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U.S. EDUCATION NEWS

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Scientists Scramble for Private Cash in Response to Fresh Funding Turbulence

Additional changes are looming, prompting more researchers to downsize labs or pursue money from outside government



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**By Chao Deng |Photography by Eirik Johnson
for WSJ**

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When the Trump administration proposed new changes to how it awards grants this spring, Erin Ingvalson had to make some tough decisions.

The University of Washington speech-perception researcher was awaiting a decision on a proposal to study literacy in children with hearing impairments. With the future of government backing unclear, she froze hiring for a postdoctoral researcher and warned partner preschools that her timeline

was uncertain.

“I feel like I don’t know what’s going to happen next,” said Ingvalson. It is “really challenging to plan long-term projects.”

University researchers are navigating more turbulence in federal funding. After last year’s cuts and disruptions, new policies brewing in Washington threaten to upend grants again. Many scientists are trying to diversify their funding by courting foundations and private companies instead. Others are downsizing their teams.



New potential policy shifts in Washington make long-term planning difficult, Ingvalson says.

The White House is pushing to deepen its overhaul of scientific investment with a new rule that would give political appointees more

power over grants and align research with administration priorities, including AI and quantum computing. Additionally, a July directive gives priority to individual scientists over universities for \$200 billion in annual federal research. It isn't clear how either of those changes would play out in practice.

A White House spokeswoman said the administration will stop giving federal grants to “politicized research” and direct money to the “best science” in order to maintain U.S. dominance.

A spokeswoman at the Department of Health and Human Services said that the National Institutes of Health, the largest federal source of university research funding, provided \$27.17 billion in the year through September 2025, exceeding the prior year. As of the end of this July, the agency said it has exceeded both the number of awards issued and funding promised, compared with the same point last year.



The University of Washington campus in Seattle

Grant Witness, a watchdog founded last year to track federal research grants, says university researchers still have lost more than \$500 million due to disrupted NIH grants it estimates were promised in years prior to fiscal 2025.

Nearly 5,800 NIH grants have been terminated, frozen or disrupted since March 2025, estimates Grant Witness. Although court orders and settlements have helped restore some 4,550 of those, universities already have laid off staff and canceled projects.

The HHS says it is “refocusing its investments on the most meritorious science, urgent health needs, and a strong biomedical research workforce nationwide.”

Researchers have responded to the new environment by submitting more grant applications, in the hopes of increasing their chances at funding, according to Scott Delaney, a Grant Witness co-founder and former Harvard University epidemiologist whose own government funding was cut then later restored.

Another response has been to pull back investment in young talent. Major American research universities admitted 15% fewer students to Ph.D. programs this fall compared with a year earlier, according to data from 55 universities that are members of the Association of American Universities. It marks the second consecutive year of substantial reduction for doctoral programs.



Scientists at the University of Washington and other research universities are diversifying funding by courting foundations.

Peter Stone, professor and head of the University of Texas at Austin's school of computing, is continuing to compete for government sources such as the NSF. But he is also increasingly pursuing private investment, such as from defense and auto companies like Lockheed Martin and Honda Motor. He is also looking at philanthropic organizations like the Schmidt Family Foundation and the Lyda Hill Foundation. One proposed study he is still seeking funding for would examine how autonomous vehicles in one fleet can learn from one another's mistakes to make roads safer.

"We've always tried to be diverse but it's more a matter of degree," he

says. For example, we're "looking not just for individual companies but a variety of companies."

Stone says some of the Trump administration's mechanisms to direct and jump-start artificial intelligence-related projects appear promising—he is among several UT Austin researchers whose work is benefiting from the Energy Department's Genesis Mission, a new administration initiative that aims to use AI supercomputing and other technologies to accelerate scientific discovery, energy innovation and national security.

Still, Stone says the overall landscape makes it "difficult to plan for the future."



Researcher Kirsten Schwarz (2nd from right) has tried to carve out more time for grant writing.

BRAD SMITH

Intensifying competition for funding has prompted Kirsten Schwarz, a University of California, Los Angeles, associate professor of urban planning and environmental health sciences, to coordinate more with local nonprofits so they can avoid cannibalizing each other's applications. Schwarz researches ways communities can address soil pollution, including hazards stemming from the LA wildfires last year.

She has approached smaller foundations like the Rose Foundation, an environmental group based in Oakland, in hopes of cobbling together enough smaller pots of money for a large project. This summer, Schwarz has tried to squeeze out additional time for grant writing, on top of trying to finish research papers.

"It's a ton of work," she says. "We're having to be more strategic."

Bradley Moore, an oceanographer at the University of California, San Diego, studies marine microbes and the chemicals they produce, including compounds that have

potential applications in human medicine. Moore is able to continue his current research through several federal grants, but as he experienced delays in funding in the past year, he tapped his “rainy day funds”—royalties from past research and discretionary funds from companies.



Bradley Moore, an oceanographer at the University of California San Diego, tapped his ‘rainy day’ research funds. SCRIPPS INSTITUTION OF OCEANOGRAPHY AT UC SAN DIEGO

He has let his research team fall from 18 to 12 people by attrition and only brought on one new postdoctoral researcher, down from the four he usually hires each year. Where possible, he didn’t renew staff contracts.

“When I’m letting people go,” Moore says, “the whole system starts to slow.”

Chao Deng is a New York-based reporter for The Wall Street Journal covering the U.S. economy. Her stories examine the economic impacts of...

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