

MORE THAN THE BOTTOM LINE

Non-budgetary Policy Changes Can Affect University Research

By Frank Graeff 

In an era of declining state support, many universities are anxiously monitoring cuts to federal research budgets. However, current policy discussions in Washington can drastically alter government research at universities without touching budgets. The following policies could affect who can apply for grants, how those funds can be used, and what topics are eligible for federal funding.

Recipient Restrictions

Earlier this year, the U.S. House sent a bill to the Senate to reshape the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) governing science authority and to limit how EPA grant recipients participate in federal advisory boards.

The EPA Science Advisory Board is a 48-person group of experts providing independent scientific counsel to the agency. Most members are academic scientists, but 11 currently come from nongovernmental organizations, state governments and private companies. The bill would increase the proportion of industry and state government voices on the panel and prevent EPA grant recipients from serving on the board. It would also bar departing members from receiving EPA grants for three years.

Proponents say this avoids conflicts of interest when the board reviews science related to member research, and the bill enhances diversity of opinions on the board. Detractors argue this bill discourages qualified researchers from joining the board by risking their research funding, and denies the EPA relevant subject matter expertise. Undoubtedly, this bill would change how EPA grant recipients interact with the government, affecting researchers' decisions to seek funding.

Previous versions of this bill died in the Senate after a veto threat from President Obama. President Trump has not commented on the legislation.

Indirect Costs

The Trump administration recently proposed capping indirect cost rates—which support administration, equipment, electricity and other overhead costs for grantees—for the National Institutes of Health at 10 percent of funding. The administration defended the cuts, arguing indirect costs represent “inefficiencies” that support “something other than the research that’s being done.” While senators have rejected this effort or any other hard cap, legislators are examining current practices.

At a recent committee meeting about indirect cost reductions in general, a National Science Foundation (NSF) director noted universities lose more money than they recoup through federal

research funding, and indirect cost rates vary greatly by institution. University administrators warned that any reimbursement reduction would fall hardest on smaller institutions, who can least afford them.

However, other witnesses disagreed, claiming current overhead funding practices exacerbate differences between wealthy and poorer institutions. These witnesses suggested Congress should consider a capped reimbursement rate and preferential treatment for applicants offering lower rates.

Research Topic Restrictions

Debate rages over whether NSF-funded research is advancing the “national interest.” Last year, the House passed a bill limiting NSF grants to applications that supported certain goals, including the following: economic competitiveness; public health; science, technology, engineering and mathematics workforce development; scientific literacy; national defense; or “promotion of the progress of science.”

Critics say the legislation would stymie research that does not have an immediate application, and decimate research in the social, physical, environmental and mathematical sciences that may not immediately translate into tangible products. While the language was watered down in the final bill, some “national interest” criteria were folded into the existing requirement for NSF-funded research to have “broader impacts.” Legislators expect a measurable effect in NSF awarding practices.

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Summary

Whether by modifying incentives for researchers to apply for grants, limiting expenses that can be charged to the government, or prioritizing specific goals, changes in non-budgetary policy affect how university researchers approach grant applications. University presidents should know how the shifting political landscape could affect the productivity and careers of scientists at their institutions. **P**

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