

DATA CHECK

BEHIND THE NUMBERS

Rethinking the time 'lost' to red tape

By Jeffrey Mervis

When university lobbyists complain about excessive U.S. government regulation, they often use this statistic to bolster their argument: Administrative tasks take up 42% of the time that faculty members devote to their federal research grant. In other words, only 35 minutes of every hour paid for by U.S. taxpayers are devoted to research.

The statistic comes from a 2005 survey sponsored by a consortium of government agencies and research institutions called the Federal Demonstration Partnership. It was repeated in 2012 with the same result, fueling a meme that academic scientists are being strangled by red tape. A committee at the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine is currently looking into the problem, which another blue-ribbon advisory panel has blamed on “a culture of overregulation” that has led to “wasted federal research dollars.”

But a closer look at the findings challenges that conventional wisdom. The survey also asked faculty members how much of their grant time would be devoted to administrative duties if they had additional administrative help. The answer—an average of 31%—may surprise you. In fact, nearly one-third of the researchers said that additional help would free up no more than 2 additional hours a week to spend doing science.

(A similar fraction, it should be noted, said they would gain as many as 9 hours.)

If the paperwork on a federal grant is so crippling, why wouldn't reforms make more of a difference? The answer lies in the survey's definition of administrative tasks, which includes every function besides the conduct of “active research.”

It turns out that many of those tasks are things that most scientists don't consider to be a burden, such as applying for a grant, training graduate students and postdocs, reporting to a federal agency on how its money was spent, and sharing the results of the research with colleagues and the public. “Writing grants and papers and managing your lab is just part of a scientist's job,” says Robert Decker, who helped design the survey.

One such task is preparing for the next

project. Faculty reported that fully 36% of the “administrative” slice of their research time—some 15.4% of their total effort—goes to preparing research proposals. That's not just writing time. Before sending in a proposal, scientists must review the literature. And in most fields they are also expected to have preliminary data to bolster their hypothesis.

Researchers do have reasons to complain, says Decker, who retired in 2009 after a career as a cardiology researcher, first at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and later at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. Low success rates may make the time devoted to grant writing seem more burdensome.

A ceiling on what universities can charge the federal government for the cost of administering a grant has also added to researchers' loads.

Before the cap, Decker says, most faculty members could hire an assistant to handle purchases and keep the books. The ceiling, which Congress imposed in 1991 in response to improper accounting practices at several universities, meant that the government no longer

reimbursed institutions for all of the administrative costs needed to comply with federal regulations, Decker says. “So the university administrators punted to the departments,” he says, “and that left it up to the faculty. To be fair,” he adds, “the sponsored research offices were woefully understaffed, and faculty are ultimately responsible under the law for managing their grants.”

The 2005 survey prompted the federal government “to change some of the worst rules,” Decker says. The current National Academies panel is expected to propose several additional changes, some of which could be inserted into pending legislation.

Even so, Decker warns scientists not to get hung up on the 42% number. “You need to figure out how to eliminate the stuff that is so time-consuming that you lose your focus as a researcher,” Decker says. “The rest is probably a reasonable burden.” ■

42
percent

Amount of time U.S. faculty say they spend on nonresearch activities as part of a federal grant

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