AAU COMMENTS ON “UNDER THE MICROSCOPE” REPORT ON NSF

Following is a statement by the Association of American Universities on “Under the Microscope,” a report on the National Science Foundation issued recently by Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK).

The National Science Foundation plays a critical role in our nation’s scientific and innovation enterprises, and its leaders must manage it with efficiency and integrity. The Office of Management and Budget has consistently given the agency high marks for management over the last decade, among the highest of all agencies.

“Under the Microscope,” a report issued last week by Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK), while acknowledging the importance of NSF research, not only undermines this outstanding record but also marginalizes the outstanding NSF-supported science that helps to make our country strong.

With respect to management issues, it is worth pointing out that Office of Management and Budget Director Mitch Daniels called NSF in 2001 one of the “true centers of excellence in this government” and that as recently as 2008, NSF received among the highest management ratings from the Bush Administration’s OMB. As with any large, complex institution, a few management issues have arisen, and NSF has addressed these issues.

It is disconcerting to see a Congressional report misrepresent NSF’s multi-year granting process in a way that makes this efficient agency look profligate. The report suggests that peer reviewed, multi-year grants awarded to scientists are somehow being wasted or should be returned to the Treasury. In fact, NSF research grants are typically forward-funded for three to five years to ensure stable and efficient support that is not disrupted by the annual appropriations process. This is smart stewardship of taxpayers’ dollars.

Perhaps even more important, this report distorts real and useful science. It is all too easy to make specific research sound “funny” and therefore wasteful. However, the grants cited in the report were peer reviewed and are intended to address real societal challenges and scientific issues. Sometimes the “funniest” sounding research leads to important discoveries that improve our health, grow our economy, or ensure our national security.

For example, the development of a robot that folds towels is actually an important step in producing a new generation of robotic devices that could, according to its lead researcher, lead to a new generation of robotic devices that could increase the independence of elderly and sick people and protect our soldiers in combat. The research involving shrimp is an obvious source of amusement, but it is serious research that seeks to find out how marine animals cope with increased
environmental stress. (For other examples of such research, see the first two issues of AAU’s “Scientific Enquirer” at http://www.aau.edu/research/societal_benefits.aspx.)

“Under the Microscope” recommends elimination of NSF’s Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE) directorate. The research supported by the SBE directorate is critical to addressing some of the most important issues facing our society, all of which involve human behavior and have elements involving economics, education, political behavior, psychology, and other fields funded by SBE. Finding solutions to national problems ranging from addressing our economic challenges to achieving energy independence, from combating obesity and other diseases to combating terrorism, requires the kind of research funded by this directorate. Eliminating it would diminish our country’s ability to address these and other critical issues.

Finally, the Coburn report states that NSF’s STEM education initiatives duplicate the activities of other agencies and implies that NSF should leave those activities to others. In fact, STEM education is a part of the mission of NSF by statute, and it has great expertise in this field. Indeed, the Department of Education employs educational models developed by NSF.

“Under the Microscope” provides an inaccurate picture of one of our nation’s most effective and important agencies. It is our hope that it does not undermine the critical research and education that NSF supports on behalf of the nation.

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The Association of American Universities is an association of 60 U.S. and two Canadian research universities organized to develop and implement effective national and institutional policies supporting research and scholarship, graduate and professional education, undergraduate education, and public service in research universities.