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Assault on peer review a new threat

On October 17, Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) introduced to the Senate U.S. Committee of Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs a bill titled "BASIC Research Act." This apparent innocent title covers the real intention of this legislation – an attempt to defund basic research and make it subject to partisan politics.

This legislation would change the way grant proposals are evaluated by all federal agencies, from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). These and other federal agencies are the main funders of scholarly work in higher education in this country. How does Paul intend to do that? According to the bill he introduced, these agencies will be mandated to include in their peer-review panels an "expert" in a field unrelated to the research proposed in the grant application in question who could not have worked at or been affiliated with a college or university for 10 years prior to the grant review. In other words, someone who is not really connected to higher education.

How an "expert" who has no affiliation to a scholarly institution is to be located is not explained. The bill will also mandate the inclusion of a "taxpayer advocate" to the peer-review panels who would consider "the likely returns on the research. To understand the absurdity of this bill, consider just two examples. In 1866, an obscure monk named Gregor Mendel, working in a monastery in what is today the Czech Republic, published a paper on plant hybridization that established the fundamental laws of genetics, a science that revolutionized agriculture, animal breeding, medicine, and many other fields which fundamentally changed for the best the way we live

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today. The importance of his research was not recognized until the year 1900.

In 1905, an obscure patent officer in Switzerland named Albert Einstein published four papers that fundamentally changed the way we understand the universe, from the conversion of matter into energy to the law of relativity. It also took years for the scientific community to recognize the significance of his work.

Now imagine an "expert" without an affiliation to higher education and a "tax advocate" evaluating grant proposals in areas that are so specialized that only a handful of real scholars can really understand the significance of the grant proposal even by reading its title.

So why is a conservative senator – the type who usually rejects government regulations – is proposing adding even more? Is it because the funding of scholarly work is getting out of control? Not really.

Take the example of the National Science Foundation. That agency has an office of the Inspector General, which investigates waste, fraud, and abuse of NSF funds, as well as examining allegations of research misconduct. This is on top of a very thorough peer-review process in which scores of real experts weigh in the quality of the proposal, its impact to society, adequateness of its budget, and many other factors. In fact, last year only 24 percent of the proposals to that agency were funded and virtually all of them were asked to make important changes in order not only to improve

the studies scientific merits, but also their requested budgets.

All of us who have ever served on an NSF panel know how thorough the process is, and that only a small fraction of proposals submitted for the first time are funded. Not only that, but larger, multi-million dollar proposals are even more thoroughly vetted by several panels and include site inspection visits.

Yet, Paul's bill intends to eliminate the office of the Inspector General at the NSF and transfer its authority (as well as its budget and staff) to a new "Office of the Inspector General and Taxpayer Advocate for Research." The mission of this new office? To comb through NSF's portfolio of top-rated proposals and chose a "random" sample to determine "if the research will deliver value to the taxpayer." The office would also have veto power. That is, no proposal that it finds wanting could be funded by NSF.

The arguments used by Paul to push his proposed bill are phony. In a hearing on the legislation last month titled, "Broken Beakers: Federal Support for Research," Paul cited studies previously identified by Republican colleagues as "silly science," such as "shrimp on a treadmill." Actually, the shrimp study in question is part of a study that looks at how the immune systems of shrimp respond to global warming and pollution, two ideas that many conservative politicians are allergic to. Given that a good portion of what we eat comes from aquatic organisms, this research would benefit food consumption and human health. Further, the cost of the treadmill is only \$50.

Paul asked during the hearing, "How does this happen? More accurately, how does it continue to happen?" He blamed a "publish or per-

ish" mind-set in academe. He also blamed NSF policies that allow the investigators submitting the grant proposals to recommend reviewers. Yet, the agency can (and does) reject many of these recommendations. Not only that, but the NIH does not even offer that option to the researchers submitting a grant proposal while having a second peer-review tier, known as the advisory committee review, determining the value of a proposal to the mission of NIH. The advisory committee includes both scientific experts and members of the public.

So far, Paul's bill has been referred to committee but has not advanced further. Sen. James Lankford (R-OK), chairman of the full Senate committee on government oversight, used a more restrained tone in critiquing current practices at federal research agencies. He acknowledged that the government has a role to play in supporting science, yet voiced concerns about whether there is a level playing field. On the other hand, the ranking Democrat on the panel, Sen. Gary Peters (D-MI), defended both the way government funds research and the value of that research.

The problem is that given what has been going on in this the country for the last year, anything seems possible. There is no question that this is a clear attempt to inject partisan politics into the main venue by which scholarly work is supported in this country, a country what used to be the model for the world on how research in higher education was supported and how it benefitted society.

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