Word clouds visually represent keyword frequency and importance in textual material. For example, a report on regulatory burdens related to federally funded academic research might have a word cloud featuring these words: burdensome, diminishing, duplicative, inefficient, reassessing, recalibrating, harmonizing and optimizing, with “harmonizing” being the most prominent and important term.

This recently published report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NAS), *Optimizing the Nation’s Investment in Academic Research: A New Regulatory Framework for the 21st Century* (doi: 10.17226/21824), was generated at the request of the U.S. Congress. In 2014, Congress asked the NAS to study the regulations and policies of all federal agencies supporting basic and applied research at higher education institutions. The U.S. Department of Education and the National Institutes of Health sponsored the study. The NAS Committee on Science, Technology, and Law and the Board on Higher Education and Workforce created the ad hoc Committee on Federal Relations and Reporting Requirements: A New Framework for Research Universities in the 21st Century, and charged it with addressing widespread concerns that “…federal oversight and its accompanying burdens raise significant questions about whether the nation is optimizing its investment in our extraordinary research enterprise” (p. xi). As part of its task, the committee did determine that the government-academic research partnership is under stress, an unsurprising finding given that academic researchers seeking and securing federal research support interact with over 20 federal agencies that all have differing regulatory and administrative requirements.

To set the stage for the study, the committee identified four constructs that have defined the federal government and academic research partnership setting for almost 70 years: both parties are partners in the scientific enterprise; the primary goal of federally sponsored research is discovery for the public good; both parties share the obligation to produce high-quality science using the highest ethical and scientific standards; and, over time, research institutions have absorbed a disproportionate amount of the shared research costs. Within this framework, the committee developed nine overarching findings and four subsequent recommendations for rebuilding the research enterprise partnership between the federal government and academic research institutions. The common theme woven throughout the nine findings is that, although federal regulations related to research remain critically important for ensuring adequate protections and responsible stewardship, the increasing number and complexity of these regulations have had the unintended effects of hampering researchers’ productivity and increasing the administrative burden placed on higher education institutions.

The following four recommendations developed by the committee focus on remedying the current situation and achieving greater harmonization throughout the research enterprise by matching findings to action items.

1. “The regulatory regime governing federally funded academic research should be critically reexamined and recalibrated.” The phrase “regulatory regime” encompasses laws, regulations, rules, policies, guidances and requirements across the research spectrum (human and animal subjects; audits; export controls; select agents and toxins; and Uniform Guidance revisions, including subrecipient monitoring and procurement micro-purchases). The recommendation identifies the key players needed to carry out this substantial task: the U.S. Congress, inspector generals, White House Office of Budget and Management, the U.S. president, federal research agencies, and academic research institutions (p. 6-7).

2. “…Research institutions must demand the highest standards in institutional and individual behavior. This can only be achieved if universities foster a culture of integrity among academic leaders, faculty, postdoctoral trainees, students, staff, and institutional administrators, and mete out appropriate sanctions in instances where behavior deviates from the ethical and professional norms of the institution and of the academic research community. Universities that deviate from or fail to enforce the norms of behavior should be sanctioned.” This recommendation references the creation of a Research Policy Board, more fully described in Recommendation 4, to develop policies and procedures in this area (p. 13).
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3. “Inspectors general responsibilities should be rebalanced so that appropriate consideration is given both to uncovering waste, fraud, and abuse and to advising on economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. The relationship between inspectors general and research institutions should be based on a shared commitment to advancing the nation’s interest through a dynamic and productive research enterprise” (p. 13-14).

4. “The committee recommends the creation of a new mechanism, to include an active public-private forum and a designated official within government, to foster a more effective conception, development, and harmonization of research policies.” The new mechanism refers to a new entity, the Research Policy Board, and a new position, “Associate Director, Academic Research Enterprise.” within the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. Committee members envision the Research Policy Board functioning as a “bridging relationship” between multiple stakeholders, such as Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, federal funding agencies and academic research institutions. The new position of associate director would coordinate the revision of existing policies and the development of new ones related to the research enterprise partnership (p. 14).

The committee envisions that the proposed framework offers an opportunity to “… create effective and proactive regulations geared to the needs of 21st century research” (p. 194). Furthermore, the committee reiterates that the framework is not intended to increase bureaucracy, it is to “… make the federal regulatory regime simpler, more effective, and more harmonized across research funding agencies” (p. 194). The proposed Research Policy Board could function as the place and space for the discussions needed to formulate decisions about best practices for achieving the vision of a more harmonized regulatory structure.

Committee Chair Larry Faulkner presented a summary of the report at the August 2016 conference of the National Council of University Research Administrators. He said in his concluding remarks, “Congress, the president and the agencies have an opportunity for course correction that can yield significantly greater value to the public from the nation’s investment in research. We hope our recommendations will guide that effort.”

Other voices have joined the chorus about recalibrating the federal government and academic research partnership. The Innovation Imperative, a coalition initially consisting of 250 representatives from industry, higher education institutions and associations, issued a call to action in 2015 advocating for Congress to address issues that affect the U.S. standing as a global innovation leader. The coalition had grown to include more than 500 endorsements by 2016, with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities among them, to reiterate the importance of streamlining and harmonizing research regulations, among other recommendations. The Association of American Universities, an organization of 62 leading research universities in the United States and Canada, issued a statement on August 8, 2016, urging presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump to advance policies that promote innovation and economic and national security, including policies to reduce costly and duplicate regulatory and compliance requirements.

Problems posed by regulatory and compliance burdens now have been researched and documented. Potential solutions have been identified and recommended. It remains to be seen whether the various stakeholders can effect the substantial changes necessary to harmonize and fully optimize the federal and academic research partnership. 

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