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[Table of contents](#)

Going to bat for science

Political attacks on research are as prevalent as ever, but APA and other organizations provide a strong defense.

By Tori Deangelis

Print version: page 20

Four years ago, Kinsey Institute psychologist Erick Janssen, PhD, received a call no researcher ever wants to get.

It was his program officer at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), telling him that his \$474,000 grant on sexual decision-making was under attack. With the grant, Janssen was investigating how negative mood states, such as depression, can combine with sexual arousal to make some people more prone to taking dangerous sexual risks. But as part of an appropriations bill amendment, Rep. Pat Toomey (R-Pa.) sought to eliminate funding for the work, along with four other peer-reviewed NIH grants, including three others on sexuality.

"It was very disturbing," recalls Janssen, who had already begun the project, including hiring research assistants and programming study surveys. "One of the things that bothered me most is that there seemed to be so much misinformation about what our research was about." Soon after, Karen Studwell, senior legislative and federal affairs officer in APA's Science Government Relations Office (SGRO), who had followed the bill and heard about the last-minute amendment from Capitol Hill staff, told Janssen her office was mobilizing its network of scientists to urge their members of Congress to vote "no" on the amendment.

The strategy worked: The House of Representatives rejected the bill by 212 to 210, and the researchers kept their funding. "APA played a key role in getting the word out," Janssen says.

Janssen is just one of many psychological scientists targeted by members of Congress who seek political attention, notes APA Executive Director for Science Steven Breckler, PhD.

"On a fairly regular basis, members of Congress will pull out a federal grant, ridicule it, claim it's a waste of taxpayer money

Advert



and make a big production out of it," says Breckler. Often they'll choose grants based simply on titles, he adds, with no real idea what the research is about.

Indeed, there has been a barrage of such attacks in the last few years. In May, members of Congress attacked nine National Science Foundation (NSF) social science grants, including two headed by psychologists (see sidebar). In another recent example, Rep. Randy Neugebauer (R-Texas) went after four federally funded psychology grants, including three on how marital communication, positive journaling and young people's choice of physical and virtual environments can influence depression, and a fourth examining pigeon models of perception and cognition (see the October 2005 *Monitor*, Vol. 36, No. 9).

Professional societies like APA are probably the best defense scientists have in these cases, Breckler notes. That's because they can play an advocacy role that neither the individual scientist nor the funding agency can: The scientist is too vulnerable to make his case by himself, and the funding agency is caught in the middle between wanting to protect its researchers and knowing that Congress holds the purse strings.

"Professional associations are not at risk in the same way researchers and funding agencies are," Breckler notes. "So we are able to give a collective voice to researchers and articulate the bigger-picture value of this kind of work."

APA does this in a number of ways, he adds, including mobilizing networks of scientists, educating members of Congress and staff, training scientists to communicate effectively about their work and providing legal defense to scientists in need.

The counter-attack

In all of these efforts, APA underscores the importance of peer review, removing the onus from the individual grant and placing it in the context of the scientific enterprise as a whole, says Breckler. "We emphasize that these grants were selected in a very competitive system as judged by scientists who understand the proposal as being incredibly meritorious," he says.

In most cases, APA has about 24 hours to act—the average amount of time between when an amendment is offered and a bill is voted on, says Studwell.

When that happens, science policy staffers immediately contact the researchers to apprise them of the problem in case they don't know about it, gather more information on their research projects and let them know help is on the way. Then, APA staff e-mails its networks of psychologists and other scientists via "action alerts" that urge them to contact their members of Congress, as Studwell did during the debate over the Toomey amendment.

Working with other scientific coalitions is key, emphasizes Angela Sharpe, deputy director for health policy of the Consortium of Social Science Associations, of which APA is a founding member.

“When you have a large, diverse group of people advocating for the same thing, it has more credence in the eyes of politicians,” says Sharpe, co-chair with Studwell of the Coalition to Protect Research, a group of 60 scientific societies formed in the wake of the Toomey amendment to defend peer review. “An attack on NIH today is an attack on NSF tomorrow.”

But if a bill passes with a threat to research intact, APA moves to its next strategy: further educating Congress about peer review and the grants themselves in hopes of turning the tide when the bill comes up for a joint vote of the House and Senate. In the aftermath of the second Neugebauer amendment, for example, APA flew in the two affected psychologists—Sandra Murray, PhD, of the State University of New York at Buffalo, and Edward Wasserman, PhD, of the University of Iowa—to visit their representatives and staff and explain their research.

“I tried to impress on them that for us, this isn’t frivolous,” says Murray, who studies relationship problems because they’re a major cause of first-time major depressive disorder. “If you don’t understand how relationships work, you’re not going to be in as a good a position to understand how to deal with depression,” she explains.

Educating for the long haul

Long-term strategies to protect science are vital as well because assaults on scientific research tend to resurface with new members of Congress, new administrations, new staffers and the vagaries of the political process, Studwell notes. To that end, APA’s science policy team visits members of Congress throughout the year and holds Hill briefings on the value of peer review and specific psychological research, for example.

Likewise, APA teaches scientists how to communicate effectively about their work during its yearly advocacy workshops. Also, since 2005, APA has hosted its Science Leadership Conference, where members discuss ways to support and advance scientists’ careers.

Media and public outreach and education also are vital to APA’s long-haul line of defense, says Rhea K. Farberman, APA’s executive director of public and member communications. Her office, for example, touts psychologists’ research through its press releases; runs “Psychology Matters,” the Web-based compilation of current psychological science that can be applied to everyday life (<http://psychologymatters.apa.org/>); and schools scientists in talking with the media.

"An educated public better understands the value of basic research, and that's a key to defending it," says Farberman.

APA also earmarks funds for psychologists' legal defense. Behavioral neuroscientist and psychologist Edward Taub, PhD, tapped APA's legal help during the 1980s when his neurological research on monkeys drew attacks from animal rights activists that resulted in the closing of his NIH lab. After investigating Taub's lab practices and concluding they were completely in the realm of scientific propriety, APA gave Taub \$24,000 to fight the charges, which were overturned.

"APA helped in a big way, and it did so with a great deal of courage," says Taub, noting that the association acted against congressional and internal APA pressure in supporting him. Taub and his colleagues went on to successfully apply his original work—named by the Society for Neuroscience as one of the 10 leading examples of translational research in neuroscience in the 20th century—to thousands of stroke victims (see the October 2004 *Monitor*, Vol. 35, No. 9).

A silver lining

Fortunately, all of these cases have ended in victory: The scientists retained or recovered their funding and put their careers back on track. Still, the attacks on their work have taken a toll. Taub's case is most obvious, but others cite a chilling effect on their work.

"I spend more time worrying that someone will take my grant away and interfere with my ability to do the science I want to do," says Murray.

That said, the experience has some salutary effects as well, says Janssen. By attending a science advocacy workshop, he learned how to explain his work to Congress and the press so they understand that studying behaviors can lead to such healthy outcomes as fewer unwanted pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases.

"Going through this experience really made me more aware of the fact that it is important for researchers to explain better why we're doing what we're doing," he says.

Tori DeAngelis is a writer in Syracuse, N .Y.

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