



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Full Committee Markup of:
H.R. 144, the “Supporting Early-Career Researchers Act”

Tuesday, March 9, 2021

As Science, Space, and Technology Committee Members heard from a panel of experts in a hearing last month, the U.S. research enterprise has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a significant drop in research productivity over the last year, with researchers in experimental fields, including those who collect data at field sites and from certain research facilities being particularly affected. Students and early career researchers have had limited access to mentoring and hands-on training, or to the kind of networking that happens at scientific conferences. Early career researchers are spending more of their time on childcare and sadly, early analyses suggest that the productivity of women researchers has been disproportionately affected.

Overall, some estimate that as much as 40 percent of research activity has been disrupted over the past year, with a total financial impact of tens of billions of dollars. The financial strain on universities has forced many institutions to withdraw job offers and implement hiring freezes. A recent analysis by Science magazine found that faculty job openings at U.S. universities have dropped 70 percent.

Early career researchers, especially postdoctoral researchers, are especially vulnerable to disruptions in the academic job market. Postdocs are hired for 2 to 3 years after earning their Ph.D. to continue their training as a researcher. During this time, they are typically highly productive in advancing their research and play a major role in training graduate and undergraduate students. Those failing to find an academic position may be faced with the difficult decision to abandon their career goals in order to support themselves and their families. This potentially irreversible loss of talent from the research pipeline could have lasting negative consequences for U.S. innovation and economic competitiveness.

We must act now to prevent what I fear will be a catastrophic impact to our nation’s research enterprise. We—and they—have already invested heavily in years of education and intensive training for these talented researchers. Those entering the job market last spring have already languished for a full year. The longer we wait, the harder it is for them to stay on track.

H.R. 144, the Supporting Early-Career Researchers Act, provides an urgently needed bridge for these researchers to keep them in the pipeline and support their research until the job market opens up again. It creates a \$250 million postdoctoral fellowship program at the National Science Foundation to support career development for early-career researchers whose employment opportunities have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. I urge my colleagues to support this legislation.

Let me also say that more is still needed, in particular the provisions of the RISE Act that many of us on this Committee have cosponsored. I commit to my colleagues on both sides to continue to advocate for research recovery funding at every opportunity. In the meantime, I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 144.