



## ***Practical Significance* | Episode 23: Get to Know COSSA!**

**Ron Wasserstein:** Hello, *Practical Significance* podcast listeners. Ron here with a mind-bending question. Life is full of difficult situations. Some situations appear surprising and even unresolvable, these are sometimes called Paradoxes.

For example, the majority of people in a sample prefer coffee to tea. But when the sample is broken down by nationality, a majority of both people from England and people from America in the sample preferred tea, this is Simpson's Paradox,

well known to statisticians. The fastest runner in the world can't catch up to a tortoise with a head start because before the runner can catch the tortoise, they have to get where the tortoise was when they started, and by then the tortoise has moved, and so on. This is an instance of Zeno's Paradox. Everything I say is a lie. That's the Liar Paradox. The Will Rogers Paradox allows me to move from one place to another and increase the average IQ in both places.

A male barber shaves all and only those men who do not shave themselves. Does he shave himself? That seems like a silly paradox, but Bertrand Russell's Set Theory Paradox had a profound effect on logic. There is what we call the Mission Impossible Paradox. Your mission is not to accept the mission, you accept the mission. Joseph Heller gave us the Catch-22 Paradox. A pilot who wants to be declared insane to avoid combat is deemed not insane for that very reason and will therefore not be declared insane. Many people have trouble with the lottery Paradox, a version of which is this. Every set of possible power ball numbers has a very low probability of being selected, but the probability is one that some set of numbers will be selected.

And my favorite one is attributed to Yogi Berra. Nobody goes to that restaurant anymore. It's too crowded. But here is the mind-bending question, which we will call the PSP Paradox, the *Practical Significance* Podcast Paradox. Simply stated, The PSP Paradox is this, why do otherwise intelligent, knowledgeable, thoughtful researchers who are not statisticians try to do statistics themselves instead of seeking the advice and assistance of professional statisticians?

Don't be like Groucho Marx who said, I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member. Don't fall prey to the PSP Paradox. Contact a professional statistician. The ASA can help you find one. And now let's start the podcast.

**Donna LaLonde:** Well, welcome everyone to *Practical Significance*. Ron and I are especially delighted today to have our colleague, Wendy joins us so that we can introduce you and the wonderful work that she does, and she can learn a bit more about all of the wonderful ASA members. So, Wendy, I'm going to start with a two-in-one question. One is, we'd love for you to introduce yourself to our listeners. Tell us a little bit about your day job and a bit more about COSSA, including what COSSA stands for because I suspect many of our listeners will not know. So, a bit about you and a bit about what's on your radar.

**Wendy Naus:** Thanks, Donna, and Ron. And it's a thrill to be with you. I will say that I am a dedicated listener of *Practical Significance*, so I'm very excited to be with you and to talk about COSSA. So, COSSA is the Consortium of Social Science Associations and I'm its executive director. I've been in this position

for about nine years now, which is hard to believe. I've been a professional advocate and lobbyist for almost 20 years in the DC policy-making area. So, I've dedicated my career to advancing the policy interests of what I like to say are noble causes. In this case, those noble causes are the social and behavioral sciences.

So, we do direct lobbying, but we also serve as a representative of the social science, behavioral science, and statistical and data science communities. And we serve as a bridge between science, research, and findings to policymakers in the government. We help translate that information into hopefully sound policy and increased funding for all of the important work that our researchers do at our universities.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Thanks, Wendy. And I also find it hard to believe that it's been nine years since you started. I was obviously around when you were hired, and you made a big difference for COSSA. And what we would like to get at is the fact that ASA is a member of COSSA, one of the founding members of COSSA. How does this benefit our members and how do you think it impacts our members?

**Wendy Naus:** So, COSSA really wouldn't exist without professional organizations like the ASA and the Psychological Association, the Economic Association of Political Science.... We exist to serve as an umbrella voice for all of the different fields and we have a singular focus, which is advocacy for everyone. So, lifting all the boats so to speak. And we are 100% in service to our members. I like to say that if your professional association is a member of COSSA, that means you are automatically a member of COSSA too.

I think this is the best-kept secret, but not intentionally. Anyone affiliated with a COSSA membership organization is eligible to receive any members-only benefits that we offer. Whether it's webinars, participation in our advocacy events, other communications, or simply just engaging with our staff to gain expertise or information on what's happening at a certain federal agency or in Congress.

And so, there's the benefit of resources and talking points and tools that you can use. But I think a really important aspect of COSSA membership is that you get to sit in the room with other disciplines, and you get to network and see how other fields of social science or data science, statistics, or behavioral science would answer a challenging scientific question or societal challenge.

And so, member benefits I think are widespread. And I also like to say that a member organization can get out of COSSA whatever it wants. So, some are less active in advocacy. Some just like to join a consortium. They tell me, I'll pay our dues, and COSSA you do your thing and lobby for us, and we trust you. Others want to engage their members in grassroots advocacy and take 'em to the Hill. And so, we can offer a range of those types of benefits.

**Ron Wasserstein:** So, I'm going to drill down just a little farther on one of the benefits that, you know, Wendy is one that I am super excited about and that is the Why Social Science series. Would you say a little bit about that and why there has to be a Why Social Science series – because there are some very compelling reasons why this was started in the first place.

**Wendy Naus:** I'm glad you mentioned that Ron because I am really proud of Why Social Science. This is an initiative that we started five or six years ago at this point. And it's been a long time in the making because the challenges to our fields have existed for a really long time. The long story impetus of it is that not everyone understands what social science is. And that translates to significant challenges when those people sit in positions of power like in the United States Congress. So, I always say that the social

sciences and the behavioral sciences have a bit of a branding problem in that everyone thinks they know what it is. Some think they can run a study or the commonsense problem we often have in our fields... I know how to do a Google form so therefore I can do my own survey.

All of these misconceptions about the process and the value. And so, we developed Why Social Science as a way to talk to the everyday person, your uncle who sits around the Thanksgiving table who may not understand what you do to just make the tie to the research to everyday life. And so, they're really short pieces written for a lay audience and simply we ask our authors, which could be researchers, members of congress, people from industry, and students to answer the question of Why Social Science from their vantage point.

And they could talk about anything from criminal justice to the Covid pandemic to early childhood education, making the case that our sciences are everywhere and the data need to be brought to bear on these big issues that affect everyone.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Thanks, Wendy. We'll put a link to that in our show notes and later on offline I'll try to figure out how it is that you know my uncle.

**Donna LaLonde:** Wendy, I want to come back to COSSA, but it actually occurs to me that I am incredibly interested. You said that you were a lobbyist for 20 years. How does one become a lobbyist? Can you tell me a little bit about your backstory in terms of your journey to that career?

**Wendy Naus:** That's a great question and my answer's probably not very satisfying, but my journey was not intentional in the sense that I knew what I wanted to be when I grow up. But I'm from Buffalo, New York. I graduated college with a political science degree. I did the typical internship in Washington as an undergrad and I knew that this is where I wanted to be. I enjoyed politics and history, but besides that, didn't know if I wanted to work on the Hill or something else.

And it's such a DC story. But a professor of mine's son worked at a lobbying firm, and he knew they were looking and so I applied, and the rest was history, of course. I don't think I knew what a lobbyist was when I was hired, but I was excited I was getting to DC. You learn along the way that lobbying means different things to different people.

I worked in a lobbying firm, but all of our clients were non-profit universities working in the science space. So very similar to the work that I'm doing now. And it really felt like I was adding some value to the discourse around science and policy and things. But you know, the other inroad to the lobbying profession is if you're a former member of Congress or a former congressional staffer, that's a very different kind of lobbying.

I've always focused more on the relationship-building side instead of the transactional type of relationship – earmarks and you know, going to this fundraiser to get this favor from a policymaker. But instead, really work on champion development and nurturing a cadre of policymakers willing to go to back for our issues.

**Donna LaLonde:** Thanks so much. Well, so now I want to come back to member benefits because as some of my colleagues know, I'm a real website nerd. I like to see how websites are designed and laid out and what goodies one can find. And one of the things that I know that the COSSA website has is The

Action Center. And first, if you could tell us a little bit about what The Action Center is and then how you really hope members would use The Action Center?

**Wendy Naus:** Yeah, I'm so glad that you found that. Let me start by saying that we continue to add content to our website, which is new. We just launched it a year ago; we're really proud of it as a staff of currently three people doing that whole thing in-house was no small feat. But I've been focused over these last nine years on member benefits and on having our resources as easy to find as possible for those who want to use them. And not everybody, as I said, wants to be an advocate, but some do. So, we built this Action Center to be a home for things you might expect, like talking points, one-pagers where you could go when we issue an alert, some legislation is on the floor and you need to reach out to your members of Congress, that sort of thing.

But what we're really excited about, especially in this post-Covid world, is the content we'll be adding soon about advocating from home. So, you don't have to come to Washington to engage in this process. There are ways that you can build relationships, you can use your expertise to help inform policy without having to leave your home. And I think we're living in such an activist time right now and people feel the need to let their voices be heard. And so, we want to encourage that as much as possible. And so, stay tuned. We really are excited to build out The Action Center even more in these different ways. Definitely different for us, but I think we'll be more valuable.

**Ron Wasserstein:** So, I have a question that in some ways I expect Wendy, you could answer in your sleep except these are the things that also keep you awake. What do you think are the significant challenges and opportunities there are for COSSA?

**Wendy Naus:** Great question. I find myself struggling in the challenge department these days because we're in such a different place than we were say nine years ago when I started. There was at that time definitely a target on the back of our sciences. There were policymakers actively trying to defund the social sciences and while that happens from time to time, it's not the norm anymore.

Of course, there are larger societal challenges that are affecting all of us as humans; that are affecting us as associations, as scientists, and so on. The social and behavioral sciences and data in particular in evidence-based policymaking are really getting the respect and the light that they need at the moment from this White House and policymakers on all sides of the aisle.

They're finally realizing that whether you're talking about climate change or Covid or the racial reckoning over the last couple of years, these are all human-centered problems and that you need data and science and research to help answer these really tough questions. My only major fear is that as a community, we don't step up to the call for more social science and that researchers make themselves available to policymakers. They volunteer their time to serve on boards or in other capacities to help inform these debates.

And that we don't lose track, don't lose ground on everything that we've accomplished over the last couple of years, and make it known that our sciences have a lot to contribute. The other challenge I would say though is a continuous one, but it's a little bit more acute coming up next year and that's champion development. We are losing several really staunch champions for social behavioral science at the end of this Congress with retirements. And so regardless of how the election turns out, we have a lot of work to do to nurture new champions for science in general and social science in particular.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Thanks Wendy. It definitely helps to have Alondra Nelson at OSTP to push things along as well. She does a great job!

**Wendy Naus:** She sure does. She's been such an amazing leader in her role at OSTP. And so inclusive too in every definition of the word for inclusivity, but also just making sure that whether they're talking about any of these major challenges that the White House is dealing with, that social science is at the table, and not just her as a sociologist, but bringing other experts in as well into those conversations. I mean, just look at the President's Council of Advisors on science and technology.

This is like the highest-level science advisory board to the president of the United States and its external folks, not government people. And for the first time, there are three social scientists on that. That's never happened. I think there's been something like six total social scientists in the last 30 years. So, this is a really big sea change and I just hope that as a community we can keep up.

**Donna LaLonde:** So, Wendy, that actually made me think of something else that I suspect maybe some of our younger listeners might be interested in. And that is, if you had to think back over your career, what's the one course that you didn't take that you wished you'd taken to make you better prepared for your job? And it doesn't have to be a course; we're just having lots of conversations about what are the skills and knowledge people need in this world, So get your take on it.

**Wendy Naus:** That is such a good question. I've been thinking about that a lot lately actually because in this role and in my previous roles too, I'm often the only non-Ph.D. in the room. But I feel strongly that working in an advocacy capacity takes its own special skill set. And it doesn't mean you have to be an extrovert, I'm a textbook introvert, but my liberal arts education really helped and being able to analyze and think deeply about things and strategically and about different approaches to take and try new things.

So, for that reason, I think my political science degree, even though I had no idea what I was going to do with it, it worked out well totally by accident. But I do think a lot about it, not so much in my professional capacity, but in my personal, just wishing that I did better at courses like GIS and statistics and economics and all the ones that I had to take for my degree. But they were not my course of study necessarily. And I passed them, and it was fine, but for some reason couldn't see the utility at the time, and now it's, gosh, I wish I did better in that course or tried a little bit harder in that course.

**Donna LaLonde:** Sounds like there are some opportunities for collaboration.

**Wendy Naus:** I will take any free education you're willing to offer me.

**Donna LaLonde:** Well, you provide so much for us that it would be nice if we could return the favor. Well, I'm going to switch gears a lot. We've developed a tradition of asking our guests what they're reading, listening to, and watching. So, share what's on your TBR or playlist.

**Wendy Naus:** Yeah, I love this question and my interests are so varied. I have a nine-year-old son and I find it frustrating when I ask him to pick something out. What do you want to do? Or what do you want to be for Halloween? Or what's your favorite cake flavor for your birthday? And he's like, I don't care. I like everything. And it's so frustrating as a parent, but he gets that from me.

So, the things that I watch and listen to, and read are just so varied. I just finished a great book called *The Barbizon* and it's about this woman's only residential hotel in New York City that opened in the

1920s and it was sort of seen as a safe place for women after World War I to come and be independent, become secretaries and go to typing school. And it was for artists and musicians, really amazing.

And it still exists today, although it's co-ed now. But just hearing the stories of some of the women who stayed there, like the unsinkable Molly Brown from the Titanic, Grace Kelly, Liza Minelli, Sylvia Plath, and Felicia Rashad. Every generation seemed to have their icon come through this hotel and reinvent themselves as well as all the stories of these young women who ended up just going back to their Midwestern home and having a child and raising a family and not having a career but for a snapshot in time having that independent New York City dream lifestyle. So that was an amazing book, and I would recommend it. The author is Paulina Bren.

**Donna LaLonde:** So, I'm a real podcast fanatic. Do you have a favorite podcast?

**Wendy Naus:** I am such a sucker for true crime podcasts. Where you can imagine the news that's come out in the last week or so with Adnan Syed, the Serial Podcast. Season one is my favorite podcast of all time. I was hooked and so now I have to re-listen because it turns out all charges were dropped, so hmm.

Maybe we should have known that through the podcast and the first time around. I just love that stuff. I tried to listen to podcasts like this one that helped me with my job too, keeping things on in the background. So, my head is always sort of turning again to sort of fill the gaps in my knowledge that I feel like I didn't fill through my formal education.

But again, really, really diverse interests. And more times than not, I'd just like to find something that'll either make me laugh or help me turn my brain off for a little while so we can relax and recharge.

**Ron Wasserstein:** So, Wendy, are you doing Only Murders in the Building?

**Wendy Naus:** I love Only Murders in the Building. I binged that season, in a weekend, the entire season. And I'm so glad that it's, I think coming back for another, given the cliffhanger that I ended on. I'm not going to spoil it, but I'm obsessed with Only Murders. Yes.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Yes, that's a lot of fun.

**Wendy Naus:** And because I have a nine-year-old, there are plenty of other types of programming on in my house. We're a very Lego-friendly household here. And so, if you haven't seen Lego Masters seasons one, two, or three, you'll feel very inadequate as a parent of a child who likes Lego because your ability is nowhere near anything that these people can do. But it's very, very cool to see what they can think of because my brain is not wired the same way that these people's brains are wired. So that is very cool.

**Donna LaLonde:** Well Wendy, that's great. Thanks so much for joining us. We will put links to the website and the other information that you've shared with us in the show notes. We really appreciate getting to know you better. And with that, I will turn it over to my colleague Ron for the other tradition of *Practical Significance*, which is the Top 10.

**Ron Wasserstein:** Thanks Donna. Perhaps the biggest certainty of life is that it ends, and we have many euphemisms for referring to this uncomfortable certainty. People pass on, kick the bucket, bite the dust, check out, give up the ghost, and so on. Well, it occurred to me that statistical terms are quite possibly useful as euphemisms for death as well. I don't have the slightest idea how things like this occur to me,

but they do. So, the *Practical Significance* podcast brings you the “Top 10 Statistical Terms that Could Be Euphemisms for Death.”

#10 The null hypothesis of life has been rejected at every alpha level.

#9 They have gone on to their posterior distribution

#8 They have permanently regressed to the mean.

#7 They are performing their final transformation.

#6 They used their last degree of freedom.

#5 They are on a long-term downward trend.

#4 Their time series is seriously stationary.

#3 They are no longer in the sampling frame of life.

#2 They have wrangled their last data.

**And the number one statistical term that could be a euphemism for death:**

They are away applying decomposition techniques.

Well, that's it for this episode of *Practical Significance*. Assuming your hosts don't shuffle off this mortal coil, we will continue the conversation next month.