Science Policy News

Budget Update: The Halfway Point

This year began with high hopes that Congress would break away from the recent tradition of partisan gridlock and make more significant headway on the legislative agenda. Though we got off to a good start with more congressional cooperation than we had seen in previous years, the upcoming midterm election may put a damper on this forward movement. In this month’s science policy column, we give you an update on the major budget issues facing the research enterprise and our analysis on how they could affect you.

With the top-line budget number for fiscal year (FY) 2015 set last December, the year began with an ambitious start, flat funding...Can We Do Better?

Food, agriculture, and natural resources research programs have had a somewhat underwhelming start in the initial budget negotiations. While most programs have not seen budget cuts, many only received flat funding, and those programs that did receive budget increases were minimal. For example, the USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) program received a 2.8% increase from both the House and Senate, meeting the president’s budget request and moving AFRI from $316 million to $325 million. Now, of course, in this climate of shrinking budgets, even a small increase is certainly appreciated. However, when compared with last year, where AFRI received a 14.5% increase, it has been disappointing to see a loss in the momentum for growing AFRI funding.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) faces a similar story. In his budget request, President Obama only asked for a 1.2% increase for NSF. The Senate met that request, bringing NSF from $7.17 billion to $7.26 billion. The House, on the other hand, put forward a more significant increase for NSF, 3.3% to $7.41 billion. Once again, this is a step in the right direction, but can we really hope to maintain our place as a global leader in science and technology with research funding levels that don’t even keep up with the rate of inflation?

Even though Congress has made significant progress in the budget process, the clock is ticking as we approach the start of the next fiscal year. Congress will only be in session for 11 days between the August recess and 1 October, and most people don’t think that will be enough time to finalize all of the appropriation bills. Since a short-term continuing resolution (CR) is becoming more and more likely, the real question then becomes will federal research programs receive flat funding with a CR or will some of the appropriations bills be incorporated into a larger deal that would allow for funding increases?

What Does It Mean for You?

So what does all this mean for researchers and students like you? More than you may think. The amount of funding research programs receive become grants and fellowships, so flat funding means no new grants and that competition will likely increase... Consider scheduling a meeting with your members of Congress to show them... the power of federal research funding in action.

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