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Fact-Checking the 'Politicization' of Scientific Funding

October 24, 2024

To the Editor:

[“The Ruthless Politicization of Science Funding”](#) by Robert P. George and Anna I.

Krylov (*The Chronicle Review*, July 25) outlines a distorted and dystopian caricature of how federal agencies support scientific research. The essay describes a review process for grant proposals that is wholly unrecognizable to me, as someone who has received grants from multiple federal agencies over the course of two decades in science. For the

benefit of readers who lack that experience, I feel obligated to fact-check its assertions.

From its outset, the essay mischaracterizes recent Executive Orders by the Biden administration aimed at delivering equitable outcomes across the federal government. It is simply untrue, as George and Krylov confidently proclaim, that “EO 13985 perversely claims that [identity] preferences are a prerequisite for equal opportunity.” Read for yourself the text of [Biden’s EO 13985](#); no such language is found there. A better summary comes from the Order itself: “The Federal Government should pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color *and others* who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality” (emphasis mine).

With similar hyperbole, George and Krylov assert that “to get funding, scientists must declare that their own institution and research groups are uninclusive and discriminatory.” No such statement appears in any program solicitation from any federal funding agency of which I am aware, and no examples are provided. The notion of “DEI loyalty oaths” is a fabrication advanced by a [501\(c\)\(3\) organization](#) with which George and Krylov are affiliated, whose mission includes opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in higher education.

What sort of DEI activities are required to obtain federal support for scientific research? In most cases, none at all. The [Proposal and Award Policies and Procedures Guide](#) from the National Science Foundation provides several examples of how to articulate the “Broader Impacts” of a proposed research program, which is a required element of any NSF proposal. Broadening participation by underrepresented groups is one possibility but other explicit suggestions include improving national security, increasing economic competitiveness, or using science and technology to inform public policy. The NSF’s “Broader Impacts” review criterion has [existed since 1997](#), as required by the National Science Board, and has persisted through presidential administrations from both political parties.

Regarding other federal agencies, George and Krylov insinuate that consultation with a

DEI liaison is required to obtain funding from the National Institutes of Health. The “evidence,” however, is simply a webpage promoting [respect and dignity in the workplace](#). They furthermore assert (without citation) that a portion of every NASA grant’s budget must be set aside for “DEI activities.” That claim is juxtaposed with expenditure estimates from an industry consulting firm, provided without context in order to look like profligate spending for unspecified deliverables. These scare tactics target readers unacquainted with writing, reviewing, or administering scientific grants. In my experience, budgets for federal grants are seldom (if ever) micromanaged. During the merit review process, anonymous peer reviewers are certainly asked to consider whether a proposal’s budget is sufficient to accomplish planned activities, but the nature of those activities is left entirely at the discretion of the would-be investigator.

A separate question is whether scientists seeking federal support *should* be asked to engage in activities that broaden participation in the scientific enterprise. Addressing this, George and Krylov suggest that “scientists seeking research funding must now profess their belief in the existence of systemic barriers.” The tacit assumption — that no such barriers exist — is nothing short of flat-Earth-style denialism. There is [overwhelming evidence](#) that [systemic barriers do exist](#), that racism in academic science and higher education is [systemic](#), [structural](#), and [pervasive](#), and that faculty hiring is [far from meritocratic](#). To the latter point, just [five universities produce one-eighth of all faculty](#) (across disciplines) while 20 percent of institutions [account for](#) 80 percent of faculty. It is impossible to realize the “equal opportunity” that George and Krylov profess to desire when a tiny number of institutional gatekeepers ensure that [academic pedigree](#) plays an outsize role in who becomes a principal investigator.

My view is that those seeking federal research support have an obligation to provide stewardship for their discipline. A scientific workforce whose demographics are [wildly inconsistent](#) with America’s population is an unhealthy ecosystem, and the question of *who* is doing science surely impacts the science that we get in exchange for our tax dollars. As [Damian Rouson puts it](#), “a diverse workforce does work differently and does different work.” Contra George and Krylov, evidence suggests that new

viewpoints, originating from individuals with diverse backgrounds (broadly construed) serve to [guard against groupthink](#) that might turn the scientific process into an echo chamber, to the detriment of American technological, economic, and societal advancement.

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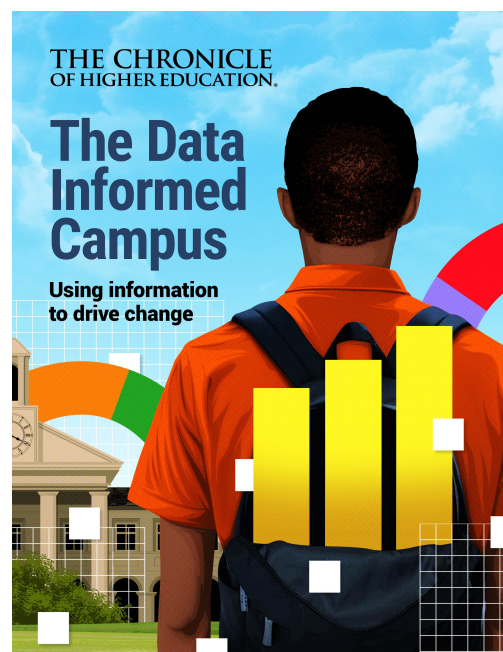
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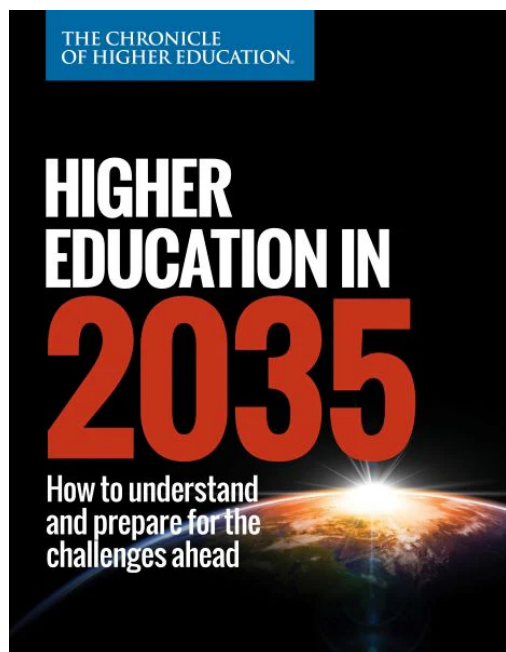
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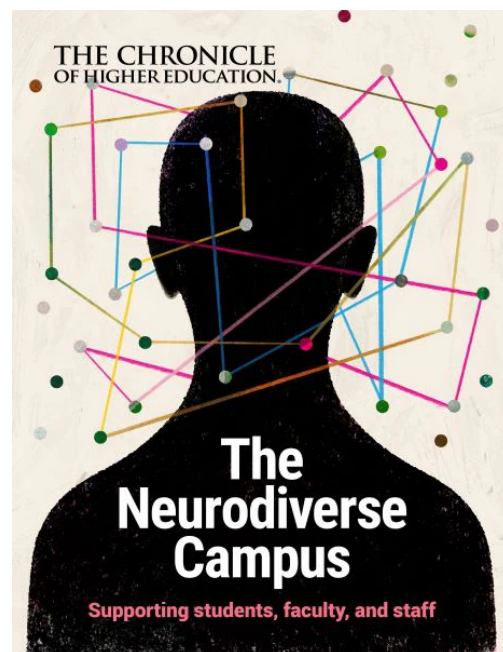
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