

U.S. SCIENCE POLICY

Senate Panel Chair Asks Why NSF Funds Social Sciences

Why is the National Science Foundation (NSF) funding a study of a women's cooperative in Bangladesh? Why are U.S. taxpayers footing the bill for efforts to understand Hungary's emerging democracy? And why are social scientists even bothering to compile an archive of state legislatures in a long-gone era when those legislatures chose U.S. senators?

Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX), chair of a panel that oversees NSF and a member of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee, put those and other sharply worded ques-



Warning shot. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) questions the value of some NSF-funded research.

tions to NSF Director Arden Bement last week during an unusually combative hearing on the agency's 2007 budget request. Hutchison signaled that she will be taking a hard look at NSF's \$200-million-a-year social and behavioral sciences portfolio, which funds some 52% of all social science research done by U.S. academics and some 90% of the work by political scientists. Hutchison made it clear during the 2 May hearing that she doesn't think the social sciences should benefit from President George W. Bush's proposal for a 10-year doubling of NSF's budget as part of his American Competitiveness Initiative (*Science*, 17 February, p. 929). And she suggested afterward to *Science* that she's open to more drastic measures.

"I'm trying to decide whether it would be better to put political science and some other fields into another [government] department," she said. "I want NSF to be our premier agency for basic research in the sciences, mathematics, and engineering. And when we are looking at scarce resources, I think NSF should stay focused on the hard sciences."

Last week's hearing was not the first time Hutchison has taken a shot at NSF's support of the social sciences. In a 30 September 2005 speech honoring the winners of the annual Lasker medical research awards, she backed a doubling of NSF's budget but added that social science research "is not where we should be directing [NSF] resources at this time." Hutchison tipped her hand a few months before the hearing by asking NSF officials for abstracts of grants funded by the Directorate for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences (SBE) going back several years. But the harshness of last week's attack caught the community by surprise, leaving social scientists and their supporters scratching their heads about how best to respond.

"In some ways, it's SBE that tackles the most challenging scientific questions, because its research investigates people's behavior and touches on the most sensitive issues in our society," noted Neal Lane, a physicist and former NSF director now at Rice University in Houston, Texas. "So I'm not surprised that it's been hard to articulate how it connects to innovation and improving the nation's competitiveness." Aletha Huston, a developmental psychologist at the University of

Texas, Austin, who wrote a letter to Hutchison before the hearing defending NSF-funded work by herself and colleagues at UT's Population Research Center, points out that "if you want to understand how to remain competitive, you need to look at more than technology, ... at the organizational and human issues that play a role."

Hutchison says she hasn't decided how to translate her concerns into legislation. One option would be to limit spending for the social sciences in the upcoming 2007 appropriations bill for NSF. Another approach would be to curtail the scope of NSF's portfolio in legislation enacting the president's competitiveness initiative or reauthorizing NSF's programs.

In the meantime, says sociologist Mark Hayward, who heads the UT population center, it would be a mistake for social scientists to ignore her concerns. "We have to be persistent and consistent in our message," says Hayward, who along with Huston hasn't heard back from Hutchison. "We can't just say, 'My goodness, she's not paying attention.'"

—JEFFREY MERVIS

Phooey on Zerhouni?

Leaders at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are fending off new criticism of their boss, Elias Zerhouni. The kerfuffle began last month when Andrew Marks, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, blamed Zerhouni's "Roadmap" of trans-NIH initiatives and large clinical trials for diverting money from investigator-initiated grants. "Obviously you are not a scientist," Marks charged.

In a late April online response, all 27 directors of NIH's institutes and centers called Marks's comments a "personal attack" and a diversion from "the real issues." Marks responds that supportive e-mails show "a substantial divide" between NIH leaders and the community.

—JOCELYN KAISER

NIEHS: Doctors Wanted

The director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) wants his agency to get more clinical. The \$641 million agency has traditionally supported research on topics as diverse as DNA repair and harmful algal blooms. But Director David Schwartz wants to boost the clinical researcher corps and focus efforts on diseases with a strong environmental component such as asthma.

Schwartz says the new focus, unveiled last week in a strategic plan, won't come at the expense of basic research: "We're not taking anything away." But observers fear Schwartz's inevitable tradeoffs. "That's what everyone will be waiting to see," says toxicologist David Eaton of the University of Washington, Seattle.

—ERIK STOKSTAD

NIH Eyes Training Support Cuts

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) wants universities to pay a greater portion of the cost of training graduate students and postdocs. NIH now pays \$3000 plus 60% of the remaining tuition costs for each of the 17,000 Ph.D. students and postdocs supported through the National Research Service Award program. Under the new policy, the agency will provide 60% up to a maximum of \$16,000 per year, with additional cash for health insurance and expenses.

The agency says the proposed policy, introduced this week, will save 2500 training slots that would otherwise eventually disappear if NIH's budget remains flat. Universities will "do everything we can" to bear the new cost and "avoid the loss of training slots," says Lynda Dykstra of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The comment period ends 2 June.

—YUDHIJIT BHATTACHARJEE