

Thriving Together: Building Strong, Future-Facing Departments

2026 ASA Department Leader Preconference
New York, NY

August 7, 2026

8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. EDT

Session Organizer: Margaret Gough Courtney, American Sociological Association

Fee: Early Bird/Regular: \$140/\$200 for Department Affiliates, \$172/\$230 for Non-Affiliates

Higher education has undergone numerous changes in recent years, requiring sociology departments to adapt and innovate. In this context, some departments are not just surviving, they're thriving. How do they do it? What can we learn from their success, and how might we adapt their strategies to diverse institutional contexts? How can we move beyond the prevailing sense of crisis to foster community, hope, and strong, vibrant departments? This preconference will explore these pressing questions, offering department leaders practical skills and evidence-informed strategies to cultivate flourishing programs. Designed for chairs and directors of undergraduate and graduate studies, this preconference provides an opportunity to connect with peers, share insights, engage in skill-building, and develop strategies needed to thrive. Topics include:

- Strategies used by departments that are thriving across varied institutional settings
- Strategic planning approaches that foster growth and inclusion
- Building systems to minimize conflict and enhance engagement
- Challenges and opportunities specific to department chairs and directors of graduate studies
- And more!

Join us for a day of engagement, practical takeaways, and peer support as we reimagine what it means to lead thriving departments in today's academic climate.

8:30 AM – 9:00 AM | Registration Check-In & Breakfast

9:00 AM – 9:15 AM | Welcome & Opening Remarks

Margaret Gough Courtney, Director of Programs and Research, ASA
Heather Washington, Executive Director, ASA
Shelley Correll, President, ASA

9:15 AM – 10:15 AM | Keynote: Meeting the Moment and Moving Beyond It

Brandy Bryson

Professor of Organizational Leadership and Learning, *Appalachian State University*

10:15 AM – 10:30 AM | Coffee Break

10:30 AM – 11:30 AM | Concurrent Roundtables 1

1) Leveraging Sociology's Role in General Education to Facilitate Change

How can sociology departments leverage their role in the general education curriculum to facilitate social change? This roundtable session will examine how sociology departments can create more informed citizens through general education students' engagement with sociology courses, in part through engaged pedagogy and a strong emphasis on development of critical thinking skills.

Deborah White

Professor of Sociology, *Minnesota State Moorhead*

2) Navigating Your Role as a New Department Chair

Are you a new department chair wondering where to go from here? This roundtable will offer practical advice for new department chairs navigating leadership, administration, and faculty dynamics.

Amanda Pullum

Professor of Sociology and Chair of Social Sciences and Global Studies, *California State University, Monterey Bay*

3) Finding and Using Data to Compare to Peer Institutions

Have you ever wondered how to find data to compare your institution to peer institutions, whether for program review or another purpose? This roundtable will describe strategies for obtaining this information and discuss important considerations when using this data.

Diana Leilani Arpino

Vice Provost of Academic Program Review & Doctoral Affairs, *New York University*

4) Strategic Planning for Sustainable Success

Do you ever feel like strategic planning is just a box to check, rather than a valuable activity? This roundtable will build on the contents of the presentation in the morning keynote address to teach you how thoughtful strategic planning can help provide a roadmap for sustainable department success and growth. This session will offer practical tips about how to develop a strategic plan you can actually use, that demonstrates a common vision and can serve as a catalyst for long-term collaboration and innovation.

Brandy Bryson

Professor of Organizational Leadership and Learning, *Appalachian State University*

5) Innovative Strategies for Directors of Graduate Studies

Join other directors of graduate studies to discuss forward-thinking strategies for flourishing graduate programs! Topics of discussion may include innovative approaches to preparing students for the job market, identifying alternative sources of funding to support students, and a consideration of how challenges and opportunities differ for MA-granting programs vs. PhD-granting programs.

Mellisa Holtzman

Professor of Sociology and Graduate Program Director, *Ball State University*

11:30 AM – 11:45 AM | Sponsor Presentation

TBD

TBD

11:45 AM – 12:45 PM | Lunch & Networking

12:45 PM – 1:45 PM | Keynote: Intentional Design: Building Systems that Minimize Conflict and Maximize Engagement

Susan A. Colby

Associate Dean of Human Capital Management, Professor of Teaching & Learning, and Dean of Faculty, *U.S. Air Force Academy*

1:45 PM – 2:00 PM | Break

2:00 PM – 3:00 PM | Concurrent Roundtables 2

6) Strengthening the Fabric: Cultivating Intra- and Inter-departmental Relationships

Interested in learning how strong relationships can serve as a foundation for departmental success? This roundtable will provide practical skills-building and strategic insights about how to best develop intra- and inter-departmental relationships to strengthen departments and secure external support.

Shannon Carter

Professor of Sociology, *University of Central Florida*

7) Preparing Students for Academic and Non-Academic Job Searches

What can departments do to best support students' academic and non-academic job searches? In this roundtable discussion, participants will learn about the different considerations for applying for roles in different industries and contexts, including useful pre-application skills, translating an academic CV and skill set for

non-academic audiences, and how to build inclusive career development programs.

Joya Misra

Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Public Policy, *University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

Timothy Pippert

Joel S. Torstenson Endowed Professor of Sociology, *Augsburg University*

8) Designing Supportive and Inclusive Departmental Practices

What does it take to create a department where all members—faculty, staff, and students—feel valued, supported, and empowered to succeed? This roundtable will focus on concrete steps department leaders can take to foster inclusive cultures, including through policies, leadership practices, and everyday interactions.

Susan A. Colby

Associate Dean of Human Capital Management, Professor of Teaching & Learning, and Dean of Faculty, *U.S. Air Force Academy*

9) Beyond the Basics: Building Holistic Support Systems for Graduate Students

Recent research indicates high rates of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and burnout among graduate students. This roundtable will focus on how departments can build holistic support systems for students, beyond linking them to health services or wellness initiatives, and including strengthening mentor-mentee relationships, providing greater support for students from diverse backgrounds, and making structural changes to the training environment.

Michelle M. Camacho

Dean, College of Social & Behavioral Sciences, *University of Utah*

10) Sharing What Works in Undergraduate Sociology

Are you a new director of undergraduate studies or a new department chair at an undergraduate-focused institution? Perhaps you've sometimes wondered what the most recent successful evidence-based approaches to undergraduate education are but not had the time to read the literature? This roundtable will provide an overview of several effective strategies for undergraduate education in different institution types and offer plenty of time for participants to ask questions and discuss the challenges and opportunities these different methods have.

Daniel Chambliss

Eugene M. Tobin Distinguished Professor of Sociology, Emeritus, *Hamilton College*

3:00 PM – 3:15 PM | Coffee Break

3:15 PM – 4:15 PM | Panel: Recipe for Thriving: Ingredients for a Stronger Department

What are the secrets to success for today's thriving departments? In this session, a panel of representatives from across multiple institutional settings will provide insight into the strategies they've used to build flourishing programs, including practical tools department leaders can apply or adapt to their own situations.

Jennifer Johnson

Professor and Chair of Sociology, *Virginia Tech*

Renee Monson

Professor of Sociology, *Hobart and William Smith Colleges*

David G. Ortiz

Department Head and Associate Professor of Sociology, *New Mexico State University*

4:15 PM – 4:30 PM | Closing Reflections & Next Steps

- ◆ Key takeaways from the day.
- ◆ Opportunities for continued collaboration.

4:30 PM – 5:00 PM | Informal Networking (Optional)

- ◆ Opportunity for department leaders to get to know one another and discuss strategies in an informal setting.