

Department of Commerce  
Attn: Jennifer Jessup  
Departmental Paperwork Clearance Officer  
14th and Constitution Avenue N., Room 6616  
Washington, DC 20230

Proposed Information Collection; Comment Request; The American Community Survey  
Content Review Results

Dear Ms. Jessup:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the content review results of the American Community Survey (ACS) and the proposed removal of questions. We appreciate the Department of Commerce's efforts to reduce burden on survey respondents by weighing the benefits and costs of questions included in the survey. The ACS is an important instrument for measuring the economic and social conditions in this country, and soliciting public input on changes is appropriate and necessary.

However, we have concerns over the Department's assessment of Question No. 12 asking respondents to "print below the specific major(s) of any BACHELOR'S DEGREES this person has received." We cannot agree that Question No. 12 qualifies as a "low benefit" question. We strongly urge the Department to commit to retaining this question in all future editions of the ACS.

Question No. 12 allows researchers to explore two primary issues:

1. Relationships between college major and other economic outcomes, including labor force participation, earnings, and industry of employment.
2. Trends in the demographic composition and popularity of college majors, particularly to inform economic development and workforce investment strategies, as well as postsecondary education policies.

Students, families, advocates, the research community at large, and colleges and universities themselves already face many challenges stemming from the lack of available data linking education and workforce outcomes. Removing this question from a crucial annual survey will only exacerbate those challenges. It is particularly detrimental at a time when earning postsecondary credentials has been clearly linked to individual and public economic benefits.<sup>1</sup>

This comment will elaborate on the importance of exploring these two issues. It will describe how research using Question No. 12 helps individuals make informed decisions

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<sup>1</sup> Sandy Baum, Jennifer Ma, Kathleen Payea, *Education Pays 2013: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*, February 27, 2014, <http://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/education-pays-2013-full-report-022714.pdf>.

about higher education and how to pay for it. It will also detail the importance of continued research using Question No. 12 to lessen disparities in higher education access and completion.

### **Outcomes associated with different college majors**

With students taking on record levels of student debt, and with hundreds of billions of federal and state dollars being spent each year on higher education, it is imperative that we explore basic relationships between students' choice of major and other outcomes such as employment rate, income, industry and occupation. In surveys, focus groups, and convenings around the country, college students cite career opportunities as a major motivation to pursue higher education, and have expressed that choice of major aligns with their workforce aspirations.<sup>2 3 4</sup> To better guide these students through their academic programs and subsequent transition into the workforce, we must provide accurate information about the expected outcomes related to students' majors.

The research and academic communities also recognize the benefits of the information Question No. 12 provides. Recommending any sort of policy change at the federal, state, or institutional level requires a foundation of statistical evidence that defines current conditions. Question No. 12 helps the research community understand the relationship between college major and other outcomes. We use these data and trends to inform higher education and workforce policies. For instance, Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, a research stalwart in the education and workforce community, recently commented on the Department's assessment of Question No. 12: "This move would be a huge step backward in nationwide efforts to help students make informed choices about what to study in college...[a]t a time when what you take in college determines what you make, the fact that they're proposing this is difficult to understand."<sup>5</sup>

The Census Bureau itself acknowledges the importance of understanding the relationship between college major and income. The Bureau promoted the publication of two reports on this relationship with an October 2012 press release titled: "Choice of College Major Can Mean Millions Over Career, Census Bureau Reports."<sup>6</sup> The revelation of such

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<sup>2</sup> Valerie Calderon and Preety Sidhu, "Americans Say Graduates' Job Status Key to College Choice," March 30, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/163268/americans-say-graduates-jobs-status-key-college-choice.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Young Invincibles, "Will College Be Worth It?" December 12, 2013, <http://younginvincibles.org/2013/12/will-college-be-worth-it/>.

<sup>4</sup> Rory O'Sullivan, Jen Mishory, "The Student Perspective on Federal Financial Aid Reform," *Young Invincibles*, November 19, 2012, <http://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Student-Perspective-on-Federal-Financial-Aid-Reform.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Caitlin Emma, "Advocates eagerly await E-Rate vote," *Politico*, December 11, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/morningeducation/1214/morningeducation16421.html>.

<sup>6</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Choice of College Major Can Mean Millions Over Career, Census Bureau Reports," October 10, 2012, <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/education/cb12-196.html>.

variation in expected lifetime earnings by college major would be impossible without Question No. 12.

### **Trends in the demographic composition and popularity of college majors**

Question No. 12 also provides important data on college majors themselves. Broadly, we can estimate the frequency with which bachelor's degree holders choose a given major and track changes over time. These trends tell an essential story about higher education in the United States and students' areas of interest.

Furthermore, Question No. 12 informs our analysis of racial, socioeconomic, and gender divides in key college majors with high demand in the workforce. When cross-tabulated with the ACS's demographic information, we gain an understanding of who is choosing which majors. Without Question No. 12, identifying disparities in demographics and intervening by targeting and recruiting underrepresented groups to consider majoring in high-demand fields of study becomes more difficult. For example, the Census Bureau, citing the value of a qualified workforce in the STEM fields, published a report concluding that women, African Americans, and Hispanics are less likely pursue STEM-related majors in college.<sup>7</sup> Research of this type, which has growing importance given today's economy, will be more difficult to conduct without Question No. 12.

We appreciate your time and consideration, and hope you will retain Question No. 12 in future iterations of the American Community Survey. Data collected through this question must continue to inform policymaking and student choice. For questions or more information, please contact Tom Allison, Policy and Research Manager, at [tom.allison@younginvincibles.org](mailto:tom.allison@younginvincibles.org).

Respectfully,

Aspen Institute College Excellence Program

Campaign for College Opportunity

Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

P. Daniel Chen, PhD, University of North Texas

Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce

John J. Cheslock, Director, Center for the Study of Higher Education, Pennsylvania State University

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<sup>7</sup> Liana Christin Landivar, "Disparities in STEM Employment by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin," (Washington D.C., U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acs-24.pdf>.

Nate Johnson, Postsecondary Analytics LLC

The Institute for College Access & Success

Institute of Higher Education Policy

Tod Massa, State Council of Higher Education for Virginia

Michael P. Meotti, Education Policy Group

Tom Mortenson, Postsecondary Education OPPORTUNITY

Young Invincibles