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin - Madison
Katherine A. Denney, Graduate student, Stony Brook University
Dominic M. Denning, Graduate Student, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Leon R A Derczynski, Associate Professor, University of Washington / ITU Copenhagen
Jaye L. Derrick, Associate Professor, University of Houston
Giannina Descalzi, Assistant Professor, University of Guelph
Paul M. Deutchman, Doctoral Candidate, Boston College
Anne Devan-Song, Alumni (PhD), Oregon State University
Yaswant Devarakonda, Graduate Student, Texas A&M University
Jalyn Devereaux, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Elz DeVito, Professional Research Assistant, University of Colorado
Charlotte Devitre, Postdoctoral Scholar, UC Berkeley
Brianna Devlin, Postdoctoral scholar, University of Oregon
Nicole D. Devos, Graduate Student, The University of Western Ontario
Thierry Devos, Professor, San Diego State University
Emily Diamond, Graduate Student, University of Michigan
Jason Diaz, Education Program Director and Assistant Professor, The Wistar Institute
Roberto Efraín Díaz, Graduate Student, UC San Francisco
Lillian Dillard, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Jess S. Dillard-Wright, Assistant Professor, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Jupiter Ding, Undergraduate Student, Princeton University
Annie Do, Public Health Practitioner, Self-Employed (Government/Community Consultant)
Petra L. Doan, Professor Emerita, Florida State University
C. V. Dolan, Ph.D. Candidate, University of Vermont
Tri N. Dong, Graduate Student, Icahn school of medicine at Mount Sinai
Alex R. Dopp, Behavioral/Social Scientist, RAND Corporation
John Dorigo Jones, Graduate student, University of Colorado, Boulder
Julia R. Dorsheimer, Graduate Student, Columbia University
Hannah Douglas, Postdoc, University of Michigan
Nina O. Dours, Graduate Student, Claremont Graduate University
Larah Doyle, Advisor III, University of Florida
Kinsey Drake, Graduate Student, University of Washington
Michelle Driscoll, Assistant Professor, Northwestern University
Brandon N. D'Souza, IRTA Postbac Fellow, National Institutes of Health
Sarahjane L. Dube, Research Specialist, University of Vermont
Ellen S. Dulaney, Adjunct Professor, DePaul University
Roland L. Dunbrack, Professor, Fox Chase Cancer Center/Temple University School of Medicine
Jeffrey K. Duncan-Lowey, Graduate student, Yale University School of Medicine
Yarrow Dunham, Associate Professor, Yale University
Ryan D.P. Dunk, Postdoctoral Researcher, Auburn University
James P. Dunlea, Adjunct Professor, DePaul University
Leslie D. Dunnigan, Graduate Student, California State University, Sacramento
Fred Duong, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Toronto
Anna E. Dye, PhD Candidate, North Carolina State University
Alex R. Eaker, Research Technician, UNC Chapel Hill
Audre R. Eakman, Medical Student, University of New Mexico
Lena Easton-Calabria, Policy Analyst, A Policy Institute

Paul W. Eastwick, Professor, University of California, Davis
Robin S. Edelstein, Professor, University of Michigan
Avery Edenfield, Associate Professor, Utah State University
Madison E. Edwards, Graduate student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Skye A. Edwards, Graduate Student, Tufts University
Louisa C. Egan Brad, Dean of Equity, Justice and Belonging, Westtown School
Lainie Eisner, Graduate Student, Cornell University
Randall Ellis, Graduate Student, Mount Sinai
Catherine Elorette, Postdoctoral Fellow, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Mary Elting, Assistant Professor, NCSU
Christopher Engledow1, User Experience Researcher, Formerly of Meta and New Mexico State University
Lee A. Enis, Graduate Student, University of Georgia
Michael L. Epstein, Postdoctoral Fellow, Boston University
Allison Erena, Graduate student, University of Wisconsin Madison
Caroline A. Erentzen, Assistant Professor, Toronto Metropolitan University
Caroline Erickson, Graduate Student, Ohio State University
Meagan Esbin, Graduate Student, University of California Berkeley
Neir Eshel, Assistant Professor, Stanford University
Rhys A. Eshleman, Graduate Student, University of Georgia
Emily Esposito, Graduate Student, University of California, Riverside
Suhas Eswarappa Prameela, MIT Engineering Excellence Post-doctoral Fellow, MIT
Samuel Factor, Graduate Student, The University of Texas at Austin
Matthew Fainor, Research Engineer, University of Pennsylvania
Zachary Fair, Postdoctoral Fellow, NASA Goddard Space Flight Center
Elise A. Fairbairn, Academic Administrator, University of California Davis
Zahra Fakhraai, Associate Professor, University of Pennsylvania
Cori Faklaris, Assistant Professor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Emily Falk, Professor, UPenn
Anna Fang, Graduate (PhD) Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Dominic Fareri, Associate Professor, Adelphi University
Kathleen Farley, Executive Director, Teaneck Creek Conservancy
Allison K. Farrell, Assistant Professor, Miami University
Stephanie Farrell, Professor and Founding Department Head, Rowan University
Kyle Fassett, Sr. Research Associate, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Sarah Fixel, Adjunct Professor of Biology, Birmingham-Southern College
Anna Fedders, Research Coordinator, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Charlie Fehl, Assistant professor, Wayne State University
Tristan Fehr, Postdoctoral Fellow, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Brian Feinstein, Associate Professor, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science
Mallory J. Feldman, Graduate Student, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Steven Feldman, Graduate Student, Indiana University-Bloomington
Isabella K. Feldmann, Graduate student, University of Arizona
zoe Ferguson, Graduate Student, University of Washington
Kassandra Fernandez, Graduate Research Assistant, University of Florida
Stephen Fernandez, Worker, UMass Amherst
Martha F. Fiehn, Research Assistant, Harvard University, NBER
Deborah A. Fields, Associate Research Professor, Utah State University
Gabrielle Filip-Crawford, Research Manager, Benefits Data Trust
Jessamine Finch, Research Botanist, Native Plant Trust
Sarah Finer, Quality Specialist, Thermo Fisher Scientific

Alexandra Fink, Graduate Student, Mount Sinai
Anna J. Finley, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Wisconsin, Madison
Kara Finnigan, Professor, University of Michigan
Jessica Finocchiario, NSF Mathematical Sciences Postdoctoral Researcher, Harvard University
Abigail Fischbach, Research Coordinator, Children's National Hospital
Hayley Fisher, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Pittsburgh
Matthew Fisher, Associate Professor, NC State University
Saxton Fisher, Graduate Student, Rice University
Carl A. Fisher, Marketing Manager, Thermo Fisher Scientific
Holly N. Fitzgerald, Graduate Student, University of Connecticut
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Ryn Flaherty, Graduate Student, New York University
Jennifer Flanagan-Natoli, Postdoc, University of Michigan
Annesa Flentje, Associate Professor, University of California, San Francisco
Lindsey Florek, Graduate Student, Columbia University
Andrew R. Flores, Assistant Professor, American University
Mira N. Flynn, Student, Olin College of Engineering
Laura Fontenas, Assistant professor, Florida Atlantic University
Anthony J. Ford, Student, UTRGV
Rachael Forester, FOUNDER, RF Equity Consulting
Olivia A. Foster-Gimbel, Doctoral Candidate, NYU Stern School of Business
John E. Fowler, Professor, Oregon State University
Jacob Michael Fowler, Graduate Research Assistant, University of Tennessee Knoxville
Henry F. Fradella, Professor, Arizona State University
Marisa G. Franco, Assistant Clinical Professor, University of Maryland
Cynthia M. Frantz, Professor, Oberlin College
Kurt M. Fraser, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of California Berkeley
Brian J. Frederick, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, SUNY Empire
Barbara L. Fredrickson, Kenan Distinguished Professor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Mara Freilich, Postdoc, University of California San Diego
Amanda Freise, Director of Undergraduate Research, UCLA
nathan t. fried, assistant teaching professor, rutgers university camden
Ryan Z. Friedman, PhD Student, Washington University in St. Louis
Hannah C. Friedman, Postdoctoral Associate, Naval Research Laboratory
Gabriel R. Fries, Assistant Professor, University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston
Rachel E. Frietchen, Research assistant, Butler Hospital
Rachel E. Frietchen, Research assistant, Butler Hospital
Sydney S. Fry, Research Intern, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Qixiu Fu, Graduate Student, Ichan School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Julian Fuentes, Graduate student, Syracuse University
Adalyn Fyhrie, Research Assistant, Laboratory for Atmospheric and Space Physics
Lowell Gaertner, Professor, University of Tennessee
Brittanie Gage, Graduate Student, DePaul University
Sarah E. Gaither, Assistant Professor, Duke University
Alexia Galati, Assistant Professor, UNC Charlotte
Glynn E. Gallaway, Graduate Student, Purdue University
Asha Ganesan, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Indiana University
Derek Gann, Senior engineer, Heirloom carbon
Derek Gann, Senior engineer, Heirloom carbon
Yesenia Garcia-Sifuentes, graduate student, Emory University

Siddharth Garg, Associate Professor, New York University
Nanette K. Gartrell, Visiting Distinguished Scholar, Williams Institute UCLA School of Law
Jason C. Garvey, Friedman-Hipps Green and Gold Associate Professor of Education, University of Vermont
Sarah Gatton, Graduate Teaching Assistant & Student, Old Dominion University
Simret A. Gebreegziaber, Graduate Student, University of Notre Dame
Dylan Gee, Associate Professor on Term, Yale University
Sofia Georgiadou, Assistant Professor, University of Houston Clear Lake
Benjamin P. Gerstner, PhD Candidate, University of New Mexico
Sarah J. Gervais, Professor, University of Nebraska
Myron K. Gibert Jr, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Laurel P. Gibson, NSF Graduate Research Fellow, University of Colorado Boulder
Brandon Giebner, Undergraduate Student, CU Boulder - LASP
Jack Jen Giesecking, Research Fellow, Five College Women's Studies Research Center
Jason G. Gillmore, Professor of Chemistry, Hope College
Lee Gilman, Assistant Professor, Kent State University
Morgan A. Gilmer, Lab Manager, The Pennsylvania State University
Michael Ginda, Senior Research Analyst, Indiana University
Nicole Giuliani, Evergreen Associate Professor, University of Oregon
Christy M. Glass, Professor, Utah State University
Jessica Glazier, Postdoctoral Researcher, Northeastern University
Alexandra Glenn, Graduate Student, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
Eli G. Godwin, EdM, MPH, Clinical Research Specialist, Boston Children's Hospital
William Goggin, Retired Professor, University of Southern Mississippi
Jin Xun Goh, Assistant Professor, Colby College
Christopher Goh, Associate Dean and Professor, Williams College
Jennifer Golbeck, Professor, University of Maryland
Hannah C. Goldbach, Graduate student, Brown University
Jonah Goldfine, Faculty at NYU, Grad Student at DU, New York University and University of Denver
Christian R. Goldsmith, Professor, Auburn University
Priscila SFC Gomes, Post-doctoral fellow, Auburn University
Jesse Gomez, Assistant Professor, Princeton University
Leslie D. Gonzales, Associate Professor, Michigan State University
Jessica Gonzalez, Graduate Student, Florida International University
Miriam B. Goodman, Professor and Department Chair, Stanford University
Emma C. Goodwin, Postdoctoral Scholar, Arizona State University
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Jonathan Gordils, Assistant Professor, University of Hartford
Kristina Gordon, Associate Dean, University of Tennessee-Knoxville
Sophia P. Gosselin, Graduate Student, University of Connecticut
Saroj R. Gourkanti, Graduate Student, University of California, San Diego
Vincent R. Graziano, Graduate student, UConn Health
Megan R. Greeson, Associate Professor, DePaul University
Allison P. Gregg, Doctoral Candidate in Clinical Psychology, UT Southwestern Medical Center
Noah Greifer, Statistical Consultant, Harvard University
Joshua A. Grey, Graduate Student, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Ginny Grieb, Research Lab Manager, Syracuse University
Emily J. Griffith, Post Doctoral Fellow, University of Colorado Boulder
Rae V. Griffith, Graduate Student, Sam Houston State University
Arpi Grigorian, Graduate Student, University of Colorado, Boulder

Macey K. Grisso, Lab Manager, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Silas K. Grossberndt, Graduate Student/Adjust Lecturer, City University of New York, Graduate Center and Baruch college; sPhenix Collaboration, BNL
Andrea Grover, Associate Professor, University of Nebraska at Omaha
Norman R. Groves, Postdoctoral Scholar, Ohio State University
Petal Grower, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Michigan
Cecile A. Grubb, Graduate Student, University of Tennessee Knoxville
Robert B. Grubbs, Professor, Stony Brook University
Oliver Grundmann, Director & Clinical Professor, University of Florida
Matthew R. Gruner, Staff, University of Pennsylvania
Sergej Grunevski, Graduate Student, Rutgers University
Patrick R. Grzanka, Professor of Psychology, University of Tennessee
Adrienne Grzenda, Health Sciences Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, UCLA
Luke Guerdan, PhD Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Jeremy S. Guest, Associate Professor, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Pascale S. Guiton, Assistant Professor, Santa Clara University
Angela Guo, Undergraduate student, University of Washington
Navarun Gupta, Chair and Professor, University of Bridgeport
Arella E. Gussow, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Eartha M. Guthman, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Princeton
Dany Haddad, Applied Scientist, AI2
Nicholas Hadler, Graduate Student, University of California, Berkeley
Cedric Hagen, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Princeton University
Maggie Haite, Undergraduate senior, Michigan State University
Goni Halevi, Graduate Student, Princeton University / Institute for Advanced Study
Emily M. Hall, Research Assistant Professor, Vanderbilt University
Richard J. Hall, Associate Professor, University of Georgia
Grace Hallenbeck, Research Scientist, Meta
Joy Ham, Graduate Student, Temple University
Emily R. Hamburger, Graduate student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Shereen Hamdy, Alumna and 2017 GRFP Fellow, University of California, Santa Barbara
Stevie Hamilton, Graduate Student, Columbia University
W. Kyle Hamilton, Graduate Student, University of California Merced
Jessica Hammer, Associate Professor, Carnegie Mellon University
Lia Hanka, Graduate student, JILA/CU Boulder
Alex Hanna, Director of Research, DAIR Institute
Amelia M. Hansen, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Brady Hanshaw, Medical Student, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine
Eisha Haque, Lab Manager, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Cheshire Hardcastle, Graduate Student, University of Florida
Hannah Harling, Undergraduate Student, Colorado School of Mines
Madeline Harms B. Harms, Assistant Professor, University of Minnesota Duluth
Nicholas R. Harp, Postdoctoral Fellow, Yale University
David P. Harper, Professor, University of Tennessee
Billie Harrer, Electrical Engineer, Northrop Grumman
Maggie Harrington, Graduate Student, Stanford
Kathryn M. Hart, Assistant Professor, Williams College
Finley Hartley, Lab Assistant, Agilent Technologies
Delenn Hartswick, Graduate Research Assistant, Georgia State University
Johanna A. Harvey, Postdoctoral Reaeacher, University of Maryland

Allison G. Harvey, Professor, University of California, Berkeley
Todd Harwell, Assistant Teaching Professor, Portland State University
Eric L. Hastie, Teaching Assistant Professor, UN Chapel Hill
Mary Hatcher-Skeers, Professor and Associate Dean of Racial Equity, Scripps College
Jennifer Havens, Graduate Student, UCSD
Laura I. Hazlett, Graduate Student, UCLA
Jiaming He, Graduate Student, University of Texas at Austin
Eric Hehman, Associate Professor, McGill University
Emily J. Helder, Professor, Calvin University
Caryn L. Heldt, Professor, Michigan Technological University
Chelsea Helion, Assistant Professor, Temple University
Chandler Hellenbrand, Graduate student, University of Wisconsin - Madison
Dre Helmns, Assistant Professor, Harvey Mudd College
Babak Hemmatian, Beckman Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Courtney Hendrickson, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
PJ Henry, Associate Professor, New York University Abu Dhabi
Michael W. Henson, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Chicago
Michael A. Herman, Professor and Director of the School of Biological Sciences, UNL
Mary r. Hermes, Professor, University Of Minnesota
Jonathan J. Hernandez, Associate Research Engineer, National Institute of Aerospace
Rudi A. Herrig, Undergraduate Student, University of Colorado at Boulder
Gerald D. Higginbotham, Postdoctoral Associate, University of Virginia
Mary S. Himmelstein, Assistant Professor, Kent State University
Laura Hirshfield, Lecturer, University of Michigan
Brianna Hoegler, PhD Student, Brown University
Michaela K. Hoffelmeyer, Graduate Student, Penn State University
Evelyn J. Hoffman, Communications Coordinator and Undergraduate Student, oSTEM @ UC, Boulder
Jasara Hogan, Assistant Research Scientist, New York University
Rachael E. Hokenson, Graduate student, UCI
Joshua Holden, Professor, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology
Alex Holder, Graduate Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Ann S. Holder, Associate Professor Dept of Social Science and Cultural Studies, Pratt Institute
Kenneth Holstein, Assistant Professor, Carnegie Mellon University
Wendy Hood, Professor, Auburn University
Theo S. Hopper, Graduate Student, University of Michigan
Erin Hotchkiss, Associate Professor, Virginia Tech
Loren E. Hough, Associate Professor, CU Boulder
Beryl Hovis-Afflerbach, Undergraduate student, Caltech
Rebecca A. Howard, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Morgan E. Howe, Postdoctoral Scholar, UCLA
Lars Howell, Graduate Student, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Crystal L. Hoyt, Thorsness Endowed Chair in Ethical Leadership, University of Richmond
Jane Hsieh, Graduate Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Mengdi Huang, Graduate Student, Northwestern University
Jiawen Huang, Graduate student, Columbia University
Yanzi Huang, Graduate Student, University of Delaware
Randolph D. Hubach, Associate Professor, Purdue University
Christina Huber, Graduate Student, University of California Los Angeles
Sa-kiera T.J. Hudson, Assistant Professor, University of California at Berkeley
Haley A. Hudson, Graduate Student, Oregon State University

Natalie V. Hudson-Smith, Postdoctoral Fellow, Stony Brook University
Brent Hughes, Assistant Professor, University of California, Riverside
Bryce E. Hughes, Associate Professor, Montana State University
Randall Hughes, Professor, Northeastern University
Kiley J. Hughes, Postdoc, The Scripps Research Institute
Jamie S. Hughes, Professor of Psychology, The University of Texas Permian Basin
Sandra Hui, Bioinformatics Scientist, Tempus Labs
Andrew Hundt, Computing Innovation Fellow, Independent Scholar
Jeffrey M. Hunger, Assistant Professor, Miami University
Laurel Hunt, Design Engineer, Andersen Corporation
Morgan L. Hunte, Alumna / Manager Scientist, University of Connecticut / Sanofi
Baqar Husain, Research Assistant, Brown University School of Public Health
Carolyn P. Hutchinson, Assistant Professor, Hamilton College
Sue J. Huybensz, Alumnus, SUNY College at Cortland
Gavin Hynes, Clinical Research Coordinator, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Tristen Inagaki, Assistant Professor, San Diego State University
Catherine Insel, Postdoctoral Research Scientist, Columbia University
Ka I Ip, Assistant Professor, University of Minnesota
Sara Iran Manesh, Graduate PhD Student, Auburn University
Kyle Ireton, PhD Student, UC Davis
Lelemia Irvine, Assistant Professor of Physics, University of Hawaii—West O’ahu
Derek Isaacowitz, Professor, Northeastern University
Lys M. Isma, Graduate Student, University of Miami
Tiffany A. Ito, Professor, University of Colorado Boulder
Siddhant Iyer, RA, Dartmouth College
Adam Jacobs, Senior Engineer, NVIDIA
Karl Jaehnig, Graduate student, Vanderbilt University
Roshan A. Jain, Associate Professor, Haverford College
Tyler G. James, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Michigan
Jennifer L. James, Graduate Student, Vanderbilt University/sPHENIX
Morgan James, Assistant Professor, Rutgers
Cassandra S E Jamison, Assistant Professor, Rowan University
EJ S. Jardas, Research Coordinator, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center
Michelle E. Jarvie-Eggart, Assistant Professor, Michigan Technological University
Alaina Jaster, PhD Candidate, Virginia Commonwealth University
Jarildy L. Javier, Graduate Student, Emory University
Nasim Jawadian, Accountant / Financial Analyst, The Count
Katya Jay, Postdoctoral Scientist, University of Colorado, Boulder
Lauren Jenkins, Graduate Student, Duke University
J. David Jentsch, Empire Innovation Professor of Psychology, Binghamton University
Amanda Jetzt, Research Associate, Rutgers University
Ananya Harsh Jha, Predoctoral Scholar, Allen Institute for AI
Joseph C. Jochman, Teaching Assistant Professor, University of North Dakota
Kerri L. Johnson, Professor, UCLA
Sean D. Johnson, Assistant Professor, University of Michigan
Jena E. Johnson, Assistant Professor, Michigan
Mary L. Johnson, Undergraduate student, Northland College
Dylan M. Johnson, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Texas Medical Branch
Alexis M. Johnson, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Dee Jolly, PhD Student, University of Oregon

Harper Jones, Graduate Student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
David Jones, Graduate Student, University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center
Nirel JonesMitchell, Postbacc Research Fellow, University of Texas at Austin
Amanda M. Jones-Rincon, Doctoral candidate and lecturer, University of Texas at San Antonio
Eric M. Jordahl, Graduate Student, University of California San Diego
Kayden Jordan, Assistant Professor, Harrisburg University of Science and Technology
Alby J. Joseph, Graduate Student, Stanford University
John T. Jost, Professor, New York University
William Jou, Engineer, Heirloom Carbon
Iris Y. Juanico, Graduate Student, University of California Davis
Josh Judkins, Business Development Manager, Thermo Fisher Scientific
Robert-Paul Juster, Assistant Professor, University of Montreal
Natalie Kachmarik, Student, Binghamton University
Natalia Kaliszewski, Alumna, University of Minnesota
Juhi Kalra, Mechanical Engineer, Heirloom
Ashlyn Kamin, Graduate Student, University of Washington
Kristyn Kamke, PhD, MS, Researcher, Anti-Violence Nonprofit
Claire M. Kamp Dush, Professor, University of Minnesota
Jennifer J. Kaplan, Professor, Middle Tennessee State University
Maira Karan, Doctoral Candidate, UCLA
Jessica Karch, Postdoctoral Scholar, Tufts University
Xantha Karp, Associate Professor, Central Michigan University
Benjamin Katz, Postdoctoral Associate, Stony Brook University
Sabra L. Katz-Wise, Associate Professor, Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School
Pierre Kawak, Postdoctoral Scholar, University of South Florida
Anna Kawakami, Graduate Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Kamron L. Kayhani, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Toy Kearse, Graduate Student, Howard University
Jason Keeler, Assistant Professor, Central Michigan University
Haley Keglovits, PhD Student, Brown University
Erin Keith, Lecturer, University of Nevada, Reno
Sarah L. Keller, Professor, University of Washington
Julie C. Keller, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Rhode Island
Conor Kelly, Graduate Student, University of Washington
Tyler Kelly, Associate Professor, University of Birmingham
Eric B. Kelly, AI Engineer, Deloitte Consulting LLP
Gregory T. Keohan, Social Studies Teacher, Medfield Public Schools
Kiya Kersh, Scientist, Person impacted by homophobia, Prism14
Brice J. Kessler, Graduate Student, Rutgers University
Jimmy Kieu, PhD Student, Duke University
Emmy Killett, software engineer, JPL
Cameron Kim, Assistant Professor of the Practice, Duke University
Ezekiel Kimball, Professor, University of Maine
Kristin Kimble, Graduate Student, Brown University
Laura A. King, Curators' Distinguished Professor, University of Missouri, Columbia
Drew King, Undergraduate Student, University of Washington
Eden Kinkaid, Doctoral candidate, University of Arizona
Michael Kintscher, PhD Student, Arizona State University
Teri Kirby, Assistant Professor, Purdue University
Adam Kirn, Associate Professor of Engineering Education, University of Nevada, Reno

LB Klein, Assistant Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Megan Klein, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Washington
Kat Klement, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Bemidji State University
Nastasia R. Klevak, Research Assistant, Princeton University
Matthew Knestrick, Senior Scientist, OnDemand Pharmaceuticals
Karen Knierman, Assistant Teaching Professor, Arizona State University
Peter N. Knox, Postdoctoral Associate, University of Vermont
John Kolade, Undergraduate Student, NJIT
Megan L. Korbel, Design Engineer, Milwaukee Tool
Jennifer Korchak, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
R Korkodilos, Clinical Research Specialist, Boston Children's Hospital
James C. Kosmopoulos, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin - Madison
Evdokiya G. Kostadinova, Assistant Professor, Auburn University
Ezra J. Kottler, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Colorado Boulder
Kelsey P. Koutsoukos, Graduate Student, University of Delaware
Jacklyn Koyama, Post-Doctoral Fellow, University of Toronto
Ben Kraemer, Graduate Student, Stanford University
Grace Krahm, Undergraduate Student, Agnes Scott College
Kelsey L. Kramer, Doctoral Candidate, Sam Houston State University
Michael Kraus, Associate Professor, Yale University
Miriam Krause, Director of Education, Outreach, & Diversity, NSF Cntr. for Sustainable Nanotechnology
Keerthi Krishnan, Assistant Professor, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Kathryn M. Kroeper, Assistant Professor, Sacred Heart University
Isadora Krsek, Graduate Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Christopher Krupenye, Assistant Professor, Johns Hopkins University
Jennifer Kubota, Associate Professor, University of Delaware
Tyler Kukla, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Washington
Danica Kulibert, Graduate student, Tulane University
David Kunkel, Graduate Student, Oklahoma State University
Raghav Kunnawalkam Elayavalli, Assistant Professor, Vanderbilt University
Mehmet Kurt, Assistant Professor, University of Washington
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David B. Kushner, Professor, Dickinson College
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Aleksandra Kuznetsova, Postdoctoral Fellow, AMNH
Damhyeon Kwak, Graduate Student, University of Utah
Mijeong Kwon, Assistant Professor, University of Colorado Denver
Brandon P. Labbree, Research Technician Associate, University of Michigan
Anna M. LaChance, Lecturer, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Marco Lai, Graduate Student, New York University
Calvin K. Lai, Assistant Professor, Washington University in St. Louis
Lauren M. Laifer, Graduate Student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Julia M. Laing, Clinical Psychology Doctoral Student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Parker L. LaMascus, Doctoral Candidate, University of Pennsylvania
Sarah Lamer, Assistant Professor, University of Tennessee
Jan Lammerding, Professor, Cornell University
Shirley A. Lang, Biology Lab Instructor, Haverford College
Alex C. Lange, Assistant Professor, Colorado State University - Fort Collins
Inez A. Lanham, Undergraduate Student, Colorado School of Mines
Emily W. Lankau, Research Scholar, Ronin Institute

Candace A. Lapan, Assistant Professor, Wingate University
Bethany Lassetter, Postdoctoral Associate, New York University
Eve N. Lasswell, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, University of California - San Diego
Bailey Lathrop, Lecturer, University of Glasgow
Jillian Lauer, Postdoctoral Fellow, New York University
Jennifer Lavers, Honorary Researcher, Natural History Museum
Connor A. Lawless, Graduate Student, Cornell University
LuEttaMae Lawrence, Assistant Professor, Utah State University
Austin B. Lawrence, PhD Candidate, University of Missouri
Joel M. Le Forestier, PhD Candidate, University of Toronto
Carter A. Lea, Research Proposal Development Officer, Tulane University
Jasper S. Leavitt, Graduate Student, East Carolina University
Richard T. LeBeau, Project Scientist, University of California, Los Angeles
Tate LeBlanc, Graduate Student, University of California, Riverside
Kathryn A. LeCroy, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Cornell University
Sarah H. Ledford, Assistant Professor, Georgia State University
Rebecca A. Lee, Postdoctoral Scholar, University of California, San Francisco
Matthew Lee, Assistant Professor, New York University
Sarita Lee, (signing as an individual), (signing as an individual)
Jasper S. Lee, Postdoctoral Fellow, Massachusetts General Hospital
Leah E. LeFebvre, Associate Professor, University of Alabama
Betsy Lehman, PhD Student, Michigan Technological University
Emma S. Lehmberg, Graduate Student (PhD), Texas A&M University
Jane L. Lehr, Professor, California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly SLO)
Ryan Lei, Assistant Professor, Haverford College
Courtney P. Leisner, Assistant Professor, Auburn University
Emma Lejeune, Assistant Professor, Boston University
Edward P. Lemay, Professor, University of Maryland
Samantha Lempke, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Emily Lenning, Professor, Fayetteville State University
Bianca A. Lepe, Graduate Student, MIT
Rachel Leshin, PhD Student, New York University
Lauren Lesko, Graduate Student, UCLA
Isaac S. Leslie, Extension Assistant Professor, University of Vermont Extension
Zoe Leung, Student Coordinator, New York University
Sara Levens, Associate Professor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Margaret C. Levenstein, Director and Professor, ICPSR, University of Michigan
Savannah N. Lewis, Graduate Student, Stanford University, Department of Microbiology and Immunology
Neil A. Lewis, Jr, Assistant Professor, Cornell University
Tianyu Li, Assistant Professor, Austin Peay State University
Toby Li, Assistant Professor, University of Notre Dame
Andrew Li, Undergraduate student, University of California, Davis
Colin Li, Graduate Student, Wake Forest University
Mingqi Li, Graduate Student, DePaul University
Cal Liao, Postdoctoral Fellow, Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard
Alysson Light, Associate Instructional Professor, University of Chicago
Ariel M. Lighty, Graduate Student, University at Buffalo
Kayla Y. Lim, Graduate Student, UCLA
Jessica Lin, Doctoral Candidate, Palo Alto University
Song Lin, Professor, Cornell University

Sarah Hope Lincoln, Assistant Professor, Case Western Reserve University
Kristen A. Lindquist, Professor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Lorri Lindsay, Student, Rutgers University
Matthew Lindsay, Graduate Student, University of Rochester
Jeffrey M. Lipshultz, Assistant Professor, Stony Brook University
Madison Little, Doctoral Candidate, University of Oxford
Yaxin Liu, Graduate Student, Emory University
Kendra E. Liu, Ph.D. Candidate (Neuroscience), University of Virginia
Richard Y. Liu, Assistant Professor, Harvard University
Chanté Lively, Conservationist, Clayton County Water Authority
Carly A. Lockard, Staff Scientist, Carle Health
Corinna Loeckenhoff, Professor, Cornell University
Kristine Loh, Graduate Student, University of Minnesota
Jason P. Londo, Associate professor, Cornell University
Elena A. Long, Assistant Professor, University of New Hampshire
Alison Long, Conservation Scientist
Joseph Long, Postdoc/Visiting Scientist, Cornell University
Laura A. Lopez, Associate Professor of Astronomy, The Ohio State University
Katherine Lorenz, Associate Professor, California State University
Lorenzo Lorenzo-Luaces, Assistant Professor, Indiana University
Hannah M. Loso, Graduate Student, University of Vermont
C. Phoebe Lostroh, Associate Professor, Colorado College
Abigail Lott, Assistant Professor, Emory University
Artemis S. Louyakis, Research Scientist, University of Connecticut
Emilie Lozier, Graduate Worker, Northwestern University
Timothy P. Luft, Graduate Student and Teaching Assistant, University of Missouri - St. Louis
Lisa Lundgren, Assistant Professor, Utah State University
Ronin A. Lupien, Undergraduate Student, University of Florida
Sahil Luthra, Postdoctoral Fellow, Carnegie Mellon University
GW Gant Luxton, Principal Investigator, University of California Davis
Alyssa Luz-Ricca, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Kirsten O. Lydic, Technical Associate, MIT
David M. Lydon-Staley, Assistant Professor, University of Pennsylvania
William Lynch, Graduate Student, Boston University
Sarah Lynch, Graduate student, University of Virginia
Andrew C. Lynn, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Vanderbilt University
Bryan K. Lynn, PhD Candidate, Oregon State University
Jessica B. Lyons, Consultant, Independent consultant
Nico MacDougall, Laboratory Associate, George Washington University
E Mace, Assistant Professor, Columbia University
Laura Madson, Professor, New Mexico State University
Wasita Mahaphanit, Graduate Student, Dartmouth College
Rocky Mai, Mechanical Engineer, Heirloom Carbon
Nadyanna M. Majeed, PhD Student, National University of Singapore
Sam Major, Undergraduate Student, Colorado School of Mines
Diane C. Malarik, Deputy Director, Biological and Physical Sciences Division, NASA Headquarters
Kaitlin E. Mallouk, Associate Professor, Rowan University
Aphroditi Mamaligas, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of California, San Francisco
Laura Mamo, Professor, San Francisco State University
Noah P. Mancuso, Graduate Student, Emory University, Rollins School of Public Health

Tara M. Mandalaywala, Assistant Professor, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Aishwarya Mandyam, PhD Student, Stanford University
Pablo Mangas, Sex researcher, University of Granada
Kody J. Manke-Miller, Assistant Professor, Carnegie Mellon University
Jeremy R. Manning, Assistant Professor, Dartmouth College
Rachael Mansbach, Assistant Professor, Concordia University
Yao-Yuan Mao, Assistant Professor, University of Utah
Amy M. Marcarelli, Professor, Michigan Technological University
Alyson March, Graduate Student, University of Rochester/outGRADS/oSTEM
Tyler Marghetis, Assistant Professor, University of California Merced
Miriam Marino, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin
Doug Markant, Assistant Professor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Katherine Markham, PhD Candidate, University of Georgia
Susan Markunas, Senior Professional Lecturer, DePaul University
Elisha M. Marr, Associate Professor of Sociology, Calvin University
Jordan Marrocco, Assistant Professor, Touro University
Riley Marshall, Graduate Student, UCLA
André Marston, Administrative Coordinator, University of Pennsylvania
Elinor R. Martin, Associate Professor, University of Oklahoma
John C. Martin, Associate Professor, University of Illinois Springfield
Miles Martinez, Graduate Student, Duke University
Roberto Martin-Martin, Assistant Professor, University of Texas at Austin
Megan G. Massa, Visiting assistant professor, Haverford college
Heather Masson-Forsythe, AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellow, AAAS
Margaux Masson-Forsythe, Science Machine Learning engineer, Earthshot Labs
Allison Master, Assistant Professor, University of Houston
Karen Masters, Professor, Haverford College
Adam S. Masters, Graduate Student, Virginia Tech
Andrew MM Matheson, Postdoc, Columbia university
Elisabetta Matsumoto, Associate Professor, Georgia Tech
Bradley Mattan, Senior UX Researcher, No university affiliation - former academic
Siobhan M. Mattison, Associate Professor, University of New Mexico
Tiffany M. Matyja, Medical Student, William Carey University COM
Hailey Maxwell, Undergraduate student, University of Georgia
Melissa J. Mayer, Science Writer/Communications Coordinator, Washington State University
Maria T. Maza, Graduate Student, UNC
Daniel M. McCalley, Postdoctoral Fellow, Stanford University
Keelee C. McCleary-Petersen, Graduate Student, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
John B. McClimon, Postdoc, University of Pennsylvania
Rachel L. McClure, Graduate NSF Research Fellow, University of Wisconsin — Madison
Ethan McCormick, Assistant Professor, Leiden University
Gary S. McDowell, Academic Consultant, Lightoller LLC
Tim McEldowney, Postdoctoral Researcher, West Virginia University
Bryan D. McElroy, Graduate Student, Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University
Emma McGorray, PhD Student, Northwestern University
Erin McGowan, Graduate Student, New York University
Katlyn E. McGraw, Postdoctoral Fellow, Columbia University
Julie S. McGurk, Director of Faculty Teaching Initiatives, Yale University
Lydan McLaws, Graduate student, Arizona State University
Kay McMonigal, Postdoc, North Carolina State University

John G. McMullen, Postdoctoral Fellow, Indiana University
Anne J. McNeil, Professor, University of Michigan
Tyler McNeill, Graduate Student, Cornell University
Malinda McPherson, Postdoc, UC San Diego
Noah McQueen, Head of Research, Heirloom
Grant D. Meadors, Scientist, Los Alamos National Laboratory
Katherine R. Meckel, Visiting Assistant Professor of Neurobiology, Swarthmore College
William B. Meese, Graduate Student, University of California, Merced
Yohannes Mehari, Lecturer, Auburn University
Matthias R. Mehl, Professor, University of Arizona
Casey H. Meili, Graduate Student, Oklahoma State University
Loreilys M. Mejias Rivera, Graduate Student, University of Pennsylvania
Aron J. Meltzner, Assistant Professor, Nanyang Technological University
Wendy Berry Mendes, Professor, UCSF
David Menendez, Postdoctoral researcher, University of Michigan
Sunshine Menezes, Clinical Professor of Environmental Communication, University of Rhode Island
Anagha M. Menon, Student, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Cal Mergendahl, Graduate Assistant, University of Minnesota
Dina C. Merrer, Professor of Chemistry, Barnard College
Natalie Merrill, Research Staff, Emory University
Adam Messinger, Associate Professor, Northeastern Illinois University
Paul Meyer, Associate Professor, University at Buffalo
Seth J. Meyer, Assistant Professor, Bridgewater State University
Meghan Meyer, Assistant Professor, Columbia University
Josephine C. Meyer, Graduate Research Assistant, University of Colorado Boulder
Chanel Meyers, Assistant Professor, University of Oregon
Kalina Michalska, Assistant Professor, University of California, Riverside
Vasiliki Michopoulos, Associate Professor, Emory University
Joe Miles, Professor, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Eric L. Miller, Assistant Professor, Haverford College
Maximus Miller, Lab Manager, University of Maryland
Emma Miller, Graduate Student, Columbia University
David Miller, Senior Researcher, American Institutes for Research
Ashley Miller, Undergraduate Student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Stephanie Miller, Postdoctoral Neuroscience Fellow, Gladstone Institutes/UCSF
Daniel L. Millimet, Professor, Southern Methodist University
Sarah G. Milliron, Graduate Student, Cornell University
Devin J. Mills, Assistant Professor, Texas Tech University
Josh Milstein, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
AV Milstein, Graduate Student, Virginia Commonwealth University
Adrienne R. Minerick, Professor of Chemical Engineering, Michigan Technological University
Dan-Mircea Mirea, Graduate Student, Princeton University
John M. Misasi, Associate Professor, Western Washington University
Dennis A. Mitchell, Professor of Dental Medicine, Columbia University
William J. Mitchell, Graduate Student, Temple University
Joel J. Mittleman, Assistant Professor, University of Notre Dame
Pinaki Mohanty, Graduate Student, Purdue University
Sanika Moharana, PhD Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Casandra Moisanu, Graduate Student, Northwestern University
S. Monroe, Graduate Student, Duke University

Margo Monteith, Distinguished Professor, Purdue
Mikayla Moody, PhD Student, University of Connecticut Health Center
Katherine S. Moore, Associate Professor, Arcadia University
Ava H. Moore, Student, oSTEM at Central Michigan University
Travis Moore, Assistant Professor, University of Texas Health Science Center Houston
Sara T. Moore, Graduate student, University of Colorado Boulder
Annareli Morales, Research scientist, CIRES
Olivia Morales, Graduate Student, Caltech
Gage K. Moreno, Postdoctoral Fellow, Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard
Pedro Morgado, Professor, MiraCosta College
Adam M. Morgan, Postdoctoral Fellow, NYU School of Medicine
Thekla Morgenroth, Assistant Professor, Purdue University
Haley Morgenstern, Research Assistant, University of Pennsylvania
Daniel P. Moriarity, Postdoctoral Fellow, UCLA Jane and Terry Semel Institute for Neuroscience
Lucas Y. Morimoto, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Thomas Morin, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Massachusetts General Hospital
Daniel J. Morris, Graduate Student, University of Pennsylvania
Melissa E. Morris, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin - Madison
Sydney Morris, Graduate Student, Brown University
Erin Morrow, Graduate Student, University of California, Los Angeles
Audra Morse, Professor and Chair, Michigan Technological University
Galadriel Mortenson, Undergraduate Student, University of Minnesota Morris
Anne Inger Mortvedt, Graduate Student, Michigan Technological University
Cora E. Mukerji, Assistant Professor, Bryn Mawr College
Kimberly Mulligan, Assistant Dean of Inclusion, Equity, and Diversity, Auburn University
Lee Mullin, Fire Protection Engineer, Arcadis
Robert Mullins, Professor, The University of Iowa
Kevin Muñoz, PhD Candidate, University of Missouri
Annie S. Munro, Graduate Student, UMass Dartmouth
Gregg Muragishi, Postdoctoral Scholar, University of Washington
Daniel Muratore, Postdoctoral Fellow, Santa Fe Institute
Corban Murphey, Graduate Student, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Kat Murphy, Graduate Student, UMass Chan Medical School
Max Murphy, undergraduate, Stockton University
Kaitlyn M. Murphy, Ph.D. Candidate, Auburn University
Jennifer Murray, Assistant Professor, University of Guelph
Anna Murray, Graduate Student, Purdue University
Kaitlyn A. Murray, Graduate Student, University of California, Davis
Vishnu P. Murty, Assistant Professor, Temple University
Keely A. Muscatell, Associate Professor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Brian Mustanski, Professor and ISGMH Director, Northwestern University
Annalisa Myer, Graduate Student, City University of New York (CUNY), The Graduate Center
Kristen Naegle, Associate Professor, University of Virginia
Sathvik Nair, PhD student, University of Maryland
Aisha Nammari, Professional Research Assistant - Electrical Engineering, University of Colorado Boulder
Laura P. Naumann, Associate Professor/Department Chair, Nevada State College
May A. Navarra, Senior Research Assistant, Boston Medical Center
Ryan Need, Assistant Professor, University of Florida
Rebecca Neel, Associate Professor, University of Toronto (American Citizen)
Joey Neilsen, Assistant Professor of Physics, Villanova University

Ryan Nell, Geochemist, INTERA Incorporated
Joey Nelson, Manager, Research Science, Heirloom Carbon Technologies
Claire Nemes, Graduate Student, University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science
Maital Neta, Associate Professor, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
ERIC NEUMANN, Graduate Student, Stanford University
Michael E. Newcomb, Associate Professor with Tenure, Northwestern University
Christian Newkirk, Undergraduate Student, University of Oklahoma
Benjamin Newman, Investigator, Allen Institute for AI
Benjamin Nguyen, PhD candidate, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Thuy Nguyen, Computational Biologist, Formbio
Abigail Nguyen, Undergraduate Student, University of Southern California
Malachie Nichols, Student, University of Arkansas
David Nicholson, Postdoctoral Researcher, Emory University
Andrew A. Nicholson, Assistant Professor, University of Ottawa
Kelley Nicholson-Flynn, Assistant Head of School for Operations, Riverdale Country School
Summer Nicks, Mechanical Engineer, Imatest
Gandalf Nicolas, Assistant Professor, Rutgers University - New Brunswick
Miriam J. Nieberg, Undergraduate student, CU Boulder
Leo M. Niehorster-Cook, PhD Student, University of California - Merced
Erik C. Nook, Assistant Professor, Princeton University
Catherine J. Norris, Associate Professor & Associate Dean, Swarthmore College
Kathryn Nowotny, Associate Professor, University of Miami
Tehila Nugiel, Postdoctoral Fellow, UNC Chapel Hill
Courtney Nuss, Research technician, University of Pennsylvania
Erin M. O'Mara Kunz, Associate Professor, University of Dayton
Danielle E. Oberg, Graduate Student, University of Arkansas
Miriam B. Obley, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Lucy E. O'Brien, Associate Professor, Stanford University
Erin O'Callaghan, Assistant Professorial Lecturer, Saint Xavier University
Mary-Frances O'Connor, Associate Professor, University of Arizona
Jacob O'Connor, Assistant Consultant, California State Senate
Michael R. O'Dea, Graduate student, NYU Grossman School of Medicine
Ian C. O'Dowd, PhD Candidate, University of Minnesota
Paola Odriozola, Postdoctoral Scholar, University of California Los Angeles
Eli P. Oesterheld, Undergraduate, Northwestern University
Lavie Ohana, Managing Editor, Space Scout
Sara Oliveira Pedro dos Santos, Graduate Student, Brown University
Kristina R. Olson, Professor, Princeton University
Anna Y. Olson, Systems Engineer, Heirloom
Scott Olson, Software Engineer, Heirloom Carbon
Melanie Ortiz Alvarez de la Campa, Graduate Student, Brown University
Max Osborn, Assistant Professor, Villanova University
Ares Osborn, PhD Student, The University of Warwick (UK)
Flora E. Oswald, Graduate Fellow, Penn State University
Kentrell Owens, Graduate Student, University of Washington
N. J. Jayce Owens-Boone, Graduate Student, Western Illinois University
Zachary S. Oxford-Romeike, Graduate Student, UCLA
Marguerite A. Pacheco, Graduate Student, Cornell University
Kiersten E. Page, Associate Developer, IBM
David Pagliaccio, Assistant Professor, Columbia University

Susannah B. F. Paletz, Associate Professor, University of Maryland
Claire M. Palmer, Postdoc, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Levi D. Palmer, Ph.D. Candidate, California Institute of Technology
Elizabeth L. Paluck, Professor, Princeton University
Laura J. Palucki Blake, Assistant Vice President for IR and Effectiveness, Harvey Mudd College
Christopher J. Panebianco, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Pennsylvania
Grace B. Panetti, Postdoctoral Fellow, Princeton University
Vanessa R. Panfil, Associate Professor, Old Dominion University
Emily Panza, Assistant Professor (Research), Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University
Shauna M. Paradine, Assistant Professor, University of Rochester
Zachory Park, Graduate Student, Georgetown University
Rebecca Parker, Graduate Student, Emory University
Joanna Parker, Undergraduate, University of Colorado Boulder
Eric V. Patridge, Principal Scientist in Computational Systems Biology, Viome
Sam Patterson, Postdoc, New York University
Noah Paul-Gin, Mechanical Engineer, Heirloom Carbon
Samuel Pazicni, Assistant Professor, University of Wisconsin–Madison
M. Pease, Doctoral Student and NSF Graduate Research Fellow, University of Maryland, College Park
Ryan Pecoraro, Engineer, BEPA
Kristen Pedersen, Mechanical Engineer, Heirloom Carbon
Elizabeth C. Pedigo, Undergraduate Student, Auburn University
Mark Peifer, Professor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Daniel Peipert, Graduate Student, University of Vermont
Theodore O. Pena, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin
Pablo Penaloza, Assistant Professor, Northwestern university
R Lee Penn, Professor, University of Minnesota -- Twin Cities
Rebecca Peretz-Lange, Assistant Professor, State University of New York (SUNY-Purchase)
Sebastian Perez-Lopez, Graduate Student, Brown University
Aster Perkins, Graduate Student, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Evan A. Perkowski, Graduate Student, Texas Tech University
Sarah L. Perry, Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Anna Perry, Graduate Student, Leiden University
Michele Peruzzi, Postdoctoral associate, Duke University
Harvey C. Peters, Assistant Professor, The George Washington University
Brett J. Peters, Assistant Professor, Ohio University
Dana Peterson, Senior Executive Director & Professor, University at Albany School of Criminal Justice
William Petry, Assistant Professor, North Carolina State University
Daniel Pfau, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Michigan
Jennifer Pfeifer, Professor, University of Oregon
Jeremiah T. Pham, Graduate Student, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Mai L. Pham, Undergraduate student, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
Kelsey C. Phelan, Product Manager, Sciplay
Elizabeth A. Phelps, Professor, Harvard University
Cynthia Phillips, Scientist, Nasa JPL
Naomi Phung, Graduate Student, York University
Michael L. Piacentino, Assistant Professor, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine
Natalie C. Piehl, Research Technologist II, Northwestern University
Jordan Pierce, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Louie Pierrakeas, Graduate Student, SUNY Stony brook
Alexis V. Pinela, Program Coordinator, SDSU

Marco A. Pipoly, Graduate Student, University of Iowa
Cecile M. Piret, Associate Professor, Michigan Technological University
Rachel Pizzie, Assistant Professor, Gallaudet University
Timothy M. Plummer, Software Engineer IV, Laboratory for Atmospheric and Space Physics
Rosana Pochat Garcia, Research Associate, Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Victoria Poletis, Senior Technical Recruiter, Radford / Heirloom
Morgan Polikoff, Associate Professor, University of Southern California
OiYan A. Poon, Program Officer/Visiting Professor, Spencer Foundation/UMD
Tralucia Powell, Graduate Student, University of Minnesota Institute of Child Development
Henry A. Prager, Graduate Student, New Mexico Tech, Los Alamos National Laboratory
Richard Prather, Associate Professor, University of Maryland
Brenna Prevelige, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Gwendolyn F. Price, Research Associate II, Vital Research
Julie L. Prosser, Visiting Assistant Professor, Saint Martin's University
Joules Provenzano, Graduate Student, MIT
John G. Purdy, Associate Professor, University of Arizona
Jonathan Puritz, Assistant Professor, University of Rhode Island
Jessica Qiu, Research Coordinator, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Tina M. Quach, Undergraduate Student, California State University, Fullerton
Loredana Quadro, Professor, Rutgers University
Vic I. Quennessen, PhD Fellow, Oregon State University
Francesca Querdasi, PhD student, UCLA
Xandria R. Quichocho, Associate Researcher, Texas State University
Kimberly Quinn, Professor and Department Chair, DePaul University
Meg Quint, Research Assistant, Fall 2023 Medical School Matriculant, Brigham and Women's Hospital
Zach Radcliff, Clinical Psychologist, Nemours Children's Health
Michael J. Radk2, PhD Candidate, Johns Hopkins University
Angela Radulescu, Assistant Professor, Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai
Megan Radyk, Postdoc, University of Michigan
Arnav Raha, Research Technician, Columbia University
Heather M. Raimer Young, PhD Candidate, University of Virginia School of Medicine
Peter L. Ralph, Associate Professor, University of Oregon
Roman Ramos Baez, Postdoctoral fellow, University of Chicago
Lenny E. Ramsey, Project manager, University of Arkansas
Pranava Raparla, Senior Product Manager, Microsoft
Melissa A. Rasberry, Director, North Carolina State University
Parisa Rashidi, Associate Professor, University of Florida
Charvi Rastogi, Graduate Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Hannah Rath, Undergraduate student, Oklahoma State University
Steve J. Rathje, Postdoctoral Researcher, New York University
Jacob M. Ratliff, Graduate student, Albert Einstein College of Medicine
Aneeta Rattan, Associate Professor, London Business School
Emmaline Raven, Undergraduate Student, Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Abigail Ray, Graduate Student, UC Davis
Darryl Reano, Assistant Professor, Arizona State University
Nicholas Reed, Scientist, Sanofi
Erzsébet Regan, Associate professor, The College of Wooster
Emma G. Reich, Graduate Student, Northern Arizona University
Hannah G. Reich, Postdoctoral Research Associate, University of New Hampshire
Elliott M. Reichardt, Graduate Student, Stanford University

Anna Reiman, Associate Professor, SUNY Albany
Madeline G. Reinecke, Graduate student, Yale University
Diego Reinero, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Princeton University
Harry T. Reis, Professor, University of Rochester
Zachary L. Reitz, Postdoctoral Researcher, Wageningen University
Hannah Rempel, PhD Student, The University of Texas at Austin Marine Science Institute
Jan Remsik, Fellow, MSKCC
Daniel W. Renner, Computational scientist, Penn State
William B. Repko, Associate Director, Novartis Institutes for Biomedical Research
Mariano Resendiz, Graduate student, University of California, Riverside
Robert W. Ressler, Senior Associate Researcher, Brandeis
Paula Restrepo, PhD Student, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Mark Revell, Project Manager, American Association of Geographers
Gabriel Reyes, PhD Student, Stanford University
Kimberly A. Reynolds, Assistant Professor, UT Southwestern Medical Center
Shawn A. Rhoads, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Marjorie Rhodes, Professor, New York University
Ryan B. Richardson, Postdoctoral Researcher, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Lewis A. Riley, Professor, Ursinus College
Dane Rivas-Koehl, Doctoral Student, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Ado Rivera, Postdoctoral Fellow, Kaiser Permanente
Kevin E. Rivera Cruz, Graduate Student, University of Michigan
w. c. rivero, graduate student, north carolina state university
Casey L. Roark, Postdoctoral Scholar, University of Pittsburgh
Megan L. Robbins, Associate Professor, University of California, Riverside
Stephanie A. Robert, Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Cassandra O. Roberts, Graduate Student, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Dustyn Roberts, Practice Associate Professor, University of Pennsylvania
Clare M. Robertson, Graduate Student, Baylor College of Medicine
Zoe S. Robertson, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Claire E. Robertson, Graduate Student, New York University
Jacob G. Robins, Postdoctoral Associate, Yale University
Nick Robinson, Graduate Student, University of Texas at Dallas
Kacey Leah Roche, Student, Anglia ruskin university
James W. Rock, Director of Indigenous Programming, Dept of Physics and Astronomy, Univ Minn Duluth
Ann K. Rockwell, General Scientist, Army Applications Lab
Daniel Rodener, Graduate Student, Heidelberg University
Christina Rodriguez, Founder & Doctoral Student, Latinas with Masters
Lionel Rodriguez, Graduate Student, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine
Kerri Rodriguez, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Colorado State University
Diana C. Rodriguez, 2nd year PhD Student, The University of Texas at Dallas
Adriana C. Rodriguez, Post-doctoral research fellow, University of Utah
Carlos Rodriguez-Diaz, Associate Professor and Vice-Chair of Prevention and Community Health, George Washington University-Milken Institute School of Public Health
Hector E. Rodriguez-Simmonds, Graduate Student, Purdue University
Troy A. Roepke, Associate Professor, Rutgers University
Michael J. Rohn, Alimni, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Adelina Rolea, PhD student, Columbia University
Rachel R. Romeo, Assistant Professor, University of Maryland
Theodore J. Ronningen, Chair, Out to Innovate

Eve A. Rosenfeld, Postdoctoral Fellow, Stanford University
Christian H. Ross, Senior Research Assistant, Baylor College of Medicine
Marisa Ross, Postdoctoral Scholar, Northwestern University
Michelle Ross, Graduate Student, Kennesaw State University
Kirsten Ross, EHS Manager, Heirloom
Taylor L. Ross, Teaching Instructor, Rutgers University
Connie B. Roth, Professor, Emory University
Kathryn M. Rothenhoefer, Postdoc, Oregon Health & Science University
Kerry Rouhier, Associate Professor of Chemistry, Kenyon College
Greg J. Rousis, Graduate Student, University of South Florida
Jean-Pierre Roussarie, Assistant Professor, Boston University School of Medicine
Rachel Rovinsky, Graduate Student, UW-Madison
Micalyn Rowe, Graduate Student, Texas A&M University
Cameron S. Royer, Graduate student, Oregon State University
Ashley L. Ruba, UX Researcher, Meta
Mollie Ruben, Assistant Professor, University of Rhode Island
Catalina Rubiano, Graduate Student, University of South Florida
Matthew J. Rubin, Senior Research Scientist, Danforth Plant Science Center
Laur L. Rubino, Founder & Executive Director, Their Research LLC
Julian M. Rucker, Assistant Professor, UNC Chapel Hill
Ashley Ruderman-Looff, Assistant Director for Advocacy & Education, Center for Women, Gender & Sexuality, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth
Richard Rueda, PhD Candidate, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center
Maegan Ruiz, Graduate Student, Washington University in St. Louis
Tomce Runcevski, Assistant Professor, Southern Methodist University
Benjamin R.K. Runkle, Associate Professor, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
Catherine Rushworth, Assistant Professor, Utah State University
Theo A. Rusmore, PhD, University of Oklahoma
Stephen T. Russell, Regents Professor, University of Texas at Austin
Cortland Russell, Market Leader, Accenture
Greg Russell, Head of Talent, Heirloom Carbon Technologies
Jihan Ryu, Instructor, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Kimia Saadatian, Graduate Student, Stanford University
Afiya Sajwani, Graduate Student, Northwestern University
Rauf Salamzade, Graduate Student, UW-Madison
Jessica Salerno, Associate Professor, Arizona State University
Arghavan Salles, Associate professor, Stanford University
Nicole Saltiel, Graduate student, The Ohio State University
Jessica Salvatore, Assoc Professor & Dept Head (Psychology), James Madison University
Shashank Samala, Employee, Cornell
Gregory Samanez-Larkin, Associate Professor, Duke University
Hannah C. Samuels, Graduate Student, DePaul University
Daniel Sanchez, Penn Provost's Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Pennsylvania
Diana Sanchez, Full Professor, Rutgers University
Hugo Sanchez, Graduate Student researcher, University of California, Irvine
Edwin Sanchez, Scallop Researcher, VIMS
Ashley Sanchez Sevilla Uruchurtu, PhD candidate, Brown University
Robyn Sandekian, Director of Faculty Advancement, University of Colorado Boulder
Benjamin E. Sanders, Graduate Student, Yale University
Jeanne Sanders, Senior Research Specialist, University of Michigan

Michel Geovanni Santiago-Martínez, Assistant Professor, University of Connecticut
Jorge Santiago-Ortiz, Sr Director, CMC, Apertura Gene Therapy
Garrett D. Santis, Graduate Student, University of Washington
Jamie Saquing, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Alisha Sarang-Sieminski, Dean of the College and Professor of Engineering, Olin College
Matthew C. Sasaki, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Vermont
Valeri Sawiccy, Doctoral Student; M.S., Oregon State University
Joshua Shicca, Associate Professor, Colorado State University
Eitan Schechtman, Assistant Professor, University of California Irvine
Julian A. Scheffer, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of California, Berkeley
Ayden Scheim, Assistant Professor, Drexel University
Nathaniel E.C. Schermerhorn, Graduate Student, The Pennsylvania State University
Kathryn Schertz, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Michigan
Tracy H. Schloemer, Arnold O. Beckman Postdoctoral Fellow, Stanford University
Toni Schmader, Professor of Psychology, University of British Columbia
Brandon Schmeichel, Professor, Texas A&M University
Michael T. Schmeltz, Assistant Professor, California State University, East Bay
Petra C. Schmid, Assistant Professor, ETH Zurich
Marian L. Schmidt, Assistant Professor, Cornell University
Helen Schmidt, Graduate Student, Temple University
Hannah N. Schmidt, Graduate student, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Christopher A. Schmitt, Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Biology, Boston University
Michael T. Schmitt, Professor, Simon Fraser University
Morgan E. Schneider, Graduate Student, University of Oklahoma
Neesha R. Schnepf, Research scientist, University of Colorado
Paul M. Schokman, Graduate Student, University of TAsmania
Zach C. Schudson, Assistant Professor, California State University, Sacramento
Dani Schultz, Director, Merck
Michael P. Schwartz, Research Program Director, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Melissa A. Schwartz, DO, Clinical Assistant Instructor, Stony Brook
Emily Schwartzman, Graduate Student, University of Toronto
Audrey P. Scott, Undergraduate Student, University of Chicago
Ilana Seager van Dyk, Senior Lecturer, Massey University
Maya A. Seale, Research Assistant & Graduate Student, UT-Dallas
Kristin A. Searle, Assistant Professor, Utah State University
Riley Sechrist, Research Scientist, Michigan Tech Research Institute
Madineh Sedigh-Sarvestani, Postdoc, Max Planck florida
Saren H. Seeley, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Avery Selberg, Graduate student, Temple University
Randall Lee Sell, Professor, Drexel University
Christopher F. Sellas, MAT., Former President, Graduate Student, oSTEM at UCF
Alexander J. Semaca, Structural Anaylsis Engineer, Boeing
Amanda A. Sesker, Postdoctoral Associate, University of Minnesota
Sharon L. Sessions, Professor, New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology
Rio W. Sessions, Undergraduate Student, New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology
Alexander J. Shackman, Associate Professor, University of Maryland
Jessica Shah, Undergraduate Student, Duke University
Dimali shah, Sr. Continuous improvement engineer, University of south alabama
Vijay Shah, Graduate Student, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
James Shanahan, Postdoctoral research scientist, Columbia University

Kyle M. Shanebeck, PhD Candidate, University of Alberta
Peggy A. Shannon-Baker, Associate Professor, Georgia Southern University
Vishal Sharma, Graduate Student, Georgia Tech
Emily E. Sharp, Graduate Student, University of Pennsylvania
Wiley Sharp, Graduate Student, York University
Brinkley M. Sharpe, Graduate Student, University of Georgia
Alanna N. Shaw, Ph.D. candidate, ABD, University of Montana
Erin D. Sheets, Associate Dean and Professor, University of Minnesota Duluth
Andrea Shehi, Undergraduate Student, University of Southern California
Jama Shelton, Associate Professor, Hunter College
Amy Shepherd, Postdoctoral researcher, Boston Children's Hospital
Phoenix Shepherd, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin - Madison
Stephanie L. Shepherd, Associate Professor, Auburn University
Heather Sheridan, Associate Professor, University at Albany, SUNY
Jeffrey Sherman, Professor, University of California, Davis
Danielle M. Shields, Lecturer of Criminology, University of Carolina Wilmington and Rutgers-Newark
Mari Shiratori, Graduate Student, New York University
Vaughn M. Shirey, Ph.D. Candidate, Georgetown University
Chengshi Shiu, Assistant Research Scientist, UCLA
Stacy Shreves, Library Clerk, Newstead Public Library
Eric M. Shuman, Postdoctoral Researcher, New York University
Pao Siangliulue, Applied research scientist, Allen Institute for AI
Victoria L. Siaumau, Graduate Student, UCSD
Noah W. K. Siem, Project Engineer, Mead & Hunt
Wolfgang M. Sigmund, Professor, University of Florida
Ana Leticia Simal Dourado, Graduate Student, University of Guelph
Hillary C. Sinclair, Research Professor, Louisiana State University
Amanda M. Singer, Graduate Student, Ohio State University
Ashwin Singh, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Admin, Queer In AI
Balbir Singh, Postdoctoral Associate, University of Colorado Boulder
Akshay Siramdas, Research scientist, Heirloom Carbon
Allison L. Skinner-Dorkenoo, Assistant Professor, University of Georgia
Christofer Skurka, Assistant Professor, Penn State University
Michael Sladek, Assistant Professor, University of Oklahoma
Jack Slater, Marine Scientist, Virginia Institute of Marine Science
Whitney Sloneker, Graduate Student, Brown
Morgan P. Slusher, Professor of Psychology, The Community College of Baltimore County
Pamela K. Smith, Associate Professor, University of California, San Diego
Byron J. Smith, Postdoc, The Gladstone Institutes
Christine N. Smith, Assistant Professor, University of California San Diego
Madison S. Smith, Postdoctoral Fellow, Northwestern University
Katherine L. Smith, Research Assistant Professor, Old Dominion University
Arden Smith, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Michael L. Smith, Assistant Professor, Auburn University
Tyler Smith, Graduate Student, Auburn University
Braelyn R. Smith, Student, University of Arkansas
Jillian E. Smith-Carpenter, Associate Professor, Fairfield University
Xochitl A. Smola, Doctoral Student, UCLA
Evan L. Sneed, Graduate Student, University of California, Riverside
Martin Snow, Research Scientist (retired), University of Colorado

Michael P. Snyder, Professor and Chair, Stanford University
Cal So, Graduate Student, George Washington University
Courtney Sobers, Associate Teaching Professor, Rutgers University
Luca Soldaini, Research Scientist, Allen Institute for AI
Tori Solomon, Operating Manager, UNL
Leah Somerville, Professor, Harvard University
Ji Young Song, Graduate student, University of Melbourne
Jessica Soong, Graduate Alumni, Johns Hopkins University/OSTEM
Ty A. Sornberger, Graduate Student, Vanderbilt University
Jose A. Soto, Associate Professor, Penn State University
Alfredo Spagna, Lecturer, Columbia University
Marko J. Spasojevic, Assistant Professor, University of California Riverside
Austin R. Spence, Postdoctoral Researcher, University of California, Davis
Shiri Spitz Siddiqi, Graduate student, University of California, Irvine
Danielle Spitzer, PhD Candidate, University of California, Berkeley
Jeremy Spool, Postdoctoral researcher, University of Massachusetts, Amherst
S A. Springer, PhD Candidate, University of Pittsburgh
Dian Squire, Associate Dean for Inclusive Excellence, Loyola University Chicago
Sorin Srinivasa, Graduate student, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Meredith M. Stafford-Chapman, Administrative Assistant, The RAND Corporation
Michelle A. Stage, Graduate Student, University of Rhode Island
Adam Stanaland, Postdoctoral Associate, New York University
Amanda Stanley, Executive Director, COMPASS Science Communication
Molly Stanley, Assistant Professor, University of Vermont
Ruth A. Starkman, lecturer, Stanford University
Christine R. Starr, Postdoctoral Scholar, University of California, Irvine
B G. Steele, Lead Data Scientist, Colorado State University
Kelly S. Steelman, Associate Professor, Michigan Tech
Jennifer Steiner, Staff, Van Andel Institute
Janet D. Stemwedel, Professor, San Jose State University
John Stepanek, Graduate Student, NSF Fellow, Oregon State University
Samantha M. Stevens, Graduate Student, Penn State
Hayley Stevenson, Graduate Student, Cal State Fullerton
Andrew L. Stewart, Associate Professor, Clark University
Stephanie A. Stewart-Hill, Graduate Student, The Ohio State University
Chantal E. Stieber, Associate Professor, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
Caitlin Stieber, Graduate Student, University of Maine
Joseph Cameron C. Stipe, Manufacturing Scientist, Aviva Systems Biology
Kayden Stockwell, Graduate Student, University of Virginia
Amber Stone, Student and President of oSTEM at Rutgers, Rutgers University
Jamie M. Stonemetz, Graduate Student, Brandeis University
Diane Stonestreet, Graduate Student, Cornell
Emma Stover, Graduate Student, New Mexico Tech
Aaron Straight, Professor and Chair of Biochemistry, Stanford University
Amalie Strange, Graduate Student, Arizona State University
Carl G. Streed Jr, Assistant Professor of Medicine, Boston University School of Medicine
Madison S. Strine, Graduate student, Yale University
Daphna Stroumsa, M.D., MPH, MSc. Assistant Professor, University of Michigan
Sam Stuesser, Design Lead, Allen Institute for AI
Nick Su, Graduate Student, University of California Irvine

Mario I. Suárez, Assistant Professor, Utah State University
Arjun Subramonian, PhD Student, University of California, Los Angeles; Queer in AI
Shreyas Sudhakar, Alumnus, University of Michigan - Ann Arbor
Gabriella P. Sugerman, Graduate Student, The University of Texas at Austin
Timothy J. Sullivan, Ph.D. Candidate, Stony Brook University
Holly Sullivan-Toole, Post Doctoral Fellow, Temple University
Larry M. Summers, City Engineer, City of New Albany
Xudong Sun, Assistant Professor, University of Hawaii
Claire Y. Sun, Research Associate, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Jonathan Sun, Graduate Student, New York University
Derek C. Sung, MD/PhD Student, University of Pennsylvania
Tong Suo, Graduate Student, University of Michigan
Danica J. Sutherland, Assistant Professor, University of British Columbia
Ames K. Sutton Hickey, Assistant Professor, Temple University
Jack Swab, Grad Student, University of Kentucky
Gokul Swamy, Graduate Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Mary Hannah Swaney, Graduate student, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Abigail L.S. Swann, Associate Professor, University of Washington
William S. Sweet, Graduate Student, California State University, Long Beach
Sarah R. Sweger, Graduate student, University of Washington
Margaret E. Swift, Graduate Student, Duke University
Madison Swirtz, Graduate Research Assistant, University of Utah
Jill Syrotchen, Graduate student, Tulane University
Michael Taffe, Professor, UCSD
Koji J. Takahashi, Postdoctoral Fellow, Northwestern University
Diana Tamir, Associate Professor, Princeton University
Quyen Tang, Doctoral Candidate, University of St. Thomas
Christophe Tanguay-Sabourin, Research Assistant, McGill University
Amanda Tarullo, Associate Professor, Boston University
Jennifer E. Tasneem, Career Services Coordinator, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Jennifer E. Tasneem, Career Services Coordinator, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
David Taullahu, Laboratory Manager, DePaul University
Naveed Tavakol, Graduate Student, Columbia University
Jordan Taylor, PhD Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Chelsea A. Taylor, Graduate Student, University of Colorado Boulder
Leah Teffera, Research Programmer, Carnegie Mellon University
Cassidy L. Tennity, Graduate Student, University of Southern Mississippi
Crystal P. Terry, Sr. People Business Partner, Heirloom Carbon
Christopher M. Teske, Graduate student, Wayne State University
Maya E. Tessler, Graduate Student, Louisiana State University
Karen M. Therrien, Bioinformatician, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Kelsey C. Thiem, Assistant Professor, Ball State University
Ashford L. Thom, Graduate Student, University for International Cooperation
Brian Thoma, Assistant Professor, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine
Syd Thomas, Undergraduate Student, Colorado School of Mines
Maya I. Thomas, Ph.D. Student, Virginia Institute of Marine Science
Edward Thomas, Professor, Auburn University
Michelle D. Thompson, CEO, Open Research institute
Ryan C. Thompson, Data Science Analyst, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Kara Thompson, Manufacturing Associate, Promega Corporation

Mark A. Thornton, Assistant Professor, Dartmouth College
Kate Thorson, Assistant Professor, Barnard College
B W. Thuronyi, Assistant Professor, Williams College
Montanna Tilton, Alumni, California State University, Fresno
Liadh Timmins, Lecturer, Swansea University
Christina Tingle, Graduate student, University of Minnesota
Morgan W. Tingley, Associate Professor, University of California, Los Angeles
Casey N. Tisdale, Graduate Student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Ffion D. Titmuss, Research Assistant II, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution
Metin Toksoz-Exley, President of Out in DTEM DMV, Out in STEM DMV
Kaitlyn Tonra, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Russell B. Toomey, Professor, University of Arizona
madeline topf, graduate student, uw madison
Julia C. Torquati, Professor, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Brittany R. Torrez, Graduate Student, Yale University
Nishant Totla, Alumni, UC Berkeley
Daniel Totzkay, Assistant Professor, West Virginia University
Elizabeth C. Townsend, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Kayla G. Townsley, PhD Candidate, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Jessica L. Tracy, Professor, University of British Columbia
Jennifer Tran, Graduate student, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Susan T. Tran, Associate Professor, DePaul University
Sorrel Tran, Graduate student, University of Georgia
Camille Trautman, Graduate Student, Emory University
Adrienne L. Traxler, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen
Kevin Trewartha, Associate Professor, Michigan Technological University
Cassidy Trier, Product Designer, Allen Institute for AI
Em Triolo, PhD Candidate, University of Washington
Marissa Tsugawa, Assistant Professor, Utah State University
Amy O. Tsui, Professor Emerita, Johns Hopkins University
Ashley Tudder, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Washington University in St. Louis
Kristine Turkow, Financial Manager, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Jake D. Turner, Research Associate, Cornell University
Lindsey Turner, Undergraduate Student, Swarthmore College
Kelsey Tyssowski, Postdoctoral Fellow, Harvard University
Lucina Q. Uddin, Professor, University of California Los Angeles
Walker Uhls, Undergraduate Student, Columbia University
Indigo Underwood, Graduate Student, Oklahoma State University
Doria E. Unrau, Graduate Student, University of Washington
Heather L. Urry, Professor, Tufts University
Anthony G. Vaccaro, PhD Candidate, University of Southern California
Raymond Vagell, Graduate Student, Texas State University
Luis M. Valencia, Graduate Student, University of Nevada, Reno
Viviana P. Valentin Valentin, Graduate Student, Emory University
Alissa Valentine, PhD Student, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Krisha Vallejos, Alumni, oSTEM @ Cal Poly Pomona
Jay J. Van Bavel, Associate Professor, NYU
Laurens van de Wiel, Postdoctoral Scholar, Stanford University
Milenna van Dijk, postdoctoral scientist, Columbia University
Natalia Van Doren, Graduate Student, Pennsylvania State University

Elizabeth Van Gompel, Student, University of North Texas
Victoria Vassileva, Director, Sales, Arthur AI
Ankitha Vasudev, Undergraduate Student, Carnegie Mellon University
John Vaughen, phd student, Stanford
Leigh Ann Vaughn, Professor, Ithaca College
Sarah L. Veatch, Professor, University of Michigan
Haley Vecchiarelli, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Victoria
Cindy B. Veldhuis, Assistant Professor, Northwestern University
Cesar D. Velez-Penaloza, Graduate student, Georgetown university
Christa Ventresca, Graduate Student, University of Michigan
Anahita Verahrami, Graduate student, Colorado State University
Lauren M. Vetere, Graduate Student, Icahn school of medicine at mount sinai
Sarah E. Victor, Assistant Professor, Texas Tech University
Paulette Vincent-Ruz, Assistant Professor, New Mexico State University
Michael Vinciguerra, Graduate Student, Carnegie Mellon University
Vera Vine, Assistant Professor, Queen's University
Daniel Virga, Graduate Student, Columbia University
Bess Vlasisavljevich, Assistant Professor, University of South Dakota
Stefan W. Vogler, Research Scientist, NORC
Ashley M. Votruba, Assistant Professor, University of Nebraska - Lincoln
Casper H. Voyles, Postdoctoral Trainee, Drexel University
Susana M. Wadgymar, Assistant Professor, Davidson College
Charlotte E. Wainwright, Research Scientist, University of Notre Dame
Sam Walker, Graduate student, University of Hawai'i
Allyn Walker, Postdoctoral Fellow, Johns Hopkins University
Andrew Walker, Associate Professor and Department Head, Utah State University
Ryan Walker, Biological Technician, USDA ARS
Catherine S. Wall, PhD Student, Virginia Commonwealth University
Adeline Walsh, Graduate Student, UVA
Sophie Jean Walton, Graduate Student, Stanford University
Ke Wang, Graduate Student, Harvard University
Yu-Chi Wang, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Boston Children's Hospital/Harvard Medical School
Shiwei Wang, Graduate student, MIT
Nathan Wang, PhD student, MIT
Yingying Wang, Associate Professor,, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Iris Wang, Technical Assistant, Harvard & Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics
Linnea Warburton, Graduate Student, UC Berkeley
Kaitlin P. Ward, People Analytics Researcher, Google
Tyler P. Warner, Scientist, Foundation Medicine
Isabel Warner, Graduate Student, University of Queensland
Aaron E.L. Warren, Postdoctoral Fellow, Brigham & Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School
Philip Wasson, Graduate Student, MIT
Elizabeth Waters, Director STEM Outreach, The Cooper Union
Joyah Watkins, Graduate Student, Rice University
Alexandra Watral, Graduate Student, Michigan Technological University
Ryan Watson, Associate Professor, University of Connecticut
Ashley L. Watts, Assistant Professor, Vanderbilt University
Emily Webb, Assistant Professor, Rockford University
Russell J. Webster, Associate Professor of Psychology, Penn State Abington College
Miranda Wei, Graduate student, University of Washington

Hua Wei, Assistant Professor, New Jersey Institute of Technology
Troy A. Weier, Pr Quality Engineer, BAE Systems
Adam Weiner, Graduate Student, UC Davis
Dana Weiser, Chairperson and Associate Professor, Texas Tech University
Jazz L. Weisman, Graduate Fellow, The Rockefeller University
Krista E. Weiss, Founder, Brave Wanderer LLC
Elizabeth Weitz, Graduate Student, University of Hawai'i
Matthew S. Welmers, Chemist, INX International Ink Co.
Andrea J. Welsh, Postdoctoral Research Associate, University of Pittsburgh
Alison Wendlandt, Assistant Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Amy R. Wesolowski, Undergraduate Student, University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
Julian West, Assistant Professor, Rice University
Emily Whalen, Ph.D. Candidate, University of New Hampshire
Danielle N. Whalen, Graduate Student, Oregon State University
Skyler Wharton, Alum, University of Pennsylvania
Sarah L. White, Graduate student, Northwestern University
Andrew White, Graduate Student, Indiana University
Christopher B. Whitehead, Assistant Professor of Chemistry, Union College
Patrick Wickstrom, Climate Action Coordinator, Middlebury College
Kimberly Wiersielis, Postdoctoral Associate, Rutgers University
Penny Wieser, Assistant Professor, UC Berkeley
Claire Wigginton, Graduate Student, California State University Long Beach
Tom F. Wiley, Research Specialist, The Rockefeller University
Mariah Wilkerson, PhD Student, University of South Florida
Stone Wilkes, Graduate student, University of Arizona
Dan Wilkins, Research Scientist, Stanford University
Benjamin T. Wilks, Scientist, Mediar Therapeutics
Charleese Williams, Graduate Student, Georgia State University
Nicole Williams, Co-Executive Director, 500 Women Scientists
Ryan Williams, Principal Researcher, American Institutes for Research
Lisa A. Williams, Associate Professor, University of New South Wales
Corey M. Williams, Bioinformatician, University of Virginia
Nancy S. Williams, Associate Professor, Scripps College
James K. Willoughby, Undergraduate Student, UCLA
Bianca D.M. Wilson, Research Faculty, Williams Institute, UCLA
Michael Wilson, Software Engineer, Allen Institute for AI
Samuel Wilson, Senior Product Manager, Stanford University
Stephanie N. Wilson, Adjunct Professor, University of Northern Colorado
Kellie Windsor, Special Programs Coordinator, SHARP Literacy
Canton Winer, PhD Candidate, University of California, Irvine
Mary E. Winn, Associate Director; Lecturer, Van Andel Institute
Manda Wittebort, Program Coordinator, University of Florida
M Wittkop, Graduate Student, Montana State University
Matthew E. Wolak, Assistant Professor, Auburn University
Aaron Wong, Institute Scientist, Moss Rehabilitation Research Institute
Gloria Wong-Padoongpatt, Assistant Professor, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Laura Wonilowicz, Graduate student, UCLA
Branskn Woo, Graduate student, Harvard University
Rozalyn R. Wood, Graduate student, Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai
Kim B. Wright, Assistant Director, Rice University

Caroline Y. Wu, Software Development Engineer, Allen Institute for Artificial Intelligence
Delancey C. Wu, PhD candidate, UCSB
Xiaomeng Xu, Associate Professor, Idaho State University
Jessica Y, Professor, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Nicholas Yates, Adjunct, University of Maryland Baltimore County
Stephen T. Yeung, Senior Research Scientist, New York University
Brandon J. Yik, Postdoctoral Research Associate, University of Virginia
Jeremy B. Yoder, Associate Professor of Biology, California State University Northridge
Tehshik P. Yoon, Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Jared W. Young, Professor, UCSD
Hannah Young, Graduate Student, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Soleil E. Young, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Colt B. Young, Board Certified Behavior Analyst, Stride Autism Centers
Benjamin L. Young, Undergraduate Student, Saint Louis University
Jacob Yount, Associate Professor, The Ohio State University
Alessandra N. C. Yu, Graduate Student, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
Raymond Yu, Graduate Student, Univ of Southern California
Lex Yu, Student, University of Southern California, Queers in Engineering Science and Technology
Sid Zadey, Researcher, Duke University
Jamil Zaki, Associate Professor of Psychology, Stanford University
Angele Zamarron, Software Engineer, Allen AI
Vic Zamloot, Graduate Student, City of Hope
Daniel Zappala, Professor, Brigham Young University
Christine Zardecki, Faculty, Rutgers University
David G. Zelaya, Assistant Professor, Brown University School of Public Health
Xueling Zhang, Graduate Student, Emory University
Rem Zhang, Graduate Student, Colorado School of Mines
Irene Zhang, Graduate Student, University of Michigan
Xiaoyu Zhao, Graduate student, University of virginia
J Zhou, Graduate Student, Cornell University
Haiyi Zhu, Associate Professor, Carnegie Mellon University
Kara Zielinski, Graduate Student, Cornell University
Sophia N. Ziemian, Postdoctoral Associate, Cornell University
Joanne F. Zinger, Associate Teaching Professor, University of California, Irvine
Samuel Zorowitz, Graduate Student, Princeton University
Joshua E. Zosky, Graduate Student, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

APPENDIX

Background

Since 1957, NSF’s National Center for Science & Engineering Statistics (NCSES) has administered annual and biennial surveys of the U.S. STEM workforce, including the National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG), Survey of Doctorate Recipients (SDR), and Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED). Everyone who receives a PhD in the U.S. is typically required by their doctoral institution to take the SED. The data and associated reports, such as the Congressionally mandated *Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science & Engineering Report*, are used widely by researchers and policymakers to understand and address educational and career barriers in STEM; to inform national policies related to STEM and higher education; and to determine underrepresented groups’ eligibility for funding and federal resources.

In October 2018, NCSES stated at a meeting at NSF headquarters, along with collaborators from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the American Educational Research Association (AERA), that it would [begin piloting](#) a sexual orientation (SO) question and expanded gender (i.e., gender identity, GI) question, which was estimated to produce preliminary results by early 2019. The initial workforce survey targeted was the NSCG. NSF’s counterparts like the Census Bureau, Department of Education, Department of Justice, and CDC have all collected sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) data for years, and these agencies have run [extensive testing](#) and converged on well-vetted question designs that other agencies can adopt. The Department of Education even runs a survey, the Baccalaureate & Beyond Longitudinal Survey (B&B), that has the same core features as the NSCG, and the B&B adopted SOGI questions in 2018. Thus, NCSES’ piloting should have been very straightforward.

However, NCSES delayed the SOGI piloting for several years, citing limited time and resources. Following public pressure, NCSES indicated in September 2020 that its “current plan [was] to restart the SOGI research by early 2021” (personal communication with NCSES; September 28, 2020). NCSES indicated that it would cooperate with the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology’s (FCSM) SOGI Research Group, a panel of experts on SOGI measurement across federal statistical agencies. The [FCSM SOGI Research Group](#) has advised federal agencies on best practices for adding SOGI questions to their surveys.

Finally, in October 2020, NCSES [sought OMB clearance](#) to initiate piloting as part of the non-production “bridge panel” for the 2021 NSCG ($n = 5,000$), but surprisingly, only for GI – it left out SO from its piloting plans (see p. 18). Following public pressure that NCSES also pilot a SO item, which *Science* [reported](#) on, NCSES backtracked and included a SO item in the bridge panel. It also initiated an additional Mechanical Turk (MTurk) non-probability study that included both SOGI items ($n = 2,800$). These actions suggested that NCSES had a predisposition to consider a GI question earnestly, while it preferred to avoid a SO question for its surveys.

List of Abbreviations	
NSF	National Science Foundation
NCSES	NSF National Center for Science & Engineering Statistics
OMB	U.S. Office of Management & Budget
NSCG	National Survey of College Graduates
SDR	Survey of Doctorate Recipients
SED	Survey of Earned Doctorates
AAAS	American Association for the Advancement of Science
AERA	American Educational Research Association
SO	Sexual orientation
GI	Gender identity
SOGI	Sexual orientation and gender identity
B&B	Baccalaureate & Beyond Longitudinal Survey
FCSM	Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology
MTurk	Amazon Mechanical Turk
HPS	Household Pulse Survey
HLSL	High School Longitudinal Survey
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

NCSES has explained its initial omission of SO from the bridge panel by noting that the bridge panel was initially intended for testing modifications of existing questions rather than testing new questions, and “[s]ince the NSCG had not collected sexual orientation in the past, it was not possible to explore question wording modifications on this construct (which was the purpose of the bridge panel).” However, as NCSES “neared [its] data collection start, through conversations with the FCSM SOGI research group, NCSES concluded that including a sexual orientation question with more expansive response options could inform the broader federal government’s effort to measure and understand sexual minorities” (personal communication with NCSES; December 31, 2022). Clearly, however, NCSES always had the capability to expand the bridge panel’s purpose to test new questions such as SO if it so desired, as this is precisely what it did following reporting in *Science* and conversations with the FCSM SOGI Research Group.

By comparison, in 2020, NCSES initiated and completed piloting for [COVID-19 impact questions](#) for a different survey, the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), and was able to receive OMB clearance in time to include an entirely new COVID-19 impact module for that very same year’s survey cycle (the [2020-21 SED](#)). Thus, when NCSES prioritizes a topic and is motivated to add new questions to its surveys, it is clearly able to do so efficiently and completely.

NSF NCSES’ Pilot Research

As shown in Figure 1, NCSES’ MTurk study ($n = 2,800$) featured a more traditional, restricted design for SOGI with mutually exclusive options, drawing its items from the Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey (HPS) and other federal surveys. The bridge panel ($n = 5,000$) featured more inclusive, expanded options for SOGI, including the ability to check all that apply.

In both studies, NCSES tested a two-step GI question series (i.e., current gender identity and assigned sex at birth questions). The rationale for the two-step series is that using just a single gender question in population surveys can substantially undercount gender minority individuals (i.e., those whose gender identity differ from their assigned birth sex). For instance, some gender minorities may prefer to identify as a man or woman without identifying as “transgender” or “trans”. For this reason, expert reports by the [National Academies](#) and the [Williams Institute](#) recommend the two-step approach, which allows a fuller spectrum of gender minority respondents to be captured (any respondents whose gender identity differs from their assigned birth sex). This approach has now been widely adopted across U.S. population surveys, including virtually all federal surveys measuring GI (e.g., Census Bureau’s HPS) and the General Social Survey, the most widely cited non-government survey in the U.S.

It is noteworthy that NCSES included several exploratory design features in both studies, rather than tried-and-true designs whose viability NCSES could test in a straightforward, confirmatory manner. As NCSES stated, it used more expansive response options for SO in the bridge panel. It also used novel question wording in the bridge panel, including the unusual reference to “sexual experience”: “Regardless of your sexual experience, what is your sexual orientation or identity?” (Figure 1). In the MTurk study, it varied the SO item’s response order (straight vs. gay/lesbian listed first) to test for potential SO response order effects, and varied the placement of the two-step GI series (GI vs. assigned sex at birth appearing first) to test for potential GI context effects. (Note that it did not test for GI response order effects or SO context effects.)

	<u>Sexual orientation (SO)</u>	<u>Gender identity (GI)</u>
MTurk study (n = 2,800) Question Items: Census Bureau's HPS	Which of the following best represents how you think of yourself? <input type="radio"/> Gay or lesbian <input type="radio"/> Bisexual <input type="radio"/> Straight; that is, not gay, lesbian, or bisexual <input type="radio"/> Something else: _____	Do you describe yourself as male, female, or transgender? <input type="radio"/> Male <input type="radio"/> Female <input type="radio"/> Transgender <input type="radio"/> Do not identify as female, male, or transgender
Bridge panel (n = 5,000) Question Items: Exploratory	Regardless of your sexual experience, what is your sexual identity or orientation (select all that apply)? <input type="checkbox"/> Lesbian or gay <input type="checkbox"/> Straight, that is, not gay <input type="checkbox"/> Bisexual <input type="checkbox"/> Asexual <input type="checkbox"/> Pansexual <input type="checkbox"/> Fluid <input type="checkbox"/> Queer <input type="checkbox"/> Other sexual orientation: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer	What is your current gender identity (select all that apply)? <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender <input type="checkbox"/> Gender non-conforming <input type="checkbox"/> Non-binary <input type="checkbox"/> Genderfluid <input type="checkbox"/> Genderqueer <input type="checkbox"/> Other gender identity: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer

Figure 1. NCSES' question designs for the two pilot studies.

The more expansive SO response options, as well as SO response order effects and GI context effects, have all been described as exploratory questions for future SOGI measurement research by the FCSM SOGI Research Group [white papers](#) and an expert [National Academies report](#) on SOGI measurement. Thus, these were admirable features of NCSES' study designs to assist the FCSM SOGI Research Group with exploratory research questions of broad interest to the federal government. However, if the aim is for NCSES to confirm that tried-and-true SOGI measures behave successfully and are viable for its surveys, these were unusual choices. They would certainly aid in the FCSM SOGI Research Group's broader understanding of SOGI measurement and help advise future revisions to federal surveys. However, it would seem unreasonable for NCSES to use these novel, exploratory questions of an academic nature to make crucial decisions on the basic viability of SOGI questions for its surveys, which should be the primary focus of NCSES' pilot studies. Nevertheless, it was assumed that NCSES would be testing separate questions: a) confirmatory analyses assessing basic viability of SOGI questions for its surveys using NCSES' standard quality metrics (e.g., item nonresponse rates); and b) exploratory analyses of interest to the FCSM SOGI Research Group (e.g., response order effects).

NCSES [presented](#) the MTurk study at the FCSM 2021 Research and Policy Conference, which has been the only public disclosure of NCSES' pilot data. On December 5, 2022, when given the opportunity to provide any factual or statistical corrections on its data for a forthcoming *Nature commentary*, NCSES provided two descriptive statistics from the bridge panel study as part of its corrections for the commentary. Since then, in response to concerns raised, NCSES has declined to provide any further descriptive statistics from the bridge panel or from the 2021 NSCG more generally (personal communication with NCSES; December 31, 2022).

NSF NCSES' Decisions for the 2023 Survey Cycle

Currently, NCSES is seeking OMB clearance for the 2023 NSCG. In its [recent submission](#) to OMB, NCSES summarizes its pilot results and explains its intent to 1) leave out a SO question, and 2)

replace its binary gender question with a two-step GI question series. NCSES' rationale for these two decisions is stated on [p. 15](#):

NCSES, with assistance from the Census Bureau as the NSCG data collection contractor, collected sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) data on the 2021 NSCG nonproduction bridge panel. This data collection was conducted to explore the feasibility of collecting consistent and reliable SOGI data from the nation's college-educated population. The analysis of the resulting data included the investigation of various quality assessment metrics including item nonresponse, breakoffs, changed answers, previous clicks, and completion times. In addition, while the bridge panel was a nonproduction sample and will not be used to produce official statistics, the analysis included the investigation of weighted response distributions.

Overall, the analysis found that the gender identity question series performed well using the quality assessment metrics described above. On the other hand, the sexual orientation question took longer to complete, had a higher percent of changed answers, and was responsible for all of the breakoffs on these screens. The estimates of S&E status for most gender minority groups presented disclosure risk concerns which suggests the need for a less detailed gender identity question series than was used in the 2021 NSCG bridge panel. With these analysis findings in mind, and working in accordance with survey best practices (e.g., minimizing burden and privacy risk to respondents; designing surveys to detect differences between groups to inform policy discussions), the 2023 NSCG questionnaire will include a two-step sex-at-birth/gender identity question with four response options for the gender identity question. Given the quality concerns with the sexual orientation question, the 2023 NSCG questionnaire will not collect sexual orientation data. The question wording for the two-step sex-at-birth/gender identity question planned for use on the 2023 NSCG is based on the module in the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, which was in turn based on modules in the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey and the National Center for Health Statistics' National Health Interview Survey.

In response to concerns raised with NCSES on December 20, 2022 about the above justification, NCSES provided an additional justification for its decision to abandon the SO item, which was not reported to OMB (personal communication with NCSES; December 31, 2022):

In addition, as we reported at the 2021 FCSM Research and Policy Conference and mentioned at our February 2022 virtual meeting with you, Felice Levin[e] [AERA collaborator], and Shirley Malcom [AAAS collaborator], our 2021 non-probability MTurk study found that the order of the response options in the sexual orientation question impacted the proportion of individuals who said they were gay or lesbian... Significantly more participants selected "gay or lesbian" when it was listed first. However, it is unclear which ordering produced more accurate responses. As a result, additional research is needed exploring the ordering of response options and its impact on estimates... [Thus,] metrics from the 2021 nonproduction bridge panel in combination with the 2021 non-probability MTurk study findings do present serious quality concerns that increase the

potential for measurement error and warrant further research before sexual orientation questions should be included on the NCSES surveys.

NSF NCSES' Decision to Abandon a Sexual Orientation Item

As described above, NCSES has justified abandoning the SO item because 1) it elicited more breakoffs, more changed responses, and took longer to complete than the GI item in the bridge panel; and 2) demonstrated a response order effect in the MTurk study. There are significant flaws with both of these concerns.

Bridge Panel Quality Metrics Justification (Reported to OMB)

This justification is flawed for four reasons:

- Analyses suggest that the SO item likely performed better or on par with comparable NSCG items like race, income, salary, and disability in breakoff rates, completion times, and changed responses (however, NCSES has declined to provide data to confirm this).
- NCSES has already disregarded its own quality metrics from the bridge panel, instead moving forward with a GI question design based on quality metrics from the Census Bureau's HPS; yet in the HPS, these quality metrics are equally excellent for the SO question. NCSES is selectively drawing on different quality metrics for SO vs. GI.
- Even if the SO item's quality metrics were found to be truly inferior relative to appropriate benchmarks (comparable measures on the NSCG), it is clearly an artifact of the exploratory, poorly developed question wording that refers to "sexual experience", which would already be addressed by adopting the Census Bureau's HPS / MTurk design.
- If NCSES were still concerned about breakoffs despite knowledge that "[the addition of SOGI items does not lead to survey breakoffs](#)" in the Census Bureau's HPS, it could always move the SO item to the end of the survey, a common practice for sensitive items.

In spite of its reporting to OMB, NCSES has separately stated that quality assessment metrics for both SOGI items were very good in the bridge panel. While item nonresponse and breakoff rates for the GI item were "close to 0%", item nonresponse and breakoff rates for the SO item were "about 2%" (personal communication with NCSES; December 5, 2022). It is an unusual and unjustified choice to benchmark the SO item's quality metrics against the GI item's metrics for deciding whether to adopt these items on the 2023 NSCG. The appropriate benchmark is the quality assessment metrics for similar questions already included on the NSCG. This is how NCSES' counterpart agencies, such as the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, have [benchmarked](#) SOGI questions for their surveys (Figure 2).

A ~2% item nonresponse and ~2% breakoff rate are very likely to constitute excellent performance compared to items that have long been included on the NSCG. The only [publicly available](#) quality assessment metrics for comparable items on the NSCG are for item nonresponse rates: earned income = 6.30%, salary = 4.54%, race = 2.33%. NCSES has not published nonresponse rates for other comparable items (e.g., for disability), or breakoff rates or completion times for any NSCG items, but these metrics tend to be highly correlated in similar federal population surveys. For instance, in the Department of Education's High School Longitudinal Survey ([HSLs](#)), which adopted a SO question in 2016, the metrics for SO were all substantially better than for income and

better or on par with disability (Figure 2). Comparing the three metrics across the five questions publicly available for the [HSLs](#) (SO, GI, assigned birth sex, income, and disability), as shown in Figure 2, indicates that these metrics tend to be extremely correlated: nonresponse and breakoff rates ($r = .98$), nonresponse rates and completion times ($r = .95$), and breakoff rates and completion times ($r = .98$). Without NCSES providing the necessary data, this analysis suggests that the more favorable pattern of the SO item relative to the NSCG's income, salary, and race items in nonresponse rates would be expected to replicate for breakoff rates and completion times. Thus, it is fair to say that the SO item's quality assessment metrics in the bridge panel are likely far better than (or at least equal to) the NSCG's income, salary, and race questions (and likely its disability question as well). In fact, on some metrics, the SO question in the bridge panel performed better than it does in similar surveys that have long included the question (e.g., SO had a nonresponse rate of 3.4% in the [HSLs](#)).

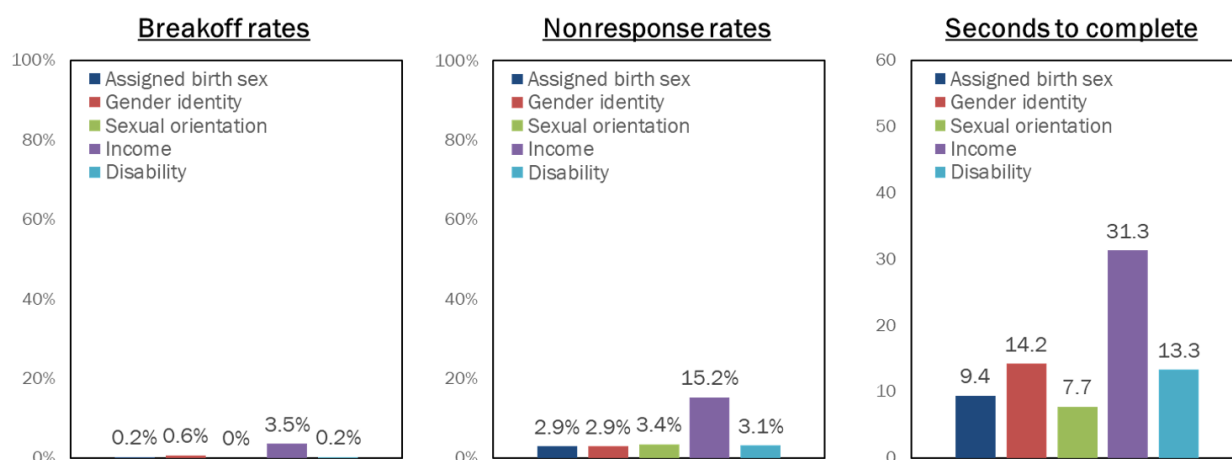


Figure 2. SO and GI questions are benchmarked against income and disability questions in the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics' [HSLs](#) survey.

After concerns were raised on December 20, 2022 regarding the bridge panel analysis and a request for these additional descriptive statistics (breakoff rates, nonresponse rates, completion times, and changed responses for SO, GI, race, income, salary, and disability questions), NCSES declined, citing [OMB Statistical Directive #4](#) to “ensure that all users have equitable and timely access to data that are disseminated to the public” and the fact that the “bridge panel findings are currently undergoing internal review” (personal communication with NCSES; December 31, 2022). This is despite the fact NCSES had already provided a portion of the results on December 5, 2022 for the forthcoming *Nature* piece, and the data in question are longstanding NSCG metrics (e.g., breakoff rate for NSCG's income question) that are not part of the bridge panel or under internal review and a portion of which was already [published](#). NCSES did not offer an explanation for why it benchmarked the SO item's quality metrics against the GI item's, a method that is inconsistent with clear [precedents](#) of its peer statistical agencies.

With respect to the number of changed responses, it is unclear why NCSES cites this as a quality metric, as it has [not been used](#) in this way by peer agencies. Nevertheless, as is described below, the MTurk study showed that in the simpler SO and GI question designs in that study, the SO item

actually outperformed the GI item in terms of related metrics like self-reported response accuracy and question comprehension (Table 1). While benchmarking the SO item against the GI item is inappropriate, this result suggests that even if NCSES were genuinely concerned about these marginal comparisons between SO and GI performance in the bridge panel, adopting the more traditional SO question design of the MTurk study would, if anything, likely yield a more favorable pattern for SO than GI on changed responses. If NCSES would provide the necessary data, changed responses for SO in the bridge panel could be appropriately compared to the NSCG's comparable questions, which would likely confirm they are negligible for SO.

In the MTurk study, while both SO and GI questions performed excellently on accuracy and comprehension metrics, the SO item actually performed better than the GI item across the board, including the extent to which respondents understood all the answer choices, perceived the answer choices to be complete, were able to accurately report their identity, their ease in answering the question, and certainty in their response, as shown in Table 1. Given that NCSES is focused on comparisons between SO and GI, it is noteworthy that it makes no mention of these more favorable findings of the SO item's performance in the MTurk study. The MTurk study was also valuable in showing that LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ respondents alike overwhelmingly report feeling comfortable providing both SO and GI demographics to NSF.

<u>SO Question</u>	Straight participants			Sexual minority participants		
		Straight listed first	Gay/lesbian listed first		Straight listed first	Gay/lesbian listed first
I understood all of the answer choices.	1.04	1.05	1.04	1.07	1.04	1.09
I was able to accurately report my sexual identity.	1.04	1.05	1.03	1.24	1.20	1.28
How easy or difficult was it to answer the question?	1.05	1.06	1.04	1.35	1.28	1.42
I am certain of my sexual identity.	1.08	1.07	1.09	1.33	1.35	1.31
The answer choices for the question were complete.	1.32	1.30	1.33	1.84	1.79	1.89
<u>GI Question</u>	Cisgender participants			Gender minority participants		
		Assigned sex at birth first	Gender identity first		Assigned sex at birth first	Gender identity first
I understood all of the answer choices.	1.06	1.06	1.05	1.30	1.33	1.27
I was able to accurately report my gender identity.	1.03	1.03	1.03	2.24	1.89	2.60
How easy or difficult was it to answer the question?	1.03	1.03	1.04	1.85	1.78	1.93
I am certain of my gender identity.	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.40	1.28	1.53
The answer choices for the question were complete.	1.31	1.31	1.31	3.19	2.78	3.60

Table 1. Self-reported accuracy and comprehension metrics for the MTurk study, presented by NCSES at the 2021 FCSM Research and Policy Conference. Scores are on a 1-5 scale where a higher score means a less favorable evaluation of the question. Means collapsing across SO response order condition and across GI context condition have been imputed and were not presented by NCSES.

Citing concerns over disclosure risk, NCSES decided to adopt the simpler GI question from the MTurk study / Census Bureau's HPS (although revised to include check-all-that-apply and write-in abilities). In doing so, NCSES disregarded its own quality metrics from the bridge panel, instead moving forward with a GI item by drawing on the item's high-quality performance in the Census Bureau's HPS and other federal surveys (as NCSES does not have quality metrics data on the exact GI question design it has selected). However, in the Census Bureau's HPS, these quality metrics are equally excellent for the SO question, and it is already known that "[the addition of SOGI items does not lead to survey breakoffs](#)" or cause issues with related metrics in the HPS. Thus, NCSES is selectively drawing on different quality metrics for SO vs. GI: It is making decisions for SO based on the bridge panel's quality metrics, but making decisions for GI based on quality metrics from precedent surveys such as the HPS. NCSES should have every reason to be comfortable also adopting the analogous SO item from the MTurk study / HPS.

Unlike the question wording used in the MTurk study / Census Bureau's HPS, the bridge panel's SO item uses exploratory, poorly developed wording: "Regardless of your sexual experience, what is your sexual identity or orientation?" (Figure 1). The MTurk SO item's non-existent breakoffs in the Census Bureau's HPS strongly suggest that the ~2% breakoff rate NCSES is concerned about is just an artifact of this unusual reference to "sexual experience" in the bridge panel, which turned off respondents. Perhaps the expansive and exploratory, check-all-that-apply options may have contributed as well, although this seems far less likely. Regardless, this all is easily addressed by NCSES adopting the Census Bureau's HPS / MTurk design. Clearly, the breakoffs are not arising from more substantive population concerns: The NSCG population is college-educated and virtually identical to the Department of Education's B&B population, which has successfully included a SO measure since 2018. Thus, NCSES has no reason to be concerned about including a SO item in general; it just tested a poorly written question. Both the [National Academies](#) and [OMB's Guidance on Best Practices for SOGI Data Collection](#) recommend the SO item from Census Bureau's HPS as a well-vetted option agencies can adopt.

In short, NCSES' move to adopt the MTurk's study GI measure clearly shows it is comfortable adopting a question it tested in the MTurk study and previously used in other major federal surveys, even in the absence of NCSES having its own quality metrics such as breakoffs on the exact question design. Census Bureau data already show that, like the MTurk study GI item, the MTurk study SO item does not cause issues with breakoffs and related quality metrics.

SUMMARY: NCSES should release the data needed to appropriately benchmark the bridge panel's SO item against the NSCG's comparable measures. Nevertheless, it can be inferred based on other available data that this benchmark is highly likely to be successful, suggesting NCSES should move forward with a SO item. In addition, there is already very strong support in favor of NCSES adopting the MTurk / Census Bureau's HPS design for SO, which has been shown not to elicit breakoffs. If NCSES is somehow still concerned about breakoffs, the SO item could always be moved to the end of the survey, a common practice among peer agencies for sensitive items.

MTurk Response Order Effect Justification (Not Reported to OMB)

Following the concerns raised on December 20, 2022 about the bridge panel analysis, NCSES indicated that it deems it "critical to assess the quality of data across a variety of metrics to

determine [the SO item's] fitness for use" and provided an additional, new justification for abandoning the SO item: a response order effect in the MTurk study, which it describes as a "quality concern" (personal communication with NCSES; December 31, 2022).

This justification is flawed for four reasons:

- The response order effect constitutes weak statistical evidence.
- Response order effects are not a true quality criterion NCSES actually uses, as this criterion was not applied to other items (e.g., GI).
- The order effect was an exploratory, academic question inspired by the FCSM SOGI Research Group that was not meant to be used for assessing the viability of a SO item on a federal survey in a confirmatory manner.
- The effect likely reflects primacy bias due to unique MTurk [satisficing](#); NCSES should use the ordering established by precedents and recommended by the [National Academies](#).

NCSES presented this order effect at the 2021 FCSM conference, in addition to a host of other findings, without any special reference that this was perceived as a significant quality concern or one that would prohibit NCSES from ultimately adopting a SO item. Recall that response order effects with SO questions are deemed by the FCSM SOGI Research Group [white papers](#) and the expert [National Academies report](#) to be an exploratory, academic topic for future research on SOGI measurement, not one for making current decisions about adopting a SO item on a federal survey in a confirmatory manner, as in the present case.

At the 2021 FCSM conference, NCSES described different response patterns for SO when "straight; that is, not gay, lesbian, or bisexual" was listed first ($n = 1,333$) vs. "gay or lesbian" was listed first ($n = 1,345$), as shown in Table 2. In the talk, NCSES described a statistically significant response order effect, focusing specifically on the gay/lesbian responses. In its justification in abandoning the SO item, NCSES indicates that "the order of the response options in the sexual orientation question impacted the proportion of individuals who said they were gay or lesbian" (personal communication with NCSES; December 31, 2022).

NCSES described a statistically significant Fisher's exact test comparing gay/lesbian responses between the two order conditions. However, it did not have an a priori hypothesis about gay/lesbian responses in particular in this exploratory research question, and so it is not justified in conducting a Fisher's exact test on gay/lesbian responses in isolation (it would be equally unjustified to run a Fisher's exact test on any arbitrary subset of comparisons and response types). Back-calculating the count data from the rounded percentages NCSES presented (Table 2) indicates that the appropriate 2×4 Fisher's exact test assessing the difference in overall response patterns between the two conditions has one of six possible significance levels: $p = .0430, .0537, .0544, .0654, .0678$, or $.0807$ (these are virtually identical for a 2×4 chi-square test, which is more appropriate for large samples). Thus, the response order effect is borderline significant, and unless $p = .0430$ it may not even be conventionally significant. Regardless, given the conditions' sample sizes, a p value between $.0430$ to $.0807$ constitutes weak evidence of a response order effect. Contemporary scientific standards and NSF's reproducibility standards would require this effect to be replicated. If NCSES had envisioned this effect to genuinely be a barrier to adopting the item back in 2021, the responsible thing to do would have been to attempt to directly replicate it, particularly given it is an MTurk study and not expensive or onerous.

Sexual orientation	Straight listed first	Gay/lesbian listed first
Straight	87.7%	86.4%
Gay/lesbian	2.9%	4.6%
Bisexual	7.4%	7.7%
Something else	2.0%	1.3%

Table 2. Frequency of reported SO in the MTurk study depending on whether straight vs. gay/lesbian was listed first, presented by NCSES at the 2021 FCSM Research and Policy Conference.

NCSES has not described any future investigation it has planned into understanding this borderline-significant response order effect since 2021, which would be expected if NCSES were genuinely concerned and interested in adopting a SO item. If this effect is truly significant and were to replicate, the most likely explanation is a simple [primacy effect](#) in response ordering (i.e., in both conditions, respondents were slightly more likely to select the first option). They were 1.7% more likely to select the gay/lesbian option when listed first, and 1.3% more likely to select the straight option when listed first. Primacy effects are highly prevalent in for-pay survey research like MTurk where respondents engage in disproportionate levels of survey [satisficing](#). This suggests that the MTurk respondents were not confused by the SO question; they were simply being lazy and selecting the first-listed option to rush through the survey and receive payment. Statisticians at the Census Bureau have [cautioned](#) about drawing inferences about the response distributions, in particular, of SOGI questions in MTurk non-probability samples: “[they] cannot be generalized to any population” and “it is not possible to draw any conclusions about [observed] differences or what they might indicate”.

Crucially, NCSES did not test response order effects for the GI item; instead, it tested the context effect of ordering the assigned birth sex vs. gender identity questions for the GI item. It is entirely possible if NCSES had varied the response order for the GI item, that a small primacy effect might emerge for GI (or any NSCG item for that matter). An expectation of zero primacy bias in response distributions on a financially incentivized MTurk survey is [unwarranted](#). Most importantly, if response order effects were a true metric NCSES uses for quality assessment, then NCSES would consider it mandatory for the GI item as well. NCSES is not justified in arbitrarily holding SO at a higher standard than GI with respect to response order effects.

As discussed earlier, the FCSM SOGI Research Group [white papers](#) and expert [National Academies report](#) have characterized response order effects with SOGI questions as an exploratory, future research question (among other topics), while simultaneously making recommendations on SOGI question designs agencies should adopt now. They do not characterize response order effects as an issue that should prohibit an agency from adding SOGI questions. With both the MTurk study and the bridge panel, NCSES seems to conflate pilot work needed to ensure basic viability of SOGI questions, which should be its primary focus, with academic work in collaboration with the FCSM SOGI Research Group that seeks to advance broader SOGI measurement issues. It is inappropriate to use an exploratory question on response order as a fundamental barrier against the SO item’s viability in the 2023 NSCG, particularly given that it is not a true quality criterion NCSES uses (e.g., it did not assess it for GI).

NCSES' reliance on the response order effect is also at odds with clear federal precedents that it already draws on. The MTurk SOGI items are derived from the Census Bureau's HPS, Department of Justice's National Crime Victimization Survey, and CDC's National Health Interview Survey. NCSES explicitly references these surveys in its decision to move forward with the GI item. However, with the SO item, extensive cognitive testing with the National Health Interview Survey has long made the [following conclusion](#), which led the National Academies to recommend always listing straight after gay/lesbian (see [Recommendation #2](#)):

Respondents who identified as gay/lesbian or bisexual could answer questions about their sexual identity with relative ease, because their sexual identity was a central component of their sense of self. In contrast, respondents who identified as straight often did not find the concept of a sexual identity salient. In other words, they did not have a clear “heterosexual” or “straight” sexual identity beyond knowing that they were decidedly not gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Thus, to help these respondents (who comprise the majority of the population) select the optimal response category, the “straight” response option includes the phrase “that is, not gay.” Given this addition of wording, it [is] necessary to maintain logical cohesiveness by having the “straight, that is, not gay” response option follow after the “gay/lesbian” response option.

It is unclear why NCSES does not heed the National Academies' recommendation or [OMB's Guidance on Best Practices for SOGI Data Collection](#), which also suggests this order. NCSES is departing from the federal precedents it already draws its SOGI items from, as well as expert recommendations, which all clearly stipulate which response ordering to use. Instead, NCSES ignores these to make invalid inferences based on ungeneralizable MTurk response distributions.

In its justification, NCSES has claimed that “it is unclear which ordering produced more accurate responses” and that “[a]s a result, additional research is needed exploring the ordering of response options and its impact on estimates” (personal communication with NCSES; December 31, 2022). It is unlikely that by “more accurate responses” NCSES implies a kind of ground-truth accuracy, as it is theoretically impossible to know which ordering yielded responses closer to true sexual minority population estimates: The federal government has not generated such estimates in an authoritative way (i.e., via the decennial Census), and the only available estimates would derive from the very same SO question with its own response order (e.g., in Census Bureau's HPS), making such an analysis circular. In the absence of any ground-truth data, NCSES would seem to imply that it wishes for a kind of self-reported response accuracy.

Yet, NCSES' own data presented in the same study already shows how response ordering relates to self-reported accuracy. When straight was listed first, sexual minority respondents reported being slightly more able to accurately report their SO and have greater ease in answering the question, whereas straight respondents showed no such difference, which NCSES described as a significant interaction (Table 1). Thus, listing straight first appears to make the question slightly easier for sexual minority respondents, although the differences are small and both orders were associated with extremely high levels of self-reported accuracy (Table 1). As such, even if the SO response order effect in the MTurk study were significant, reproducible, not at odds with federal precedents, able to be validly generalized, and a quality criterion NCSES actually used (as opposed to an exploratory endeavor), NCSES already knows how response ordering relates to self-reported

accuracy among respondents. Regardless, NCSES should simply use the response ordering established by the same precedent surveys it draws its items from, as is explicitly recommended by the [National Academies](#) based on extensive cognitive testing and suggested by [OMB's Guidance on Best Practices for SOGI Data Collection](#).

More generally, NCSES' decision to use the MTurk study for exploratory research questions, such as the SO item's response order effects (and use the bridge panel for understudied, exploratory wording, such as referencing "sexual experience"), suggests that NCSES was more focused on giving a public appearance of a commitment to SOGI data by collaborating with the FCSM SOGI Research Group on academic topics, without actually taking seriously an assessment of the basic viability of tried-and-true SOGI measures for its surveys. In doing so, it appears to have sacrificed significant quality of the results with respect to answering the simple question of including straightforward SOGI questions on its surveys. Just because the FCSM SOGI Research Group expressed interest in exploratory future work looking at response order with SO does not allow NCSES to justify making such an exploratory, rather than confirmatory, research question suddenly a fundamental quality criterion for the item's viability in the NSCG (while not making it a criterion for other items like GI). All the while, NCSES benefits from the public perception that it is committed to assessing the viability of SOGI questions for its surveys.

Finally, if NCSES truly has remaining quality concerns about SO that it believes cannot be addressed by existing data, federal precedents, or expert recommendations (albeit unjustifiably), it should be including the MTurk / Census Bureau's HPS measure or some other proposed SO measure on the 2023 NSCG's non-production bridge panel used for testing survey changes. However, NCSES has not described any concrete plan for further piloting of a SO item.

SUMMARY: NCSES' justification for abandoning the SO item due to a response order effect in the MTurk study, which was not reported to OMB, is unwarranted and does not reflect a genuine quality concern. NCSES should use the response ordering established by the same precedent surveys it draws its items from, as is explicitly recommended by the National Academies report.

NSF NCSES' Selection of the Less Inclusive Gender Identity Item

NCSES cites disclosure risk and identifiability concerns in why it has chosen to adopt the expanded gender identity (GI) question that is relatively less inclusive (MTurk study design) than more inclusive (bridge panel design). These concerns are certainly important. NCSES uses several methods to avoid disclosure of identifiable information. It removes names and all identifying information, and out of an abundance of caution uses suppression techniques to protect confidentiality. For example, if a data cell has too few respondents such that an individual might possibly be identified (e.g., when cross-tabulated with other demographics or identifiers), NCSES suppresses the data cell. NCSES routinely uses such suppression techniques to deal with identifiability and disclosure concerns and can clearly apply the same techniques to its GI data.

The Census Bureau's HPS itself has [estimated](#) that transgender and other gender minority individuals constitute approximately 1% of the U.S. population. In its reports and data releases, NCSES has long included aggregate statistics on racial and ethnic categories that have an equivalent or even smaller prevalence in the U.S. population, such as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific

Islanders (0.3%) and American Indians or Alaska Natives (1.3%). Thus, NCSSES will not encounter issues in providing statistics on the gender minority population in the aggregate as well. In the case of more fine-grained subgroup data, which the more inclusive GI question design (bridge panel) would provide, NCSSES can always use suppression techniques to avoid identifiability risk in a situation where a data cell lacks sufficient sample. In specific data tabulations where a full range of response options might pose identifiability risk (especially when cross-tabulated with other variables), NCSSES could suppress such data cells and provide only an aggregate transgender/gender-minority statistic. In other tabulations where the range of response options does not pose risk, no suppression would be needed and NCSSES could provide disaggregated data so that variability by gender minority subgroups could be parsed.

The more expansive design would be more inclusive to the breadth of gender minority identities and allow non-binary and other gender minority respondents to feel included in NSF's data collection process. Even if fully disaggregated gender minority data could not be possible in a number of contexts due to identifiability risk, that in and of itself should not warrant rejecting the more inclusive question design, as levels of disaggregation can be calibrated to minimize risks post hoc. This comports with [OMB's Guidance on Best Practices for SOGI Data Collection](#), which states that "responses can...be aggregated to different levels (e.g., [sexual or gender minorities]) as needed for compliance with agency disclosure prevention protocols". The more inclusive question design's quality metrics were also excellent: item nonresponse and breakoff rates were "close to 0%" (personal communication with NCSSES; December 5, 2022).

SUMMARY: NCSSES should reconsider adopting the more inclusive GI question design from the bridge panel for the 2023 NSCG, as the identifiability concerns cited are easily resolved through aggregation and suppression techniques NCSSES already uses.