
Activism by Scientists at the Grass-Roots Level Is Needed To Solve the Research Funding Crisis

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Although the United States government has a tradition of generosity in its support of science, it seems all too easy for individual politicians and scientists to convey an attitude of mistrust when they come face to face on official business.

Specific issues aside, what can scientists do to close the gap between themselves and their elected representatives? How can they protect research from animal rights zealots and antiscience demagogues? How can they advance the cause of science in our democracy? The answer lies in the constitutional right of petition—specifically, lobbying. Large organizations and corporations make their views known at all levels of government, and it is important for science to do the same.

Several years ago, Donald Stein of Clark University made a valiant effort to mobilize individual scientists and institutions, founding the National Coalition for Science and Technology to lobby Congress in support of science. Regrettably, his efforts proved to be premature. Most scientists were not ready or willing to face political realities. But now there is evidence that scientists are

prepared to confront the need to make Congress recognize the interrelationship of basic research, technology development, and economic health.

In a recent interview with this publication's news editor, Jeffrey Mervis (*The Scientist*, April 1, 1991, page 1), ex-congressman Doug Walgren, former chairman of the House science committee's research and technology subcommittee, discussed his new career as a Washington lobbyist. His experience will be put to good use in increasing the momentum for continued funding of basic research in the U.S. Others, such as Terry Lierman of Capitol Associates in Washington, have been involved in the campaign to maintain congressional support of biomedical research started by Mary Lasker 40 years ago. Research!America is another organization dedicated to this objective. Founded under the leadership of former Sen. Lowell Weicker, Jr., now governor of Connecticut, it is supported by more than 150 organizations. It is waging a public educational campaign to drum up grass-roots support for increased funding of research.

What can you do personally?

Well, you can certainly express support via tax-deductible donations—but this should not be a substitute for your personal lobbying. You should call, write, or visit congressmen yourself. Perhaps grant applicants should send copies of their rejection letters to several congressmen, in order to raise their consciousness of the funding problem—after all, scientists are also part of their constituencies. And when you communicate or visit your local congressman, be prepared with documented evidence of the long- and short-term economic impact of your research.

Local chapters of the American Chemical Society, American Physical Society, Sigma Xi, FASEB, the American Society for Clinical Investigators (the “Young Turks”), and others might well emulate the Philadelphia chapter of the ACLU,

which has organized a network of 50 member-volunteers to telephone 1,000 other members whenever a civil rights issue arises. These members, in turn, can each telephone a dozen other people. As a result, these thousands of Philadelphians have formed a Bill of Rights lobby ready to take action by letters and phone calls to Congress whenever a crisis arises.

If scientists want to solve the crisis in research funding, then they must learn how to operate at the grass-roots level. It is not sufficient to be active at election time. Congress needs to be prodded and educated regularly. The culmination of such activity might one day be a march on Washington—not just by and for scientists, but also for the millions of citizens who recognize the as-yet-unfulfilled potential of research. ■