

Deafening Quiet from the Scientific Establishment

When the new administration came into power, I expected contentious discussions about specific policy issues, and the possibility of reorganizations and budget cuts at science agencies. However, I did not fully anticipate the disruption of time-tested grant review processes, mass termination of grants based on political considerations, large-scale firing of government staff without cause, and other assaults on science that have taken place. I also did not expect the striking silence from leaders of the scientific establishment.

It is not that I fail to understand the pressures such leaders face. I have served as a department chair at a major medical school, director of one of the NIH institutes, Editor-in-Chief of Science magazine, and as in a strategic leadership position at a major university. I recognize the risk that standing up for core principles might trigger retribution. But remaining quiet is, in my view, misguided. Silence may protect an institution from becoming an early target, but history shows that it increases the likelihood that that institution (and many others) will be become targets over time.

Early on, I was deeply troubled to learn that many grants awarded through NIH mechanisms related to “diversity” were slated for wholesale termination. I saw stunning reactions from many in the scientific establishment. Universities, scientific societies, and private funding agencies rapidly took down webpages with statements about the importance of diversity and representation in the scientific workforce, and some cancelled programs; others just remained silent or rebranded such programs with new language. I found this distressing because these programs are not motivated by vague “social justice” goals, but rather with specific objectives related to engaging scientific talent from across our nation, diversification of perspectives on research questions, and, in some cases, building capacity to understand and address health disparities. The programs had very broad eligibility criteria that included being a member of a racial or ethnic group that was historically underrepresented in research, but eligibility also included those from disadvantaged educational or socioeconomic backgrounds and those with a physical disability or other factors, or just an interest in working on the biomedical workforce. These grants were not awarded through illegal, “racial preference” programs, but rather through highly competitive, merit-based processes. But rather than articulating and defending these goals and processes, many parts of the scientific establishment seemed to be rushing to violate one of the first tenets of historian Timothy Snyder’s important book On Tyranny: Do not obey in advance.

In communicating with some of the scientists affected by grant terminations, it was striking (but not surprising) that many felt abandoned by their institutions and the scientific establishment at large. This was fueled, in part, by the contrast between this acquiescence

and the rapid institutional responses, including lawsuits, after the administration had proposed a cap on the rate of reimbursement for so-called indirect costs of research. The scientific establishment had the capacity to push back vigorously when some of their values (financial viability) were threatened but could not seem to muster much energy when other principles were under assault.

The indirect cost issue had demonstrated that pushing back works. The administration lost lawsuits, and Congress reasserted its authorities to determine indirect cost rate policies. Some individuals and groups did sue the government over the diversity and other grant terminations and won in the court of William Young, a veteran judge first appointed by Ronald Reagan. Judge Young ruled that the terminations were illegal and, in addition, made a powerful speech calling out what he saw as the worst discrimination he had witnessed in over 40 years on the bench. This ruling was appealed to the Supreme Court which ruled that these terminations were likely illegal but then stayed Judge Young's order that the grants be reinstated, in a fragmented 5-4, shadow docket ruling that even Supreme Court justices called out as being nakedly partisan. The final outcomes for these grants remain uncertain.

Hundreds of NIH staff members also pushed back, sharing with Congress and the public the "Bethesda Declaration". This document called out grant terminations and other actions of the Administration that the staffers felt were misaligned with the mission of the NIH. This courageous act brought needed attention to some of these actions and spread courage to employees at several other federal agencies to share analogous dissent documents about actions that are antithetical to their Congressionally mandated agency missions.

While it is easy to focus on the apparent lack of moral courage shown by the scientific establishment, I am more struck by two other aspects of these reactions. The first is the lack of utilization of scholarship to guide their reactions. There is a substantial body of scholarly literature about the value of participation of individuals from diverse groups in science, particularly health-related research. Moreover, many universities have scholars, including historians, sociologists, and lawyers, who have devoted their efforts to studying the consolidation of power by authoritarian governments. What is happening in America is not new. It has occurred, with variations, in many other countries. Since individuals and groups involved with science should be well equipped to explore and understand scholarly writings, I expected more efforts to use this information to shape and articulate their responses.

The second involves what seem to me to be one-sided risk calculations. I certainly understand the challenging situations that leaders face, with fiduciary responsibilities and boards to which they answer; Standing up to defend your programs and staff and ending up

in the crosshairs of this vindictive administration could be devastating. But many of these leaders seem not to be including the risk of losing the trust of members of the communities they are charged to lead. I have had the privilege of leading several scientific organizations. In my view, one of the most valuable assets that one needs to develop as a leader is the respect and trust of your staff. I fear that many leaders are not giving adequate weight to this consideration. Moreover, by remaining so silent, these officials are limiting opportunities for building coalitions with one another and with the public, many of whom would be eager to show their support for scientific research, with its potential to improve so many aspects of our lives and to drive economic growth and stability. Such coalitions may exist “behind the scenes” but they could have been much stronger, and could have helped many institutions and individuals manage the almost daily chaos being imposed on the scientific enterprise. They might have also engaged components of the private sector who have huge stakes in publicly funded research.

One university president noted that his fellow presidents who are facing actions and threats from the Administration and who may feel that their best course of action is compromise should, at the very least, articulate that several of their core values are being placed in conflict and that they are trying to find paths that balance these factors. Such a step would be valuable, but more is needed.

Pushing back clearly has had very real benefits. Litigation, while not a panacea, has had substantial impacts. Note that these lawsuits were primarily based on violations of laws regarding basic procedural competence and fairness, not principles that some might categorize as “woke”. The Bethesda Declaration, written and shared at considerable personal and institutional risk by its authors, brought to light many facts including that the scientific areas affected by the turmoil span the entire range of the NIH mission, including cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, and other topics of considerable importance for all.

The federal workers involved in the various dissent declarations weighed the harm to the missions of their agencies and to our chosen form of democratic government against personal risks, including loss of their livelihoods, and decided to stand up for all of us. One of the mantras of these staffers is “Courage is Contagious”; I hope more of this spreads to more of the scientific establishment and soon.

Jeremy M. Berg, Ph.D.

Director, National Institute of General Medical Sciences, NIH 2003-2011

Editor-in-Chief, Science magazine 2016-2019

Elected member, National Institute of Medicine