

WashU students work to stop cuts

MICHELE MUNZ
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

ST. LOUIS — In a room on the third floor of a study building on the campus of Washington University Medical School, a group of graduate students prepared to call Missouri's elected officials — to ask them to stand up against proposed federal cuts to research spending and threats against academic freedom.

Tell them your personal story, advised Jamie Moffa, a couple years away from earning both a medical degree and a doctorate in neuroscience.

"For example, as a neuroscientist, I study how the brain responds to pain and what happens in the brain during chronic pain. Because of robust federal funding for research, I'm able to be on the cutting edge of understanding pain and developing treatment, so that my mom who has sciatic nerve pain can have relief," Moffa said.

The medical students along with those on Washington University's main campus in St. Louis joined thousands of researchers and higher education workers across the country Wednesday as part of a "day of action" against planned federal funding cuts to health research.

The "Hands Off our Healthcare, Research, and Jobs" rallies, held at more than 20 locations across the country, were organized by Labor for Higher Education, a national coalition of nearly a dozen labor unions representing academic workers.

Students at Washington University used the day to call the offices of their U.S. congressional representatives and senators as well as the Missouri governor and attorney general.

"It's easy for these politicians to see funding for research as a number in a ledger that can be changed or moved around," Moffa said. "So, we need to remind them of the other side of that. Funding cuts can have consequences for real people's lives."

The scientific and research community has been in upheaval since President Donald Trump took office. A week after Trump was sworn in, the Office of Management and Budget issued a directive to pause nearly all federal funding, which was rescinded two days later.

Trump's flurry of executive orders called on the federal government to eliminate grants related to DEI (diversity, equity and

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LAURIE SKRIVAN, POST-DISPATCH

Washington University graduate research assistants (from left) Humza Hemani, Austin Southard-Smith and Jamie Moffa pose Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2025, on the Washington University Medical School campus after making phone calls to elected representatives asking them to fight back against President Trump's federal cuts to health care research and education.

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Cuts

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inclusion), climate change, and gender ideology — broad issues that leave researchers unsure if their studies will end up on the chopping block.

The National Institutes of Health temporarily paused reviews of new grant proposals for research to ensure compliance with the new orders.

The biggest financial blow came Feb. 7, when the NIH announced it would cut billions in funding for “indirect costs” of research — administrative and overhead costs such as staff, buildings, maintenance and data processing.

A district judge in Boston on Friday extended her order temporarily blocking the cuts after a lawsuit was filed by university associations.

The amount universities receive in indirect costs varies, depending on the location and types of research. Washington University, students say, receives an additional 55% of direct costs to go toward indirect costs. The NIH order would cap the amount at 15%.

WashU receives by far the most in NIH funding in the state. Its medical school has for the past two years ranked No. 2 in NIH funding across the country. In fiscal year 2024, the school received \$683 million, its highest amount yet, for studies into diseases such as cancer, dementia, heart disease and HIV.

Dropping the cap in indirect costs means the university could receive \$165 million less year, the students calculated.

The NIH has stated that it wants to ensure that as many funds as many go toward direct costs. Katie Miller, part of billionaire Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency team, called the indirect funding “Liberal D.E.I. Deans’ slush fund.”

Dong-Gyu Kim, a WashU graduate student in plant and microbial biosciences, said despite its name, indirect costs prop up all the research at universities.

“Indirect costs fund almost all, if not all of the background, everyday things that we might not appreciate, but is absolutely necessary for research activities,” Kim said, from the utilities to the disposal of hazardous chemical waste.

“If indirect costs are cut, our ability to do research will also be cut,” Kim said. And long-term, that means fewer scientists and weaker research institutions.

Humza Hermani, 27, is in his second year of graduate studies in bioinformatics (the development of computer programs to analyze biological information) at WashU and working in a lab where he produces massive amounts of data on kidney disease.

“If we can’t maintain the building, what am I supposed to do?” Hermani said. “If I don’t have access to the computer cluster here, I’m done.”

Impact on St. Louis

Moffa also cited the economic impact beyond WashU’s walls. According to the NIH, every dollar it invests creates roughly \$2.46 in economic activity through job creation and the development of new medical technologies.

“Funding cuts harm the economy. Funding cuts damage the reputation of St. Louis as a hub for research,” Moffa said. “And

funding cuts drive scientists broadly to look to other countries for research opportunities, which harms the U.S. as a whole.”

The White House attacks on research related to DEI, climate and gender are harder to quantify, Moffa said, because the descriptions are vague.

“The immediate financial impact of these cuts to WashU is a lot harder to quantify, because we just don’t know which grants will be approved and which will not. But if we don’t fight back, it will be severe,” Moffa said.

Moffa said they are aware of graduate students who have already had their grants supporting underrepresented groups in research rescinded, leaving the heads of their labs with less money to hire other researchers or buy equipment.

“The complicated thing about these cuts is that the impact is felt in sort of a shock wave through research. It’s never just one person. It’s never just one research project. It’s the entire lab,” Moffa said.

Moffa also wonders whether the ENDURE program, an NIH-funded initiative that prepares undergraduates from diverse backgrounds for graduate studies in neuroscience, will continue at WashU.

Austin Southard-Smith, 28, studies pancreatic cancer at WashU and works in a lab that also studies rare types of cancer in diverse populations.

“These funding cuts targeting research that is focused on diversity, depending upon how they’re applied, could affect our lab’s ability to continue that study,” he said.

The students also expressed frustration with leadership at WashU, particularly the chancellor’s office. They want the university to speak out publicly against the threats to research, be more transparent in its efforts to fight cuts and promise to fill any possible gaps in funding with university funds.

Academic leaders at WashU have only sent a campuswide email telling students that they are “mobilized on multiple fronts” and “engaging with congressional representatives and others.”

The students started a petition demanding university leaders to more protect workers and research.

WashU Chancellor Andrew Martin, in an email Thursday to the Post-Dispatch, said leadership shares the students’ concern about proposed cuts and is “looking at this situation from all possible angles” to determine how best to protect its mission to support research and patient care.

“We encourage our students, faculty, staff and supporters to use their voices and influence to make their concerns known to their elected officials,” Martin wrote. “We look forward to working together with our community to navigate this complex and challenging issue.”

Moffa said Wednesday’s event was just the start of the students’ fight, as they expect more research cuts to come.

“It’s really setting the groundwork,” Moffa said, “for being able to keep speaking up, to keep mobilizing, to keep pressure on our politicians and our university to protect research as these kinds of attacks keep happening.”

Michele Munz - 314-340-8263
mmunz@post-dispatch.com