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CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE  NEW

The House met today in pro forma session and will meet periodically through the August recess.

Like the House, the Senate will meet periodically in pro forma session during August. It will resume business on Tuesday September 6.

BUDGET & APPROPRIATIONS

OMB ISSUES GUIDANCE FOR AGENCY FY13 BUDGET SUBMISSIONS  NEW

White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Director Jacob Lew on August 17 issued OMB’s budget guidance for FY13, directing each federal agency to submit to OMB a proposed FY13 budget that cuts discretionary spending by five percent from its FY11 level and to identify additional discretionary spending cuts that would lower the budget by 10 percent from the FY11 level. The goal is to “provide options to support the President’s commitment to cut waste and reorder priorities to achieve deficit reduction while investing in those areas critical to job creation and economic growth.”

Director Lew cautions agencies against proposing to achieve the cuts by “across-the-board reductions or cuts to mandatory spending in appropriations bills, reclassifications of existing discretionary spending to mandatory, or enactment of new user fees to offset existing spending.”

At the same time, agencies may identify programs to expand or protect because they “provide the best opportunity to enhance economic growth.” The memorandum concludes, “I know this will be a difficult year, but it will also offer an opportunity to make the hard decisions to invest where we can get the most done and pare back in other areas.”
A new study released by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) shows a significant gap in the success rate of white and black scientists in receiving NIH R01 research grants.

The report, published August 18 in Science, analyzed more than 83,000 R01 applications submitted between the years 2000 to 2006. It showed that even when one controlled for such factors as type of institution, the applicant’s training, previous funding record, and publication record, there remained an inexplicable 10 percent disparity in awards to black researchers, who already represent a very small percentage (1.4 percent) of NIH applicants. Such a disparity in funding did not seem to exist for other underrepresented minorities, such as Hispanic and Asian applicants.

A companion news article in Science suggests that some possibilities for the disparity might be subtle biases based on name or colleges attended, or varying access to mentors or research collaborations.

NIH Director Francis Collins expressed concern about the results of the study both in a response published in the magazine and during a conference call of stakeholders held the afternoon the report was released. He said the disparity is “unacceptable” and is an indication “that NIH’s current approaches and those of other stakeholders have not gone far enough to facilitate and encourage the recruitment and advancement of underrepresented minorities in biomedical research.” He vowed to more rigorously assess the problem and take action to solve it.

The first step in doing so was announced on August 17 with the formation of a working group to the Advisory Committee to the Director on the diversity of biomedical research. Dr. Collins also announced in his response in Science that NIH has formed an internal task force to examine the issue. Following up on one of the other findings of the paper—namely, that serving as a peer reviewer is highly correlated with successful grant applications—NIH also has begun a program to engage junior faculty, particularly from underrepresented groups, in the study section process.

Another perspective, published in ScienceCareers, looks at the challenges and opportunities for minority scientists in identifying mentors and serving on review panels.

On a related issue, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on August 17 issued a request for information (RFI) on the future of the biomedical research workforce. Comments from the biomedical research community and from the public at large will inform the deliberations of the working group of the Advisory Committee to the Director, which has been charged with creating a “sustainable and diverse” model of the biomedical research workforce and making “recommendations for actions that NIH should take to support a future sustainable biomedical infrastructure.” The panel is co-chaired by Princeton University President Shirley Tilghman.

Among the many issues that the working group is considering are the length of postdoctoral training, the attractiveness of a biomedical research career, whether students should be trained on research versus training grants, and the utility of professional staff scientist positions.
AAU will submit comments to the panel; comments are due by October 7.

AAU AND COGR COMMENT ON DFAR RULE FOR SAFEGUARDING UNCLASSIFIED DEFENSE INFORMATION

AAU and the Council on Governmental Relations (COGR) submitted comments to the Department of Defense (DOD) on August 16 regarding the agency’s proposed rule on safeguarding unclassified DOD information under the Defense Acquisitions Regulations System (DFARS).

The comment letter expresses appreciation to the Department for its responsiveness to concerns raised previously by the two associations regarding proposed DFAR rules, particularly for the added clarity in the revised definition of fundamental research. However, the letter also proposes language to clarify that the research performer and contracting office should determine if a project is fundamental research, not the prime contractor.

Additionally, the letter expresses concern that the Enhanced Safeguarding Clause in the proposed rule could end up requiring universities to use separate, highly restricted computer systems and networks for work associated with DOD contracts. Such systems are typically used for classified research, not for unclassified work done at the nation’s universities. The two associations urge the Department to review the appropriateness of applying increased controls, particularly since government-wide guidance is pending.

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