

Washington Insider

National Academies Release Framework for Democrats on SST Committee Release Response to Coburn Report on NSF

On July 27, the Democratic minority on the House Science, Space and Technology Committee (SST), Ranking Member Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX), released a staff report, *Out of Focus: A Critical Assessment of the Senate Report, "The National Science Foundation: Under the Microscope."*

The Democrats' report is a response to the earlier document produced by Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) that was strongly critical of the National Science Foundation (NSF) and included a call for the elimination of the Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE) directorate. The SST panel Democrats conclude that Coburn's report "makes no coherent argument about why, for example, studying the changing face of American democracy is inherently less important than funding a physics or chemistry experiment."

Coburn's report also cited numerous individual grants as "questionable studies." These included many in the social sciences, including the American National Election Studies (ANES) and the Panel Study on Income Dynamics (PSID). The committee staff reached out to the researchers whose work the Coburn report criticized sending them a five question survey. Of the 52 researchers contacted, 39 responded. In almost all the cases, Coburn's staff had never contacted the researchers of the "questionable" grants. They all suggested the Coburn report's characterizations of their research were inaccurate.

Here is the response of Arthur 'Skip' Lupia, professor of political science at the University of Michigan and former co-director of the ANES:

"The ANES provides data to the nation and the world that is matched by no other entity...For over 60 years researchers have used this data to clarify many important aspects of how people feel about past actions of government, and how such feelings affect their willingness to contribute to society in a range of different ways, from the workplace to the ballot box, to a range of volunteer organizations. The ANES is used by tens of thousands of scholars, teachers, journalists, and citizens around the world to not only better understand the current state of American democracy, but to compare the present to the past...Our goal is to support the legitimacy and vibrancy of American democracy by producing credible measures of individuals' relationship to their government and to their country."

Charles Brown, professor of economics at the University of Michigan and co-director of the PSID, told the committee staff: "The worst feature of the discussion of the PSID is that it refers to one study using the data, which they find insufficiently interesting to merit government funding, and then reports the amount that NSF has provided to support the entire project. Someone who read only this report would never learn that PSID data is used by federal agencies, has inspired similar studies in other countries

around the globe, etc."

Former American Political Science Association President Henry Brady of the University of California, Berkeley, also derided the Senator for misrepresenting his study on "The Costs of Voting." Coburn criticized the research "for helping party leaders learn strategies to increase voter turnout." Brady and his colleague Tom McNulty of Binghamton University told the Democratic staff that the intended audience for the study was not party leaders, but social scientists and academics to "substantially advance the body of knowledge in the field of voting behavior," and "non-partisan election administrators, whose task it is to conduct free and fair elections as efficiently, inclusively, reliably, and securely as possible."

The now infamous "Shrimp on a Treadmill" study, which the AARP has been using in television ads to denigrate scientific research, was also defended by its Principal Investigators, Biology Professors Louis Burnett and Karen Burnett of the Grice Marine Laboratory at the College of Charleston. The Burnetts noted that the study that utilized the treadmill experiment is part of a much larger research effort to determine how to maintain healthy populations of marine organisms "to bring important economic and ecological benefits to the U.S. and worldwide."

The Democratic staff concluded that Coburn's report results in "reverse earmarks," in which congressional staff picks winners and losers among scientific projects. This is probably not the kind of merit review envisioned by NSF and the National Science Board (see previous story).

In addition, the Democrats' report criticizes Coburn's claims of other wasteful spending by NSF concluding that these "claims were unsubstantiated and reflected a misunderstanding of appropriations law, grant management practices, and the actual findings of Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports." ■

Cuts to US Overseas Research Centers Affects Critical International Scholarship

The American Overseas Research Centers (AORC) Program, funded by Title VI of the Higher Education Act of 1965, was cancelled for FY 2011, when Congress failed to appropriate an expected \$1.4 million. The Centers receive funding from a variety of sources, but the withdrawal of support from the Department of Education for the Centers' FY 2011 budgets will have adverse consequences on the ability of the institutions to pay salaries, fund travel, and enhance and preserve research collections.

The research centers are located in some of the most strategically vital parts of the world and support research in nations where there is a great need to increase American expertise and scholarly understanding. Most of the Centers span an arc from West and North Africa to South Asia, including countries such as Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Slightly more than half of the 22 Centers are located in Islamic majority countries. The institutions play a key role in providing a base for visiting scholars of all nationalities and recording and preserving cultural heritage documentation. The Centers offer a variety of services such as fel-

lowship competitions, language training, public events, and the dissemination of scholarly publications. They are nongovernmental institutions viewed as an official arm of US higher education in the countries in which they are located.

Approximately 400 US educational institutions in 47 states hold roughly 1,000 institutional memberships in the Centers. The organizations play a significant role in facilitating travel for American scholars in countries that are often dangerous and inaccessible. A prominent example is the role that the American Institute of Iranian Studies plays in linking two nations that have no formal diplomatic relations. The Institute provides funding for Iranian scholars to attend conferences in the US and offers grants for US citizens to receive Persian language training in Tehran and conduct research in the country.

Leonardo Villalón (department of political science, University of Florida), Treasurer of the Council of American Overseas Research Centers (the private federation that oversees the Centers) and President of the West Africa Research Association (an AORC with a base in Senegal known as WARC) from 2001–2005, says “the loss of the Department of Education Title VI money for the Centers is a terrible blow to American scholarship on international issues, and an infinitesimally small drop in the bucket in terms of deficit reduction.” Villalón believes “there is no single institution that has collectively done more to support American scholars” in West Africa than WARA. He adds that the “support that centers like WARC give scholars in terms of contacts and introductions... as well as logistical support for setting up research, identifying research assistants, [and] securing permits...is invaluable in contributing to efficient and productive research.”

The members of the Council of American Overseas Research Centers are the American Academy in Rome, American Center for Mongolian Studies, American Center of Oriental Research, W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, American Institute of Bangladesh Studies, American Institute of Iranian Studies, American Institute of Indian Studies, American Institute for Maghrib Studies, American Institute of Pakistan Studies, American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies, American Institute for Yemeni Studies, American Research Center in Egypt, American Research Center in Sofia, American Research Institute in Turkey, American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Cyprus American Archaeological Research Institute, Center for Khmer Studies, Mexico-North Research Network, Palestinian American Research Center, The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq, West African Research Association, American Research Center in Egypt, American Research Center in Sofia, American Research Institute in Turkey, American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Cyprus American Archaeological Research Institute, Center for Khmer Studies, Mexico-North Research Network, Palestinian American Research Center, The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq, and West African Research Association. ■

The Center

A LOOK AT THE CENTENNIAL CENTER FOR
POLITICAL SCIENCE & PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The Centennial Center for Political Science and Public Affairs is an invaluable resource to political and social scientists. Since its opening in September 2003, the Center has housed more than 100 scholars. The center, located in the APSA headquarters near Dupont Circle, provides a great base of operations for scholars researching in the DC metro area. The Center offers visiting scholars furnished work space, telephone, fax, computers, Internet access, conference space, a reference library, and access to George Washington University’s Gelman Library. Visiting scholar stays range from a few days to 12 months. Space is limited to APSA members and is available for faculty members, postdoctoral fellows, and advanced graduate students from the United States and abroad. Scholars are expected to cover their own expenses and a modest facilities fee for the use of the center. Prospective visiting scholars may apply at any time. Positions are awarded on a space-available basis.

As federal funding sources that support international research continue to diminish (see Washington Insider, this issue), the Association would like to remind members that the Centennial Center endowed funds provide modest resources for international projects in addition to support for domestic travel and office space at APSA’s Washington, DC headquarters (all applicants should note that APSA does not provide support for visa arrangements).

The Center has recently allocated funds for projects in Latin America (Shannon Walsh, University of Notre Dame, “Engendering State Institutions: State Response to Violence Against Women in Latin America”) and West Africa (Jamie Bleck, University of Notre Dame, “Can Local Radio Emancipate Rural Women to Become Democratic Agents?”). Bleck was awarded her PhD this year and Walsh is a graduate student. As APSA does not have the resources to replicate the important work of Title VI and Fulbright-Hays, the funds are not intended to be the sole source of support needed to underwrite extensive research abroad. Rather, they are meant to provide critical supplemental assistance for emerging scholars who may not have the history of external funding necessary to competitively solicit grants from major donors.

Interested members can find an application form and more information on the 7 funds that support non-residential scholars at:

<http://www.apsanet.org/imgtest/ApplicationNonResident.pdf>

Full details on the center and the Visiting Scholars Program are online at <http://www.apsanet.org/centennialcenter>. You may also contact Veronica Jones at APSA: (202) 483-2512; vjones@apsanet.org.