

New executive order puts all grants under political control

On Thursday, the Trump administration issued an executive order asserting political control over grant funding, including all federally supported research. The order requires that any announcement of funding opportunities be reviewed by the head of the agency or someone they designate, which means a political appointee will have the ultimate say over what areas of science the US funds. Individual grants will also require clearance from a political appointee and “must, where applicable, demonstrably advance the President’s policy priorities.”

The order also instructs agencies to formalize the ability to cancel previously awarded grants at any time if they’re considered to “no longer advance agency priorities.” Until a system is in place to enforce the new rules, agencies are forbidden from starting new funding programs.

In short, the new rules would mean that all federal science research would need to be approved by a political appointee who may have no expertise in the relevant areas, and the research can be canceled at any time if the political winds change. It would mark the end of a system that has enabled US scientific leadership for roughly 70 years.

We’re in control

The text of the executive order recycles prior accusations the administration has used to justify attacks on the US

scientific endeavor: Too much money goes to pay for the facilities and administrative staff that universities provide researchers; grants have gone to efforts to diversify the scientific community; some studies can't be replicated; and there have been instances of scientific fraud. Its "solution" to these problems (some of which are real), however, is greater control of the grant-making process by non-expert staff appointed by the president.

In general, the executive order inserts a layer of political control over both the announcement of new funding opportunities and the approval of individual grants. It orders the head of every agency that issues grants—meaning someone appointed by the president—to either make funding decisions themselves, or to designate another senior appointee to do it on their behalf. That individual will then exert control over whether any funding announcements or grants can move forward. Decisions will also require "continuation of existing coordination with OMB [Office of Management and Budget]." The head of OMB, Russell Vought, has been heavily involved in trying to cut science funding, including a recent attempt to block all grants made by the National Institutes of Health.

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