Coburn Fallout and the Troubles Ahead

With the enactment of Sen. Tom Coburn's (R-OK) amendment to restrict National Science Foundation (NSF) funding for political science research to projects the Director certifies as "promoting national security and economic interests of the United States," the question of interpretation remains uncertain. Although the action has generated many denunciations from the President's Science Adviser and former NSF Directors and the Ranking Democrat on the House Research Subcommittee, Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-IL), some grants have already been held up and the fate of the American National Election Study is unclear.

So far, the American Political Science Association has announced the cancellation of the NSF-funded 2013 Ralph Bunche Summer Institute, held at Duke University, which provided opportunities for broadening participation of underrepresented groups by preparing them for graduate school in political science.

While the interpretation discussion continues at NSF on how this amendment affects FY 2013 funding for political science, the playing field for FY 2014 appears to have many difficulties ahead. For starters, both House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) and House Science, Space, and Technology (HSST) Chairman Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX) have made it clear in speeches, meetings with science groups, and in the HSST "views and estimates" on FY 2014, that they intend to go after funding for the social, behavioral and economic sciences (SBE) at NSF (see Update, February 11, 2013 for Cantor's remarks). The HSST "views" state:

"Further the NSF request for the Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE) is over $259 million in FY 2013, with significant, preceding annual increases. The Committee is concerned that the Administration has lost sight of NSF's core mission in support of the physical sciences when so much funding is provided for SBE. Several recent studies conducted by NSF's SBE funding have been of questionable value, and something our nation can ill-afford. These SBE funds are better spent on higher priority scientific endeavors that have demonstrated return on investment for the American taxpayer."

The vehicle for this attack is the reauthorization of the America COMPETES Act, which includes the NSF's authorization bill. Most of the line of attack is not new. We have seen it in 1995-96, and again in 2005-06. It states that the NSF is the province of the physical sciences and engineering and the SBE sciences do not belong. Furthermore, these sciences, the argument goes, can receive funding from other federal agencies. The complaint also takes the form of the need to set priorities, and the SBE sciences come at the bottom of any list. There is a corollary attack on social science funding, especially for economics research, at the National Institutes of Health.

While House leaders continue to question the SBE sciences, the Senate has been quiet regarding NSF reauthorization. Key Senators who would be involved in the COMPETES Reauthorization, Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee Chairman Sen. Jay
Rockefeller (D-WV) and Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), who played an important role in the original COMPETES bill, have not made any explicit statements on this legislation yet.

In addition to the COMPETES bill the FY 2014 Commerce, Justice, Science (CJS) Appropriations bills offer other opportunities for opponents of federally funded SBE research to create mischief. Coburn will probably be back and the possibilities that those who would restrict funding in COMPETES would do so again in appropriations looms large as well.

As we move forward through the legislative process COSSA and its members, other scientific and higher education groups, as well as universities and business leaders will be manning the barricades to protect the SBE sciences. We hope to have your support and help. Stay tuned!