

NSF and NIH Differ Over How to Pay Out Stimulus Money

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In the absence of definitive guidance from either the U.S. Congress or the White House, the nation's two leading providers of federal science money to universities are apparently taking different approaches to what it means to help the U.S. economy.

The National Institutes of Health, which is getting \$10.4-billion from the \$787-billion economic-stimulus measure signed last week by President Obama, announced it will tweak its science-based distribution guidelines to ensure the largess some measure of geographic parity.

The National Science Foundation, which is getting \$3-billion in stimulus money, has concluded that it will not.

"We are sticking to NSF's mission," Arden L. Bement Jr., director of the National Science Foundation, told the agency's board on Tuesday.

The differing approaches follow a debate in Congress over the stimulus bill. Some lawmakers expressed concern that money distributed through science agencies would benefit the states with the strongest existing research universities and facilities.

Lawmakers were concerned about the have-nots. A report by the NSF in 2006 showed that a group of 25 states plus Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands had 20 percent of the U.S. population and 25 percent of the nation's research institutions and yet received only 10 percent of the science foundation's research funds.

The House version of this year's stimulus bill urged a geographic distribution of the research spending. But the Senate version, and the final version passed by both chambers and signed by Mr. Obama, did not.

The decision on whether to comply with the intent expressed by the House therefore was left largely for the agencies to resolve—and to take the political risk if their decision is later seen as hindering attempts to deal with the nation's overall economic woes.

The NIH and the NSF are getting the two largest chunks of \$21.5-billion in new federal money for research and development contained in the stimulus measure. But while the NSF is an independent federal agency, the NIH is part of the federal Department of Health and Human Services, which makes it more tightly bound to direction by Congress.

'Sensitive' to Geography

Raynard S. Kington, acting director of the NIH, said last week at a budget briefing that his agency's stimulus-money decisions would be based on scientific merit and public-health need, though they will also be guided by a need to ensure geographical distribution. The NIH has a program, the Institutional Development Award, designed to ensure a balanced geographic distribution of research money.

Dr. Kington said the NIH would be "sensitive to geographic distribution, not because of politics but because this unique funding for medical research is intended to stimulate the economy while advancing science," said John T. Burklow, an NIH spokesman. "There will be no political considerations in NIH's final funding decisions," Mr. Burklow said. "Final decisions will be based on sound science and programmatic objectives."

The NSF has acknowledged that its science-based grants have tended to favor a small group of states.

The science foundation's latest figures, for 2005, showed that federal spending on research and development "varied greatly among the states." The states range from the 12 states where the agency spent no more than \$226 per worker (Arkansas, Delaware, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming) to the 12 states where it spent at least \$838 per worker (Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Virginia, and West Virginia).

The agency has created a unit—the Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research, known as Epscor—to help spread out its award money. But Epscor accounts for only a minority of NSF funds.

The approach to geography isn't the only split between the NIH and NSF. The NIH has pledged to pay for projects with its stimulus money within two years, while the NSF is considering longer-term projects. The NIH appears to be taking that approach through a stricter interpretation of the stimulus measure as a short-term jobs bill, said Patrick White, vice president for federal relations at the Association of American Universities.

"NIH is apparently following what it believes Congress wants it to do," Mr. White said.

Mr. Bement, concluding a two-day National Science Foundation board meeting dominated by questions over its grant-making priorities in light of the stimulus bill, described his decision to avoid outside considerations as largely a result of having little choice.

The foundation has no ability to evaluate the effects of its grant-making decisions on job creation, especially 10 to 15 years in the future, he told the board.

The intent of Congress and the White House with respect to the stimulus appears deliberately opaque, one board member said.

Dan E. Arvizu, director of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, told the board that he spoke with a Capitol Hill staff member in an attempt to understand the intentions of lawmakers with regard to use of the stimulus money. "The quote I took away from that," Mr. Arvizu said, "is, 'the stimulus package is not to be understood.'"

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