

OPENING STATEMENT
Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson(D-TX)

House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Subcommittee on Research and Technology
“National Science Foundation Part I: Overview and Oversight”
March 9, 2017

Thank you Chairwoman Comstock and Ranking Member Lipinski for holding this hearing. And welcome back to our distinguished witnesses, Dr. Córdova and Ms. Lerner. This hearing is an opportunity to introduce some of our new Members to the mission and operations of the National Science Foundation, and to review progress on some longstanding oversight issues.

The National Science Foundation was established by Congress in 1950 to “promote the progress of science.” Those very words are written into the enacting legislation. For more than six decades, America’s scientists and engineers have been submitting their best and most creative ideas to the Foundation for funding. For more than six decades, the Foundation has required that every one of those proposals undergo merit-review by scientific peers in order to select and fund the best of the best. This is the case for all fields of science and engineering supported by the Foundation, from physics and biology, to earth systems science, to the social, behavioral, and economic sciences.

The enacting legislation also established NSF to “advance the national health, prosperity, and welfare” and “to secure the national defense.” Those words are also central to NSF’s mission. The intent was not that every grant would be required to meet these particular criteria. The guiding rule of basic research is that you should not be constrained to a particular path or a particular application. To be constrained in what research is pursued is to fail to ask the most fundamental and compelling questions in science and engineering. To fail to ask the most fundamental and compelling questions is to miss out on the truly transformative scientific and technological breakthroughs. The intent since 1950 has been that -- in the aggregate -- the taxpayers’ investments in NSF would help contribute to a more secure and prosperous nation. And the record shows they certainly have. This is as true for the social and behavioral sciences as it is for physics and engineering.

This hearing is the first of two hearings this Committee will hold before moving legislation to authorize appropriations for the National Science Foundation and to take a fresh look at the Foundation’s 1950 organic Act. While Congress has passed minor amendments to the 1950 Act, the central mission of the Foundation, and the Foundation’s reliance on competitive peer-review to identify and fund the best proposals, have remain untouched. In short, the 1950 Act has proven remarkably durable and worth preserving.

Over the last few years, we have had vigorous debates in this Committee about NSF’s mission and about the process for selecting and funding the best and most worthy grant proposals. In the bipartisan American Innovation and Competitiveness Act signed into law by President Obama in January, we arrived at a compromise that reaffirmed NSF’s gold standard merit-review process while ensuring transparency and accountability in their grant decisions. This was a good outcome for U.S. science and for the taxpayer.

As we consider additional NSF legislation this Congress, I hope that all of us sitting here behind the dais will truly listen to the experts sitting before us and, perhaps more importantly, to the experts across the science and engineering community who constitute the lifeblood of U.S. innovation and competitiveness.

Once again, I want to welcome and thank the witnesses before us today. I look forward to your testimony and to a fruitful discussion about NSF's progress on a number of oversight issues, and I yield back.