



ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

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AAU BOARD STATEMENT CRITIZES HOUSE SCIENCE COMMITTEE NSF INQUIRY

The leadership of the [Association of American Universities](#) (AAU), which represents 60 leading public and private U.S. research universities, today said that a House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology inquiry targeting some 60 specific National Science Foundation (NSF) research grants “is having a destructive effect on NSF and on the merit review process.”

“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,” the [AAU Board of Directors](#) said in [a statement issued on behalf of the association](#). “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.”

The Science Committee has sent three letters to NSF designating the targeted research grants by title and asking for information not only on the research being conducted but also on specifics of the merit review process for the grants, including the names and comments of scientific reviewers. The Committee has not explained how it selected the research grants.

The AAU Board statement asserts that “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.”

The statement continues, “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.”

The statement concludes, “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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