



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

Floor Statement

Statement by Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

On H.R. 204, the *STEM Opportunities Act*

May 18, 2021

Our economic competitiveness and national prosperity depend in large part on our capacity to lead the world in science and innovation. We need a STEM workforce that is equipped with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of today's industries and make breakthrough discoveries that will launch future industries. We are having a spirited debate in Congress about how best to position ourselves to maintain our leadership position in science and innovation, especially with respect to China. In debating how much we invest, at what agency, and in what form, we cannot lose sight of a key advantage of ours – our diversity.

Research provides compelling evidence that diversity unlocks innovation, yet we have failed to fully leverage the diverse talent available to us. Of particular concern is the underrepresentation of women and minority researchers in STEM faculty positions. According to the National Science Foundation's recently released report entitled, *Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering*, women hold only 25 percent of full professor positions in STEM. The numbers are even more striking for faculty in racial and ethnic minority groups. Black STEM faculty represent only 2.5 percent of full professors across all science disciplines, while only 4.6 percent of full professors are Hispanic. In some fields, the disparity is particularly stark. Women make up only 19 percent of full professors in computer science and 11 percent in engineering. The number of Black and Hispanic professors in computer science are so small, they cannot be reported without compromising their privacy. In engineering, 2.5 percent of professors are Black and 4.3 percent are Hispanic.

This lack of diversity in the academic workforce is holding us back. It is critical to ensure STEM faculty resemble the students they are teaching. When students see someone who looks like them in a career they want to pursue, they are more likely to see it as an achievable goal. Diversity of perspectives also advances research and leads to new lines of inquiry. Without diverse STEM faculty, we cannot grow the STEM workforce and advance the research and innovation we need to take on the pressing challenges ahead and to compete around the world.

The *STEM Opportunities Act* would empower Federal agencies and universities to identify and lower barriers to the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women, minorities, and other groups underrepresented in STEM studies and careers. The bill promotes an evidence-driven

approach to these challenges. It requires agencies to collect comprehensive demographic data on the grant review process and on STEM faculty at U.S. universities. The bill supports research on participation and career trajectories and the implementation of best practices for increasing the recruitment and retention of minority students and faculty.

This bill also pushes Federal agencies to do more to ensure all researchers have a fair shot at receiving funding for their work. The Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) is directed to develop consistent federal policies for recipients of federal research awards who have caregiving responsibilities. The bill also requires consistent federal guidance to grant reviewers and program officers on best practices to minimize the effects of implicit bias in the review of federal research grants. It requires OSTP to develop guidance for universities and Federal laboratories to aid them in identifying any cultural and institutional barriers limiting the recruitment, retention, and achievement of underrepresented groups in academic and government STEM research careers, and in developing and implementing current best practices for reducing such barriers.

I have been working on a version of this legislation for nearly 15 years. I thank Ranking Member Lucas for joining me last Congress, and again this Congress, in making this a bipartisan bill. I also thank the 25 organizations and institutions that have endorsed this legislation.

After the year we have just gone through, it is undeniable that science, and *scientists*, are critical to ensuring we are poised to handle the challenges ahead. We must act now to ensure we have the STEM workforce we will need. The *STEM Opportunities Act* is an important step in that direction. I look forward to working with my colleagues in both bodies to get this legislation over the finish line.