

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

2321 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6301

(202) 225-6371
<http://science.house.gov>

April 17th, 2025

Sethuraman Panchanathan
Director
National Science Foundation
2415 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dear Director Panchanathan,

I write to you to convey my assessment of an inflammatory and unscientific report issued last October criticizing National Science Foundation (NSF) grants. I urge you to disregard its so-called findings in your grantmaking decisions. Senator Ted Cruz published a report (the “Cruz Report”) that claimed that over 10% of NSF grants awarded during the Biden-Harris Administration funded “questionable projects that promoted DEI or pushed neo-Marxist perspectives.”¹ This is demonstrably false, and it is imperative that NSF is not intimidated into accepting these vacuous findings and undermining its merit review process by substituting the Cruz Report’s slander for expert opinion on meritorious proposals. I request that you review the attached report, protect NSF’s gold-standard merit review, and be transparent about the post hoc grant review that you are currently undertaking.

Months after the publication of the Cruz Report, the database of “questionable” grants was published, and my staff conducted an assessment of that database, with a methodology reviewed by subject matter experts. The findings of that assessment are detailed in the attached report, which my staff prepared at my direction. While it was clear at face value that the claim that 10% of NSF grants were funding “DEI” and “neo-Marxism” was false, the attached report confirms that. Most of the grants listed in the Cruz Report were flagged because of the descriptions of broader impacts work. As you know, it is legally required that every NSF proposal describe how the project will include activities that benefit society, which – statutorily – may include anything from technology transfer activities to “expanding the participation of women and individuals

¹ “Division. Extremism. Ideology. How the Biden-Harris NSF Politicized Science,” U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation, accessed here: <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/services/files/4BD2D522-2092-4246-91A5-58EEF99750BC>.

from groups underrepresented in STEM.”² You personally have been a fierce³ advocate⁴ for expanding⁵ access⁶ to STEM opportunities. Therefore, it should disturb you that Senator Cruz – a onetime champion of the Hidden Figures⁷ – is villainizing the very efforts that bring in the “missing millions” you have advocated for throughout your tenure as NSF Director.

It is reprehensible, though not surprising, that Senator Cruz is opposed to broadening participation work and, as described in the attached report, is opposed to grants awarded to colleges and universities that note their status as minority-serving, historically Black, or women’s institutions. The basic scientific errors in the Cruz Report are more surprising, and they perfectly illustrate why it would be disastrous to align NSF grantmaking decisions with Senator Cruz’s preferences. NSF merit review is the gold standard for the world. Program officers identify subject matter experts to apply the intellectual merit and broader impacts criteria approved by the National Science Board. This process draws upon a wealth of expertise to ensure that NSF funds research that advances knowledge and benefits society. Every single one of the grants in the Cruz Report’s database passed these rigorous standards. The Science Committee, on a bipartisan basis, has encouraged continued experimentation and reform of the NSF merit review process to ensure it remains the gold standard as science continues to evolve. But the fundamentals remain solid. You must uphold the merit review process and reject the Senator’s demands that NSF’s standards be warped by politicization.

You, of course, understand that merit review is the foundation for NSF’s success. That is why it was so shocking to see that NSF is undertaking a review of active grants in response to the flurry of executive orders issued earlier this year.^{8,9} I am fully aware that the priorities of each Administration differ, and I am not so naïve to think that the Trump Administration would be

² 42 USC 1862p-14: *Broader Impacts Review Criterion*.

(n.d.). [https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=\(title:42%20section:1862p-14%20edition:prelim\)](https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=(title:42%20section:1862p-14%20edition:prelim)).

³ “NSF funds over \$50M in new partnerships to broaden participation in materials science,” National Science Foundation, July 25, 2024, accessed here: <https://www.nsf.gov/news/nsf-funds-over-50m-new-partnerships-broaden>.

⁴ Director Sethuraman Panchanathan, “World-class science is shaped by a wide range of perspectives. Our nation needs every person who is interested in pursuing a STEM career to be able to do so. Find resources, funding & more through @NSF’s Broadening Participation in STEM initiative: bit.ly/44SKwme,” X, July 24, 2023, accessed here: <https://x.com/NSFDrPanch/status/1683537656293015553>.

⁵ “EPSCoR conference drew 500+ attendees, including National Science Foundation Director,” University of Nebraska-Lincoln, October 28, 2024, accessed here: <https://newsroom.unl.edu/announce/snr/18089/98107>.

⁶ Adam D. Cohen, “NSF Director Lays Out Vision for Future of U.S. Science,” American Association for the Advancement of Science, February 18, 2021, accessed here: <https://www.aaas.org/news/nsf-director-lays-out-vision-future-us-science>.

⁷ “Sen. Cruz participates in unveiling of the new ‘Hidden Figures Way’ street sign in front of NASA’s headquarters,” Ted Cruz, June 14, 2029, accessed here: <https://www.cruz.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sen-cruz-participates-in-unveiling-of-the-new-and-145hidden-figures-way-and-146-street-sign-in-front-of-nasa-and-146s-headquarters>.

⁸ Dan Garisto, Max Kozlov, “Exclusive: how NSF is scouring research grants for violations of Trump’s orders,” *Nature*, February 3, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-00365-z>

⁹ Carolyn Y. Johnson, Scott Dance, Joel Achenbach, “Here are the words putting science in the crosshairs of Trump’s orders,” *Washington Post*, February 4, 2025, accessed here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/2025/02/04/national-science-foundation-trump-executive-orders-words/>.

eager to fund future work that acknowledges the existence of people of color, women, LGBTQ+ communities, disabled individuals, and scores of others who do not align with the President's narrow view of Americans. However, threatening existing work that has passed the merit review process is galling. It was all the more disturbing to find that every single word reported to be in NSF's grant-search word bank was listed in the Cruz Report's appendix of search terms. This was the list that flagged concussion research for using the word "trauma," leopard seal research for using the word "female," and polymer research for referring to the nucleation "barrier"; all three of these keywords are supposedly being used by NSF to comb through existing grants, per media reports. This is primarily concerning because it is a betrayal of NSF's own merit review process, but I would be remiss not to note that it is a colossal waste of time for NSF's intelligent and overstretched workforce to be picking through thousands of already-funded grants just because they include words that hurt Senator Cruz's feelings.

I know that you have great respect for NSF and its gold-standard merit review process. I also know that NSF, along with the entirety of the U.S. federal scientific enterprise, is under constant attack by this Administration. As Ranking Member of the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, I wholeheartedly support the mission of NSF. For that reason, I request more information on the process NSF is undertaking to review current and future grants for alignment with the Trump Administration's values. Please respond to the following by April 25, 2025:

1. Describe the process NSF is using to evaluate existing grants, including any list of words being used to flag grants and the methodology to determine if a grant is problematic.
2. Describe the process NSF used to determine the list of words it is using to flag existing grants for review.
3. What are the potential consequences for a grant recipient that has been flagged in NSF's review of existing awards? How is NSF determining what consequences will be levied in each instance?
4. Is there an appeals process for grant recipients whose awards have been flagged? If so, please describe that process.
5. Will NSF publish a list of grants that have been terminated as a result of a post-award review?
6. Is NSF updating its guidance to advise applicants on what words are considered a violation of the executive orders influencing NSF's award decisions?

Pursuant to Rule X of the House of Representatives, the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology "shall review and study on a continuing basis laws, programs, and Government activities relating to nonmilitary research and development."¹⁰ The Committee possesses jurisdiction over the National Science Foundation.¹¹ If you have any questions regarding this

¹⁰ [119 First Session House Rules](#).

¹¹ *Id.*

letter, please contact Sara Palasits or Albert Hinman with the Committee's Minority staff at (202) 225-6375. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Zoe Lofgren', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Zoe Lofgren
Ranking Member
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

CC: Brian Babin
Chairman
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

National Science Board Members