



House Science Panel Looks at Reducing the Administrative Burden for Researchers

June 16, 2014

On June 12, the House Science, Space, and Technology Subcommittee on Oversight and Subcommittee on Research and Technology held a joint hearing focused on [Reducing the Administrative Workload for Federally Funded Research](#). Testifying were [Arthur Bienenstock](#), Chairman of the Task Force on Administrative Burden, National Science Board (NSB); [Susan Wyatt Sedwick](#), Chair of the Federal Demonstration Partnership (FDP); [Gina Lee-Glauser](#), Vice President for Research at Syracuse University; and [Allison Lerner](#), Inspector General for the National Science Foundation (NSF) Office of Inspector General (OIG).

Oversight Subcommittee Chairman Paul Broun's (R-GA) [opening statement](#) cited the finding from a 2012 Faculty Workload Survey conducted by FDP, which would come up several times during the hearing, that researchers spent an average of 42 percent of their time completing administrative requirements. Ranking Member on the Oversight Subcommittee Dan Maffei (D-NY) suggested in his opening statement that a contributing factor to high administrative workload is the low success rates for grant applications and overall funding levels for federal research, pointing to the *Frontiers in Innovation, Research, Science and Technology Act*, or FIRST Act, as an example of too-low research allocations (for more on the FIRST Act, see [Update, June 2, 2014](#)). Rep. Larry Bucshon (R-IN), Chairman of the Research and Technology Subcommittee, [noted](#) that a provision in the FIRST Act would establish a working group to review federal regulations governing research and that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) will soon begin working on a project to identify burdensome federal research requirements. Ranking Member of the Research and Technology Subcommittee Dan Lipinski (D-IL) argued that there needs to be a balance between not tying the hands of researchers and protecting human and animal research subjects and preventing fraud and abuse.

Bienenstock testified on the recommendations in the NSB report [Reducing Investigators' Administrative Workload for Federally Funded Research](#). The report suggested that (1) proposals requirements should focus on the science and only require information necessary for merit review, with supplemental material (budgets, mentoring plans, etc.) being provided once an application is deemed likely to succeed; (2) the government should continue to push to change ineffective or inappropriate regulations; (3) regulations should be harmonized and streamlined across federal agencies; and (4) universities should work to be more effective and efficient stewards of taxpayer dollars.

Sedwick explained that the Federal Demonstration Partnership is an association of research institutions, universities, and federal agencies who work together to streamline the administration of federally-funded

research. FDP is currently conducting a Payroll Certification Demonstration Pilot, which could help reform effort reporting—the way universities report salary expenses—which is often pointed to as a particularly burdensome requirement.

Lee-Glauser expressed concern about low success rates for grant applications; she asserted that there is often no meaningful difference between successful applications and the next highest tier in quality. The lack of available resources for research contributes to the amount of time faculty spend on administrative tasks as they apply over and over for grants. Lee-Glauser observed that this has a chilling effect on prospective scientists, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Lerner reminded the Subcommittee that the OIG does routinely uncover fraud and abuse of public funds and asked them to keep in mind that some of the federal requirements and regulations under discussion provide the OIG with the tools it needs to do its job, including effort reports, cost accounting, and single audits. Lerner pointed out that on average, the OIG conducts fewer than 20 audits each year. She expressed a willingness to participate in a dialogue with stakeholders to find ways to improve and streamline administrative requirements without rendering the OIG toothless.

Maffei asked for comments on how passage of the FIRST Act would affect grant recipients' administrative workload. Bienenstock responded that while the working group it would establish to look at burdensome regulations is commendable, the Act's treatment of research misconduct would de-harmonize NSF from other agencies, which would be a real setback. In response to a question from Rep. Bill Johnson (R-OH) on steps that NSF is taking to simplify grant applications, Bienenstock described an NSF pilot of "pre-proposals" consisting of very limited information to weed out as much as half of potential grant applications to save both researchers' and reviewers' time. However, he noted, legislative action would be necessary to eliminate a requirement in NSF's authorizing legislation that postdoc mentoring plans be included in grant proposals (as opposed to submitted once it becomes clear a proposal is likely to be funded).

