



ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

AAU STATEMENT ON NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION GRANT INQUIRIES

Following is a statement by the AAU Board of Directors on behalf of the Association of American Universities.

The House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology has now sent three letters to the Director of the National Science Foundation (NSF) asking for exhaustive information about grants issued by the agency for some 60 merit-reviewed projects. We are troubled by these inquiries and urge the Committee to recognize how this ill-defined investigation will harm the scientific enterprise we all support.

Congress has a duty to conduct constructive oversight of federal agency activities, and federal agencies such as NSF need to be transparent about their processes for reviewing and selecting grants. Our concern is that the Committee's current inquiry into the value of selected NSF grants, based primarily on their titles, is far from constructive. In fact, it is having a destructive effect on NSF and on the merit review process that is designed to fund the best research and to remove those decisions from the political process.

First, the Committee's demand for the names and comments of scientific reviewers is highly inappropriate. It violates the confidentiality guaranteed in the merit review process, thereby discouraging top scientific experts from participating in the important process of reviewing grants within their specific areas of expertise.

Our broader concern is this: that NSF will be pressured to fund only "safe" research that does not attract political attention; and that NSF peer reviewers will therefore reject potentially important but odd-sounding research proposals. Scientists and engineers, particularly young ones, should not be discouraged from pursuing unconventional, often groundbreaking scientific research – the kind that sometimes ends up winning Nobel Prizes and transforming science and society. Has NSF been perfect in making grant decisions for over 60 years? Of course not. But its record is superb, and its merit review process is the model for other countries as they try to compete with American science.

The choice of grants the Committee has targeted is certainly puzzling. Several projects are being investigated for no apparent reason other than the sound of their titles. Others are studies related to climate change or to the study of any countries other than the United States.

If the Committee wishes to override the merit review process or if it wants NSF to stop funding research related to certain issues, its members owe it to the American public to say clearly what they are doing: substituting their judgment for the expertise of scientists on the vital question of what research the United States should support. The long history of success at NSF in making U.S. science the best in the world would be undermined by such a change.

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