

Save the Social Sciences

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Speech by Leah Juliett

The year that I graduated high school I wanted to go to New York University and study musical theatre at the acclaimed Tisch School of the Performing Arts. Despite my clear ambition and unrelenting sense of self, I didn't have the grades to get accepted into NYU. I had spent four years of high school as one of the only gay kids in a small town, and I experienced online sexual abuse, cyberbullying, and harassment at the hands of my peers. I could barely hold my head above the water in high school—so no, I didn't go to NYU. I applied and was accepted into the Musical Theatre program at WestConn. I was enamored by the talk of a brand new, 97-million-dollar Visual and Performing Arts Center. I'd be the third class of performers to experience the grand education of a shiny new state school BFA—the best New York-level conservatory training with more affordable in-state tuition.

Ten years ago, in 2012, the Connecticut Board of Regents invested nearly 100 million dollars in the gorgeous performing arts building on the Westside campus at WestConn—a long-overdue investment in the arts for state students. The same year, the Connecticut Board of Regents invested less than \$102,000 into research grants dispersed amongst the other smaller department—social sciences, anthropology, economics, politics, and mathematics.

And while students at the Visual and Performing Arts Center have thrived in the beautiful VPA these last 10 years, students in the social sciences department have experienced the crumbling infrastructure of the oldest buildings on campus, a clear visual image of the disproportionate investment in funding and opportunity.

The year that I studied musical theatre as a freshman at WestConn was the hardest year of my life. The program was wonderful and challenging, but I was suffering from PTSD, severe depression, and suicidal thoughts as a result of the abuse that I suffered as a high school student. I was terrified by the presidential campaign of 2016, combined with the stressors of existing as a queer, nonbinary, survivor of abuse in America that year. I dropped out of the theatre program at WestConn and decided to study social sciences, hoping that I could be a part of positive political change during a dark moment in our country. During that hard year, the social science department at WestConn was a warm hug of hope and positive action in the face of uncertainty.

It was in my Nonviolent Conflict Resolution class my sophomore year, taught by Professor Emeritus Dr. Averell Manes that I was asked to create a social justice project that addressed a social issue that mattered to me. For the first time, I was given the opportunity, the tools, and the encouragement to build something sustainable out of the ashes of the abuse that I had experienced. For my project, I organized the March Against Revenge Porn, a protest march across the Brooklyn Bridge that advocated for the criminalization of online sexual abuse and internet harassment like what happened to me. I organized it all from my dorm room in Grasso Hall. The march received international attention and was profiled by CNN.

Around this time, I decided to reapply to transfer to New York University to study advocacy and politics. I was accepted to NYU in 2016. But I decided to stay at WestConn. Not because of the beautiful 97-million-dollar VPA building, but because of the professors who invested in me in the social sciences department.

And it only grew from there. In my sophomore and junior year, Dr. Manes and the social science department encouraged me to continue pressing my advocacy forward.

Today, March Against Revenge Porn is a federally-recognized 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that has changed the landscape for victims and survivors of internet harassment internationally. We've helped victims of online abuse around the world through advocacy campaigns, legislative action, and victim services.

In 2017, I was selected to the university's cohort of Hancock Student Leaders, a fellowship-like leadership program then-ran by Dr. Manes. There, I was paired with Jillian Gilchrist, who at the time served as Director of Outreach at the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence and now serves as a Connecticut State Representative. Representative Gilchrist believed in my mission--she invited me to testify about internet harassment before the Trafficking in Persons Council at the Connecticut General Assembly and present amended policy recommendations to the Sentencing Committee for Connecticut's Unlawful Decimation of an Intimate Image Statute. Several of my recommendations were applied to the existing law, which still stands today.

In 2018, as a Senior at WestConn, I focused my Senior Thesis work with Dr. Bandhauer on creating a comprehensive analysis of internet harassment legislation nationwide and internationally, and laid out policy recommendations for federal legislation. I worked with California legislator Susan Rubio to testify on behalf of her legislation that mirrored my policy recommendations and also worked with the Luthania Human Rights Council on global legislative efforts. That year, I was also mentored by Dr. Howell Williams, under which I got to do an honors research practicum and independent study on transgender pedagogy in political and social sciences and present at the Northeast Political Science conference in Montreal. For my work that year, I was named a Glamour Magazine College Woman of the Year--the only one from a state university--and was honored alongside Kamala Harris at the Glamour Awards in New York City. Also that year, I was recognized as a GLAAD Rising Star Grant recipient and Founded the National LGBTQ+ Youth Town Hall, an event that brought legislators and youth activists to WestConn in the leadup to the 2018 midterm elections.

After three and a half years, one changed major, and three minors and concentrations under my belt, I graduated WestConn in 2018 and accepted my first job offer out of my undergrad— to serve as Writer for Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer and the Senate Democratic Caucus in Washington, DC. I was often the only graduate of a state university amongst my Congressional colleagues who touted Ivy League educations. But I proudly chose WestConn. And with every stroke of my pen as I wrote essays on behalf of Senate Democrats, I considered the impact of the state education and the opportunity that I had to inform the moral backbone of everything I did while working in Congress. Because I believe that having graduates of state

universities in the halls of Congress, where decisions are being made, is the best way to have an American government that looks more like the American people. But the only way that we can get there is for our state universities to believe in the social sciences and the leaders that they produce. The professors in the social sciences department at this university changed the trajectory of my life by giving me the tools to turn my personal pain into political power---and that is a valuable currency regardless of the name of the institution on your diploma or the amount of money you spent on your degree. WestConn social sciences were the foundation and the springboard to the success that I have been able to achieve as an activist at only twenty-five years old. And I will keep coming back to WestConn to sing the praises of this department until the Board of Regents invests in this program like the people of this program invested in me.

Now, I know that telling my personal story may not make much difference because at the end of the day---this is a business decision and this is about dollars and a bottom line. They say that enrollment in the social sciences is low and blame general disinterest among students.

To that, I remind you of 2012, when the Connecticut Board of Regents invested \$ 97 million into what was once a crumbling visual and performing arts program at WestConn. Their significant financial and supportive investment helped the program to thrive, recruit new talent, and retain high-quality students that leave their mark on the university and on the world.

The students of the social science department at this university have **also** been leaving their mark---addressing critical issues of racism and violence, creating solutions to global economic turmoil, and demonstrating leadership in the face of adversity. They are showing up to their classes in White Hall in spite of the dwindling investment from the Board of Regents in making the program they chose to study thrive and survive. They are showing up, they are making change while championing diversity, and they are achieving academic and civic greatness in spite of deeply inopportune circumstances. That is resilience. That is strength. That is a community of students and faculty that will grow where they are planted—but they need water and investment and nourishment to survive and to thrive.

Earlier this year, Forbes cited Gen-Z as the most charitable and philanthropic generation. It's the social scientists of Gen-Z that are leveraging philanthropy by investing their undergraduate education in creating sustainable solutions to generate positive social change.

This university was founded to remove barriers to entry for students through affordable tuition so that they can reach their potential regardless of their circumstances. Now, we can remove the barriers created by institutional lack of funding and administrative disinvestment to ensure that our students are set up to be successful in their pursuit of a better future.

So, I ask for your investment and your vote **against** the removal of the social sciences department at WestConn, to grow future changemakers and to recruit new, inspiring, young leaders in the State of Connecticut.

The WestConn social science department is where I was inspired to reclaim my dignity and reclaim my name after years of intolerable abuse. In that spirit, I am proud to announce that I have established a Reclaim Social Sciences scholarship for a WestConn student who, through the vessel of the social sciences, demonstrates resolute in the face of adversity, drive in the face of stagnation, and embodies courageous abandon not only in the pursuit of a better world but by taking tangible action steps to get there. And I hope we all lead by their example. The scholarship is open for all WestConn social science students to apply now at reclaimscholarship.org.

Today, I'm investing in the future of social science students at Western Connecticut State University, and I'm asking you all to do the same. Please vote to save the social sciences. Thank you.