

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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April 26, 2013

Hon. Lamar Smith
Chairman
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
U.S. House of Representatives
2321 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman,

Your letter of April 25 to the Acting Director of the National Science Foundation (NSF), Dr. Cora Marrett, has provoked me to write to you.

At our hearing on April 17, both Dr. Marrett and the Chairman of the National Science Board (NSB), Dr. Dan Arvizu, offered to engage with the Committee in a meaningful discussion of the mission of NSF and how the agency's merit review process can best be constructed to support that mission. Rather than entering into that dialogue, your letter marks the beginning of an investigative effort, the implications of which are profound. This is the first step on a path that would destroy the merit-based review process at NSF and intrudes political pressure into what is widely viewed as the most effective and creative process for awarding research funds in the world. It is this process that has supported the growth of the American research university system and it is this process that has established the American research enterprise as the most innovative of our age.

No system constructed of, for, and by humans is infallible. But for decades the world has held the NSF's peer review process as the gold standard for how scientific proposals should be judged and funded. This applies equally to all fields of science, including the social and behavioral sciences. In this context, the term "peer" is not simply a fellow citizen as we encounter on a courtroom jury. It means very specifically another scientist with expertise in at least some aspect of the science being proposed. Politicians, even a distinguished Chairman of the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, cannot be "peers" in any meaningful sense.

In your letter, you say that "based on my review of NSF-funded studies, I have concerns regarding some grants approved by the Foundation." Based on your personal assessment you then ask NSF to provide to the Committee the technical reviews and program officer evaluations for five specific grants, all of them in the social and behavioral sciences. In

the history of this Committee, no Chairman has ever put themselves forward as an expert in the science that underlies specific grant proposals funded by NSF. In the more than two decades of Committee leadership that I have worked with—Chairmen Brown, Walker, Sensenbrenner, Boehlert, Gordon, and Hall—I have never seen a Chairman decide to go after specific grants simply because the Chairman does not believe them to be of high value.

Interventions in grant awards by political figures with agendas, biases, and no expertise is the antithesis of the peer review processes. By making this request, you are sending a chilling message to the entire scientific community that peer review may always be trumped by political review. You also threaten to compromise the anonymity that is crucial to the frank and open exchange of comments and critiques during the review process, and in doing so, further compromise the integrity of the merit review process. How can future participants in the peer review process have confidence that their work will remain confidential when the Chairman of the Science, Space, and Technology Committee has shown that probing specific awards absent any allegation of wrong-doing may become the way business is done?

Like you, I recognize that NSF grants come from taxpayer dollars, and as such, that recipients of those grants have a responsibility back to the taxpayers. But I also believe that: 1) the progress of science itself – across all fields, including the social and behavioral sciences – is in the interest of the taxpayer; and 2) that NSF’s Broader Impact criterion is the right way to hold the *individual grantee* accountable. As part of the *COMPETES Reauthorization Act of 2010*, out of concern that some NSF-funded scientists did not take this responsibility seriously enough, this Committee enacted a requirement for NSF to clarify and strengthen the Broader Impacts criterion. In response, NSF took up a review of both the intellectual and broader impacts criteria and after extensive community input and debate, updated their guidance to the Director of NSF.

In turn, the Director implemented new policy guidance to the grantee community and merit-review panels only this past January. I encourage you to let this new policy take hold and then return to this area in a year or two with an appropriate oversight effort. Instead, through your document request, coupled with your “High Quality Research Act” proposal, you are taking steps that could erode NSF’s 60-year old peer review process at the same time that your legislative proposal would undermine NSF’s core mission as a basic research agency. I am sure this is not your intention, but intentions do not always predict outcomes and the path you are leading the Committee onto is very dangerous.

In 1950, Congress established the National Science Foundation "to promote the progress of science; to advance the national health, prosperity, and welfare; to secure the national defense..." The intent, however, was never that every single grant funded by NSF would meet all of these criteria, but that in the aggregate, the taxpayers’ investments in NSF over time would achieve all of them. And they have, in spades.

The moment you compromise both the merit review process and the basic research mission of NSF is the moment you undo everything that has enabled NSF to contribute so profoundly to our national health, prosperity, and welfare. An unavoidable consequence

would also be a fundamental attack on our universities as bastions of inquiry and discovery.

I cannot stand by silently as you continue this political intrusion into one of our Nation's and indeed, one of the world's most important scientific organizations. I ask that you withdraw your letter to Dr. Marrett. I stand ready to work with you to identify a less destructive, but more effective, effort to hold NSF accountable to the requirements laid out in law.

Sincerely,



EDDIE BERNICE JOHNSON
Ranking Member
Committee on Science, Space, & Technology

Cc: Dr. Cora Marrett
Acting Director, National Science Foundation