From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences, with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

Janet Box-Steffensmeier is the Interim Executive Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. She is the Vernal Riffe Professor of Political Science and a Professor of Sociology by courtesy. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences, and I am very pleased to welcome you to Voices, Dean Box-Steffensmeier.

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm a big fan.

And we will certainly talk about that. But I wanted to start, first of all, by just simply noting that your time as Interim Executive Dean will end in July, and I'd like you to reflect on your year as Executive Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; if you were giving a sort of the state of the Arts and Sciences address, what would you say about the Arts and Sciences?
Janet Box-Steffensmeier  01:14
Yes, well, it's been my pleasure to serve and give back to Ohio State in this way. I've been a faculty member here for 26 years, and have been part of the college for five years, so four years as the Dean for the Social and Behavioral Sciences, and then this year, as the Interim Dean for all of Arts and Sciences. And one of the best things about it's just been the amazing faculty, students, and staff I've met across the college, I mean, I feel like my mind has really been expanded and being able to have decision making happen, where we bring more and more people in, and that diversity of ideas leads to much better outcomes. So, that's been a personal pleasure. When I think about the state of Arts and Sciences, I really go back to the founding of the college. It's a relatively young college, so about ten years, but it is the intellectual academic core of the university, and I believe you heard our Provost talk about that earlier on your podcast. It really is the university's primary lab for inquiry into human expression, into social and cultural systems, to physical, biological, and cognitive processes. And I believe firmly that the foundation to all of universities, education, and even the professional schools, happens in Arts and Sciences. It's here where we teach students to communicate, to write, to hone analytical thinking. And so, I think about the breadth and depth of Arts and Sciences as really unmatched and is the core of the whole entire university.

David Staley  02:37
And you say we're young, but obviously, we've had Arts and Sciences at Ohio State. When you say young, what does that mean in terms of the how the college has been organized historically?

Janet Box-Steffensmeier  02:45
Yeah, so it used to be five separate colleges, and it was blended to be able to take advantage of that diversity of experiences and ideas and to make collaboration easier. And I study both institutions and culture, and so ten years is not very long when you take an institutional perspective.

David Staley  03:03
Not when we're 150 years old, no.

Janet Box-Steffensmeier  03:04
Yes, yes, which we're all looking forward to celebrating this coming year.

David Staley  03:08
So, your theme throughout your year as Interim Dean was "Excellence in the Arts and Sciences", in fact, you helped to title this podcast. I'm curious, what do you mean by excellent or excellence, and what makes us excellent?
So, I think when I talk about the goals and values that I brought to Arts and Sciences this year, it was certainly excellence in our research, excellence in our teaching. It also went a bit beyond that, as well as looking at transparency and accessibility, being able to tell our story and harnessing the breadth and depth of Arts and Sciences. It was also advocacy for what our students want and what our faculty can bring to the university, the community, the state, and, really, the world, and it was partnerships across campuses and our regionals. When I drill down into looking at what I see as the excellence that we bring, it really is to identify areas where we are or can be national and global leaders, and every single part of Arts and Sciences has something unique to be able to contribute to that overall reputation. And so, we have a committee chaired by Rich Petty, who is a former Chair of Psychology and is one of our most amazing professors. He is on the list of the most 100 influential psychologists, alive or dead; so, Freud is on that list, too. So he was a perfect person to chair this excellence committee, to challenge leaders of our 38 departments and units to say, what is it that is uniquely Ohio State that you can get here and to drill down on that. We also produced a small brochure called "Facts and Figures About Arts and Sciences", and if you look at that, it highlights some external measures - and there's many ways to look at excellence - but some of the external measures show that we have over 25 programs in the top 25 in the world and over ten in the top ten, which is amazing in and of itself. But, you can come to Ohio State as a student and work with world class scholars, both in the classroom, in their labs in the field, etc. And I see the explosion of interest in coming to Ohio State partly because of those unique excellence experiences that we can bring.

When you say transparency, for instance, what does that mean in this context?

It really means laying out where we are in the changing world of higher ed, being straightforward with the challenges we might have budgetarily, in access and affordability - and I like to say access to excellence. That's what's unique about coming to Ohio State, because you can have access to so many different institutions, both profit and nonprofit, and what's different about our educational experience, I think, is that it's access affordability - those are a couple of the challenges that everyone is thinking about in higher ed - but it's access to excellence here at Ohio State. And so, I want to be transparent with those kinds of problems, because if we harness it and we get the leaders around campus - and anyone can be a leader if they want to help in the college this way, another part was accessibility, making sure faculty could come see me on Fridays, getting out and walking and meeting people in their offices, you learn a lot about that. When I first started doing that five years ago as the SBS Dean, I had a prominent economist say, what are you doing here? And then it wasn't too long after that where people would say, when are you coming back? And so, that's just been delightful. And you know, you might have a problem that you can solve for them, but it's also... you might be pondering something about, say, online education, or using virtual reality in the classroom or something like that, and they might know a whole lot more than I do. Usually they do, whatever the topic is. And so, that has been really terrific, and so by being transparent, both with the
opportunities, say, teaching with virtual reality in the classroom, such as one of our amazing history professors does now where you think you're in a civil rights march, or possible future where you're dissecting a frog and virtual reality, those kinds of opportunities, but also challenges. You know, students are coming with more and more credit from high school, and what does that mean for what we're offering at Ohio State? Should we be offering more four plus, or in this case, if they're coming with a year of college credit, three plus one degrees? Should we be offering the quality of education that we have at Ohio State to more of the students, not just in central Ohio, but in the whole state of Ohio? I don't know, at least it's a question I want people to talk about. I certainly don't presume to have the answers, but I love the diversity of ideas that come from having an open and transparent discussion.

David Staley 07:45
You started to mention these, and I wanted you to go into a little more detail about the challenges that you see the college facing.

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 07:51
So when I think about some of the challenges, College Credit Plus is one, and trying to match a seamless experience from high school to college. So for example -

David Staley 08:01
We should probably explain what College Credit Plus is.

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 08:03
Yes. So, College Credit Plus is the opportunity in high school to take college level credit that is paid for or subsidized by the state of Ohio, and this is happening in every state in the nation. And so that would be one challenge to make sure that the student doesn't take, you know, Calc I, Bio I, Political Science Intro, whatever it is, and then come to Ohio State and be ready for the second class, and then there's a gap; and we don't want students to experience that. So that's one example, and so one way we're addressing that is we have three departments that have jumped in to, essentially, train some of the high school teachers in those subjects. So, English, Physics, and Chemistry, I believe, this year are jumping into that. And that way, we won't see such a gap for students to be frustrated, to wonder why they're struggling, they may not be struggling in college, it may be that they just had a gap. So, that's one example, but there are other things like opening up our campus for more summer course offerings, the flexibility of online courses. One challenge that I am really excited about is certificates. So, the current governor has a challenge out for having 10,000 certificates during his first term in office, as I understand it. A certificate is just four classes, so about 16 credits; these can be taken before you have a college degree, they can be taken while you're a student, or they could be taken because you've already got your bachelor's degree and you're interested in learning more. And so, some of the certificates that we have planned, and I'll tell you about the first one that we already have on the books is on diversity, equity and inclusion. We have so many experts across Arts and Sciences, this is what they teach. This is what they do, social stratification and
learning about economic equity and learning about women, gender, sexuality studies. And so, that's our very first one, and this is a real service, I think, to the community, people already working that want to come back and say what have you done to support diversity, you can say I have, I actually have a certificate in that. And so, that's pretty exciting. But some of the other certificates that we're looking at that I'm really excited about - data visualization, geographic information systems, cultural competency, and language for travel and business, Somali culture in U.S. communities, genetics and health, quantitative risk management - really, the list kind of goes on and on. And there were over 40 certificates proposed by faculty across the college within a, probably a two month duration when we start talking about certificates. So this is a way to address some budget challenges, but fundamentally to help current students, but citizens of Ohio to respond to what our political leaders are interested in. So, some of our challenges are real opportunities as well.

David Staley 10:46
Sounds like an extension of the land grant mission in some ways.

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 10:48
Absolutely, I love our land grant mission. Even our GE, I would say, our general education curriculum, which we just went through reforming, certainly was a challenge; it always is, when you're looking at reforming something as major as the general education for 40,000 undergrad - just 20,000 alone in Arts and Sciences - but it impacts every student that comes through our doors. And we hadn't updated it for about 40 years, I believe. But one thing I love that ties into our land grant mission, the top level theme - so, we have a thematic general education - is our university motto, which is education for citizenship. And we mean citizenship very broadly and think of it as a global context too, as well as, you know, a citizen of the state and of the local area as well. So, there's... challenges are also opportunities, but they're not really opportunities if you don't bring everybody in for dialogue.

David Staley 11:40
So, you mentioned online education. What's the future look like for you, in terms of online education? Where do you see Ohio State going?

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 11:47
So, we have some online courses; I think we need to expand that, we have to continually update, you know, the current generation that's coming to Ohio State is called "Generation App" as a nickname, kind of tells you how familiar they probably are with the technology. We're not saying they always know how to use it, or how to use it the best, and that's part of our mission with everyone getting an iPad and what we're doing there. But, for online education, just walking around the Oval, one out of five of the classes students are taking who are here are taking an online class. And what I hear from the Student Advisory Board are a few things: one is that they like to be able to put in online classes, they're familiar with that kind of learning, they liked the flexibility it gives. More and more students are interested in that. They
can often find classes at the freshman and sophomore level, but when they get to the junior or senior level, they're seeing less of that. And I certainly wouldn't want Ohio State to be online completely, I mean, some of our best classes are those pedagogical, interactive, research-based, all of that courses. But there is a role, I think, for online education, I myself have taught online for a very long time. When I teach small writing classes online, I often get to know the students better than when I'm in class, because I teach it on interest groups in Congress, and they get to choose whatever interest group they want. They often choose very hot, controversial topics, and sometimes they will say things they wouldn't say in a room with me. And so, that's some ways that I get to know the students even better online, you know, you post pictures, videos, have chat rooms, etc. So - but it's an interesting way, I've always been interested in tech in my own classrooms. And so, online has went that way. But again, virtual reality, I think that's really exciting, too. It's not for everybody, but I want to allow those faculty who want to explore that medium, and for those students who want to try it, to be able to have that opportunity, and it does allow us to reach other students. I actually started teaching online when a couple of my students got called up for the Iraq War, and then I didn't want them to have to drop their classes. And the following quarter, because we were in quarters back then, was a winter quarter, and I had a student who had difficulty due to accessibility issues of getting to campus. And I'm like, Oh, my gosh, we really need to think more about this. So, that's how I got started in it, and then I've just always been interested in tech tools and changing things. And so, that part's been fun. I'm not saying I'm good with the tech tools, but I enjoy it.

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David Staley  14:14

So, it's sometimes said about the Arts and Sciences, especially for undergrads, why would you want to major in one of the Arts and Sciences; how do you get a job, how do you get a job studying, you know, biology or math or history or philosophy or something like that? What do you say to those folks about the career possibilities for majors in the Arts and Sciences?

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Janet Box-Steffensmeier  14:30

Right, well, two things. One is, I absolutely believe that the flexibility that we train students in in the Arts and Sciences, whichever major you have - and we have over 100 - that we are preparing you for the new world of work. It's that flexibility that we give students that's really going to make a difference. So, students today are expected to change careers seven to nine times - that's mind boggling to me. But in order to do that, you need to be trained broadly, because we're training students for jobs that we don't even know exist yet, in the short a time as a decade. And so, I believe heartily the Arts and Sciences is absolutely the best way to prepare a student going forward. And I also have seen students who need to pursue a passion, it's that calling that gets them excited and allows you to excel in whatever you choose to do. If you're forced in a different path that's not where your heart is calling you, I don't think you'll do as well in life, you know, looking 30, 40 years out. But if it's something you really enjoy doing, then I think you're going to be successful. The other thing I would tell you is that we made investments in career and professional success this year. And what I love about that is it's able to help students understand what those degree possibilities are, as well as parents. And it connects extremely well better than I think anywhere else on campus, with our alums coming back, and both seasoned alums who are at the top of their field, to the newly minted alums who are in their first or second job, and that connection has helped show students the possibilities.
So, for example, the career and professional success have a variety of programs, one is called "career communities". So, depending on what your degree is, you might fit in two or three different career communities, and you can learn about careers in those more broad general areas, rather than a specific.

David Staley 16:20
Such as, what are one of those categories? So, I want to talk about... you returned to the faculty, returned to teaching and research. But before we get there, I'm interested to know, why administration, what brought you into administration?

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 16:21
So, one of the categories might be on communication and jobs that you could get where you would be interacting in that field, or health careers, or there's one... I think, even in the sports area, because there's, you know, jobs in journalism and data analytics, there's just so many different jobs than just being a journalist, right, that might come to mind. And so, those career communities are really wonderful. The coffee chats are a way they bring back alums in small groups of, you know, like seven to ten students, you can really get to know the alums. They have this amazing program called "Match 50 Mentor" that matched 50 students with 50 mentors, the very first time it started; six months later, they're at 100, and they have a goal to, you know, match any student who wants a mentor. And the mentors, these alums, are coming back from, you know, East to West coast, they are so devoted to this program and coming back and meeting with their students. So, they're on fire, and they're there for the students and the parents, as well as the alums to show different paths forward with the job. But again, I think it's that nimbleness that we train our students with in Arts and Sciences that means this is, I think, the best job preparation. So, it really was feeling a debt to Ohio State, and feeling like I had gotten so much from Ohio State that I needed to serve and give back if asked. And it was exciting to try something new, and I knew I would get to meet colleagues such as yourself from all over campus. And so, that was really exciting. It- I'm a first generation college student, too, and so I thought this would be a really cool way to be able to serve students and get to know them and be able to hopefully have some macro changes that might be possible. And the Student Advisory Board has just been a terrific sounding board and brought issues everything from, you know, concerns about mental health and other national issues for our students to online education, to certificates. But they're really good at just being really blunt about what they need, what they see, and giving feedback, it really was a way to serve and give back and try something new.

David Staley 18:30
Well, and I know in your time as Dean, you've been an indefatigable supporter of this podcast, and I thank you for that, and I'm just curious: why? What was it that drew your attention to what we were doing here?

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 18:40
Well, it just matched so well because I wanted to be able to celebrate the excellence that we
Well, it just matched so well because I wanted to be able to celebrate the excellence that we have at Ohio State and tell our story. I really feel like the more that people know about Arts and Sciences, the more awestruck they are, whether it's a student, a parent, wherever it is. And some of the wonderful things that have come out of this podcast is the new Vice President for Research Morley Stone, who said he hasn't missed one yet. So, he's learning about the amazing research that happens in every sector of Arts and Sciences because we have, you know, over 900 faculty, so there's a lot to learn here, and I've been learning.

David Staley 19:15
I have many, many more to interview.

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 19:17
I know, I know. And as you know, a professional association picked up a podcast for a faculty member that they were highlighting, so we're having impact that way. We actually had a faculty member who had amazing offers to other places stayed and one thing he asked was, could I be on the podcast? So, you know you have a fan club building out there. But it really was a perfect vehicle to tell our story in the broadest way possible. I mean, this is archived, it's available whether you're in Hawaii, Australia, Germany, wherever you're at, and what a great way to learn about everything that's going on in Arts and Sciences. So, when I found out about what you guys were interested in doing, this was easy.

David Staley 19:55
It really was a nice connection, I think. So, let's talk about your return to the faculty. And so, first of all, tell us about your research, both what you've done and what you're going to be doing now, now that you have the time; because, of course, being an administrator, you don't have time to do research and teaching.

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 20:09
Yeah.

David Staley 20:09
So, let's start with research.

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 20:10
Yeah. So, I am excited. I'm a Buckeye, I'm never leaving Ohio State, and so I am excited to get back in the classroom and back on my research. I was able to keep my fingers in both when I was the Social Science Dean, but this year was a wash. And one of the projects I'd like to talk
about is one that I started while being Dean and that I'll return to, and it is looking at amicus curiae briefs. Those are -

**David Staley** 20:33
Oh. I should brush up on my Latin, okay.

**Janet Box-Steffensmeier** 20:35
These are "friend of the court" briefs that are filed before the Supreme Court, typically by interest groups, that's what I'm most interested in. And I've always been interested in studying coalitional behavior in politics; it is foundational to our system, as a democracy and as a representative government.

**David Staley** 20:54
So, coalitional - meaning?

**Janet Box-Steffensmeier** 20:56
Working together, whether it's individuals to be able to get your voice heard in the government, petition your government. And so, a lot of people look negatively on interest groups, and I have always thought they should be the white hats, not the black hats, we should look at them both ways. So, if you go clear back to Madison, James Madison, in "Federalist No. 10", he talks about liberty is to faction as air is to fire. So, if we want to have liberty, and we hopefully all agree on those fundamental principles in the U.S., then we are going to have factions, that is interest groups. But, I think these can be a real vehicle for positive change, too. And interest groups have been shown in the political science literature to impact every part of our government, so the executive branch - the congressional branch, we think of a lot as them going up to Congress and lobbying. But, it's the executive branch, it's the bureaucracy, it's the courts, the state and local level, and they have been shown to have more impact at different times than others and on different issues. And so, trying to figure out why and how that impacts our government is really always been an interest of mine, a part of my dissertation way back when. And so, one thing we have not been able to do very well, though, is to measure the impact of interest groups as well as we would like. So, we would often do surveys, or we would study one particular issue like environmental politics, or health care or something like that, and I really wanted to get something broader and that showed coordinated and purposeful action. So, you could look at who's working with whom by studying, maybe, campaign finance, interest group A and B are both giving to a member of Congress C; well, that doesn't mean they coordinated on that. In fact, they could be... say it's gun control, they could be on opposite sides of the spectrum. You could look at who registered to lobby a particular member of Congress - and again, that doesn't mean there's any coordination - but when you look at who wrote a brief to the Supreme Court, that is very purposeful, because it is a public record, you had to coordinate to agree on what was said in that brief. And so, what we did is we went back and collected data from the very first brief written in the United States in the 1930s. So, we have about 90 years worth of data now, over 100 OSU undergrads have worked on this project,
which is just amazing. That's another thing I love about Ohio State, is the ambitious undergrads who want to do research. So, I have a form on my website where students can fill out if they're interested, and one of my favorite stories from that was... so we did a lot of data scraping to get some of the original collection, about the 1980s, you just can't go back any further. So by data scraping, you mean...? Using computer tools to scrape data off of websites to figure out what the topic of the brief was, the different interest groups that wrote together, etc. But you get to a point where you can't scrape, and so we were sending students to the law library to use microfiche, and I had the student come back and say, "Do you know what microfiche is?", and I'm like, "I do." And so, for those who are listening who are younger than me, you know, you sit in front of this really big box, and you put little film strips through. So, they were reading court briefs written by interest groups and recording the information that way. But, it was just delightful, in one big giant document where we're sharing and double checking to make sure the data is accurate, but it's quite a resource now, and we've used that in some of the published work already.

David Staley 24:16
So, you scrape the data and you've created this database. So, how are you reading, how are you sort of analyzing these amicus briefs?

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 24:22
Yeah, so we use network analysis, so a methodological tool, to be able to say which groups are the most powerful, and often powerful in a network analysis will be measured by, for example, how central that group is, if you picture a network that you might see from -

David Staley 24:37
So, one node is larger than others or something like that.

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 24:39
Exactly, yeah. And so, that's how we measure it, and then we use that data to look at its impact on Supreme Court decision making. And what people had said before we did our work is they often just counted how many briefs were filed, which didn't really make sense to me, because otherwise everybody just write separately and, let's file a hundred briefs instead of ten. then. But what we could do is say, who wrote on that, and how influential and central are they in the network of people who are writing briefs and working in this interest group space? And so, that was pretty exciting, that was one of the first publications that came out on the data.

David Staley 25:15
And what sort of conclusions did you draw?
Janet Box-Steffensmeier 25:17
That absolutely it matters on who is writing and how central they are, and that has a factor on Supreme Court decision making, which is important for us to know for the health of our democracy.

David Staley 25:27
Yeah, what are those implications? You're doing this research, so how do we use this, or how is it being used?

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 25:31
Yeah, so we want to then step back and think about normative implications, about who is participating, who isn't participating, why they're participating, why they aren't participating; looking at factors like the membership of the groups, the income of the groups, what industries they're working in, to be able to draw some normative conclusions about the health of our democracy and the representative system that we have, and perhaps even think about different kinds of checks and balances we might need. We also led to some methodological innovations on the network analysis side, and so network analysis assumes that you can perfectly measure everything when you put in a model, and we just... absolutely no, that's not true. And so, in the interest group realm, ideology is very difficult to measure. And so, we did some modeling innovations to account for unobserved heterogeneity, so things you can't measure that show differences. And so, it was really cool, it's called a Frailty Exponential Random Graph Model, a "FERGM", and I think it's an important innovation that we're now actually applying to some healthcare data too, because we think that people might be interested in trying to look at smoking behavior based on who you hang out with, or obesity, common topics for network analysis. If your relatives and friends all smoke, are you more likely to smoke? And so, we're using this model so that they can get more accurate measures on the other variables that they care about too, such as health behaviors or heredity.

David Staley 26:57
Other research projects that you see in your near future?

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 27:00
Yeah, so I can't wait to jump back in on this one. I am co-authoring - all this work has been co-authored with former graduate students and undergraduate students, as well. And one thing that we are doing is we're actually using this data and the network analysis to try to get estimates of ideology for interest groups for the last - we're right now looking at 65 years, which people have basically said is not going to be doable, and we have a way to do it. And I told my grad student now who's tenured and the other students we've brought in, I said, we've got to get the framing of this paper, right, it's gonna be really important. And it was presented last week at a Political Networks Conference and won Best Poster.
Congratulations.

So, I'm really excited about that going forward. And so, I'll be returning to that, I have some National Science Foundation funding that I need to wrap up, and then we'll be able to think about new projects and new directions after that. But, the biggest one will be continuing with this amicus brief project.

You mentioned a class you have taught on interest groups in Congress, what sorts of classes will you be teaching?

Yeah, so interest groups in Congress, absolutely. I have taught the Introduction to American Government for years, it's kind of a norm in my department, once you get tenure, you do some of these intro classes. And that's been delightful. And I want to upgrade some of the things I do with, like, 360 degree videos and such. So, I'm really looking forward to that. And I am likely to teach a class called "Political Trials"; it was my favorite undergraduate class, and it's not taught at Ohio State, so I'm really looking forward to that too. And then, at the graduate level, I tend to teach methodological classes, so time series analysis or event history analysis and network analysis.

So, you do a lot of work, obviously, research and teaching on interest groups. Why, what got you interested in that? What got you interested in this field?

Yeah, so interest in political science really happened growing up in Iowa. My first political memory - this is something political scientists talk about - my first political memory was around seven, going with my dad to meet the stream of candidates that come through Iowa, being the first state with caucuses. And so, that really got me interested, and there's actually a little cluster of political scientists from the area I grew up in, and we have talked about that as well. And there are two neighboring counties, one county, it was almost impossible to get elected if you're a Democrat, the other county right next door, it was almost impossible to get elected if you're Republican. And I think that kind of dialogue and seeing that - and people were very politically engaged, certainly my dad was - is why I got interested in political science in the first place.
David Staley  29:33
Janet Box-Steppensmeier. Thank you.

Janet Box-Steppensmeier  29:36
Thank you.

Eva Dale  29:37
Voices from the Arts and Sciences is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug Dangler. I'm Eva Dale.