

ROLL CALL



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Memo to Congress: Stop Fighting Scientific Research | Commentary

By Patricia Klem Kobor and Angela L. Sharpe

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The social and behavioral sciences seem to have been painted with a big bull's-eye, given the escalating number of attacks against National Institutes of Health-supported research grants during the 2014 election season. Sen. [Rand Paul](#), R-Ky., invoked several during his stump speech in support of Republican candidates. Sen. [Tom Coburn](#), R-Okla., cited a few more in his latest "Wastebook." Readers interested in federal support for science might well wonder: Has the NIH, renowned worldwide for high-quality science, lost its collective mind by funding grants of questionable utility, as some Republicans claim? Or have these congressmen merely misunderstood what the social and behavioral sciences have to offer NIH's health mission?

To the first question — NIH's mind remains as sharp as ever. However, to the misfortune of the American public, these politicians are overlooking and minimizing the value and utility of social and behavioral science research. The business of government, including Congress, is to support its citizens and solve problems. Social and behavioral science research has critical tools that can help accomplish these goals. When examined through the lens of some commonly practiced Republican values — competition, frugality and return on investment — this research is solid.

Imagine you are a scientist who has studied a behavioral treatment that helps to improve sleep, reduce stress and increase overall physical well-being (which then has a direct impact on productivity at work). You can see that the treatment is effective, but your studies to date haven't told you exactly what the "active ingredient" is — which aspect of this treatment contributes most to its effectiveness. In order to receive additional NIH support, you must convince a committee of peer scientists that you have a workable idea to answer the question you pose. You must show you can recruit study subjects. And you must demonstrate that your project has real public-health relevance. The NIH budget has not kept pace with medical inflation for the past 10 years, and grants have become harder and harder to get. For your work to receive support, the committee must rate it very highly, and an NIH institute must decide that it fits within its program priorities. It's a multistep process, and you could fail at any point along the way.

Fortunately, the NIH peer-review process — rigorous and highly competitive — winnows out unworkable or low-priority ideas. Currently, only one proposal in six is funded. As a consequence, scientists are practically crawling on broken glass to receive NIH funding. The projects that survive to be funded are truly meritorious; however, you need to read the small print in the application to understand why. The NIH's peer review process has served the nation well. Congress should trust the process. It should also trust the NIH director, who has been very responsive to congressional concerns.

The research example above refers to the practice of mindfulness meditation, the study of which was attacked in the recent "Wastebook." The mere mention of meditation irks some members of Congress, who assume it's a frivolous or low-priority practice for the worried well. Yet there is strong evidence that people can change the function of their brains with meditation. It's a drug-free way of helping people cope with conditions ranging from ADHD to fibromyalgia, to insomnia to crippling anxiety. Compared to other interventions for those conditions, meditation is cheap — frugal congressmen, take note. The fact that this intervention has been shown to be effective for multiple conditions is evidence of a high rate of return. And even if you don't believe those conditions should be as high a priority for NIH dollars as, say, Alzheimer's disease, everything scientists learn about the brain, whether by studying meditation or memory or biomarkers, helps explain more about the structure and function of this most important organ.

Congressional critics have a responsibility to spend more time learning what the social and behavioral sciences have to contribute to the NIH's mission, and to the prevention and treatment of costly health conditions. Behavioral and social factors are responsible for more than 50 percent of the preventable injuries, illness and deaths in our nation. The NIH cannot neglect research on these factors if it is to improve our nation's health.

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