Earlier this summer, I announced that Douglas Elmendorf, who most recently served as director of the U.S. Congressional Budget Office, will be returning to Harvard in January to serve as dean of the Harvard John F. Kennedy School of Government. In the course of the search, and in my many conversations with faculty, staff, and students across the School and the University, I saw how research in the social sciences is expanding understanding, informing policy, and improving lives. The new dean received his Ph.D. in economics at Harvard and is himself an example of how social science has shaped our nation. His expertise provided him with the analytic skills to bring objective, non-partisan budgetary assessment of legislation into a political environment that too often emanates more heat than light.

New capacities that have emerged in the social sciences in recent years have rendered them increasingly valuable. Staggering computational power has made it possible for researchers to collect and extract knowledge from “Big Data,” massive amounts of newly available information. More refined analyses are deepening what we know of ourselves, of the relationships we form and sustain, and of the structures and societies we choose to create. The Dataverse Network Project, created by Harvard’s Institute for Quantitative Social Science, hosts and manages more than 750,000 files—the largest collection of research datasets in the world. Utilizing everything from clicks, hashtags, and “likes” to census data, social security records, and tax files, faculty across the University are exploring issues that range from the effects of incarceration on labor markets to efforts to close the nation’s racial achievement gap to challenges to privacy and confidentiality.

Harvard is poised to align our extraordinary array of research activities with emerging and existing data science platforms, convening faculty and educating students who will continue to bring new levels of technical sophistication to their work not only in the social sciences, but also in business, law, medicine, policy, public health, the natural sciences, and the humanities. The nature of censorship in China, to give just one example, can be explored by monitoring the types of communication suppressed by the government, a project that relies on sifting through millions of social media posts. At the same time, real-world experiments can inform economic, political, and social theory. Are people more likely to save for retirement with the help of targeted brain stimulation? Can gender bias in hiring, promotions, and work assignments be overcome by evaluating candidates jointly rather than individually? How do malnutrition and sleep deprivation among low-income individuals influence economic outcomes? Faculty supported by cross-school research programs such as the Behavioral Insights Group and the Foundations of Human Behavior Initiative are answering these and other questions by undertaking discipline-spanning research that can shape everything from the decisions we make at the grocery store to the votes we cast in the ballot box.

The rapidly expanding social sciences landscape has also been enhanced by the increasing prominence of creative and powerful visualizations that identify and communicate important insights. Award-winning work by one of last year’s Harvard College seniors elegantly combined socioeconomic profiles of New York City residents with storm surge risk, revealing additional implications for disaster preparedness and urban planning. The acceptance of an idea, the development of a trend, or the spread of a disease: we now have new ways of seeing and understanding change across time and space. The social sciences deploy these methods to great effect, challenging long-held assumptions and sharing knowledge in dramatic and meaningful ways.

This is a time of remarkable promise for the social sciences. Yet short-sighted federal funding cuts are threatening our ability to answer questions that have the potential to inform and shape all of our lives. The last 51 of the United States’ recipients of the Nobel Prize in Economics were supported by the research divisions of the National Science Foundation’s Directorate for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences, which may soon face a more than 50 percent reduction from current federal funding. If we hope to address complex and consequential issues such as climate change, global pandemics, and inequality and human rights, we cannot ignore unique insights into the human and behavioral that the social sciences alone can provide.

Sincerely,