THIRD WAY

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Freezing Research Funding Hurts More Than Just Colleges

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There's been no shortage of higher education news since President Trump returned to the Oval Office for his second term. Between the reduction in force at the Department of Education; a sweeping executive order on diversity, equity, and inclusion; and a House reconciliation bill with major proposed changes to higher education, colleges are experiencing seismic shifts. Although the federal government's role in higher education is limited, much of its involvement lies in the form of federal funding, not only through financial aid programs but also through other grants and support functions for academic research. While Congress holds the power of the purse, President Trump has sought to wield executive authority by withholding federal funds from colleges and universities, which he views as out of alignment with his agenda.

The primary purpose of higher education is to educate students, prepare them for careers, and set them up for financial security. Yet higher education's social contract extends beyond the students that

institutions serve. Colleges and universities, along with their faculty and staff, are the hubs and spokes for groundbreaking scientific research and development. Since the 1950s, universities have received federal support to advance medical and technological research that has saved countless lives and contributed to the global position of the United States as a scientific leader. On campuses around the country, cutting-edge research on some of our most challenging health issues is taking place, from understanding Alzheimer's disease and dementia to the recent discovery of a new molecule that kills hard-to-treat cancers. Research on college campuses has led to many technologies Americans use daily, including MRI tests, GPS navigation, and Google search. And while major private universities and public flagships have some of the most robust research operations, smaller colleges and those located in rural areas of the country also receive tens to hundreds of millions in research dollars from federal initiatives.

Groundbreaking scientific and medical research comes at a steep cost. The National Science Foundation cited that the total research and development (R&D) expenditures for universities in Fiscal Year 2023 exceeded $108 billion—greater than the GDP of several small countries. Of that, 55% came from federal sources, including the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Energy, the Department of Agriculture, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Institutions don't only rely on the federal government for their research funding: an additional 25% of R&D expenditures come from internal resources.

Higher education's research enterprise—developing new treatments and pharmaceuticals and running clinical trials—is an essential economic contributor with a substantially higher ROI compared to other forms of federal investment. According to recent commentary from the American Enterprise Institute, the impact of R&D also creates a pipeline for private sector innovation while developing human capital through graduate training—as they write, it should be a "no-brainer that American public policy should aim to significantly increase both government and private-sector R&D investment to boost innovation-driven productivity and economic growth." Beyond the economic impact, a substantial federally supported R&D partnership with higher education is an asset for global competitiveness and the future growth of the workforce.

The research enterprise at American colleges and universities is one of the many feathers in the cap of our higher education system, and the federal government's support is crucial in ensuring its continued growth and longevity. Despite tangible economic and health impacts, President Trump has put federal research funding for colleges and universities in the deep freeze. In the past few months, President Trump's antisemitism task force has frozen more than $2.7 billion in total grants to Columbia, Harvard, and the University of Pennsylvania. The sudden freezing of funds creates a cascading negative impact on scientific and technological research, and risks patient safety for those actively participating in clinical trials. These funding freezes hurt the colleges and universities supporting this research. Yet the real losers in the battle over research funding are those who are sick and pinning their hopes on scientific advancement for a cure.

It's true that trust in higher education is on the downswing, and there's room to improve campus culture so all students can thrive. But while voters nationwide support additional accountability for colleges and universities, they aren't looking for that in the form of cuts to lifesaving medical research. Punishing colleges and universities by abruptly turning off the tap for R&D funding will undoubtedly hurt them in the short term, but the long-term impacts of those cuts will be far more painful—and felt far beyond the campus gates.