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Independent research institutes: Out of sight – but not out of the minefield

A new study gauges the Trump administration's impact on America's often-overlooked non-university labs

Although spared the vitriol aimed at their counterparts in academia, the nation's leading independent research institutes — or IRIs, as they're widely known — haven't escaped the Trump administration's push to roll back federal science funding and restructure future support, a new analysis reveals.

Despite ongoing efforts to keep their heads down and their eyes squarely on apolitical, highly translational research, many of these science-centered nonprofits have found themselves caught in the culture-war crossfire that erupted with Donald Trump's return to the White House earlier this year, researchers found.

The unavoidable conclusion: You can't spell "ramifications" without *IRIs*.

Harris Search Associates, the global talent and leadership consultancy that compiled the report, said its goal was twofold: to quantify the second Trump administration's initial impact on the independent research sector and, more broadly, to gain a sense of how the nation's premier IRIs might fare over the next three-plus years.

Jeffrey G. Harris, the firm's founder and managing partner, noted that those topics appear to have gone largely unexamined, at least on a large scale, even as media outlets, think tanks, and watchdog groups have rushed to analyze every salvo fired at scientists working in academia, government, or industry.

"As the scientific community here and abroad comes to terms with a new funding landscape, it's entirely possible, if not likely, that IRIs will expand the already-profound role they play in the never-ending fight to eradicate disease and improve the human condition," Harris said. "Now more than ever, therefore, it's incumbent on us to have a nuanced understanding of the independent research sector's capabilities, vulnerabilities, and potential opportunities for growth."

In compiling the study, Harris Search Associates relied primarily on data supplied by the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, the task force that Trump created by executive order within hours of his second inauguration, ostensibly to ferret out fraud and waste. For the purposes of its analysis, the firm focused on the 76 institutional members of the Association of Independent Research Institutes, or AIRI, which was founded in 1961 to help the sector "improve human health and advance knowledge." The resulting report reflects the relevant grant and contract terminations that DOGE announced prior to Aug. 1.

Among the study's highlights:

- According to DOGE's online database, formally titled the "Wall of Receipts," 18 of AIRI's institutional members experienced the termination of at least one federal grant or contract during the period reviewed. Combined, per DOGE's calculations, the affected IRIs accounted for 155 grant and contract cancellations. DOGE put the overall "savings" — that is, the losses to those organizations — at \$1.65 billion.
- DOGE reported that eight of AIRI's members suffered a single grant termination: Benaroya Research Institute in Seattle; Banner Health in Phoenix; the Florida Institute for Human and Machine Cognition in Pensacola, Florida; Magee-Womens Research Institute in Pittsburgh; the Research Institute at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio; the Santa Fe Institute in Santa Fe, New Mexico; St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee; and the Broad Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Another eight IRIs, according to DOGE, saw multiple grants pulled by formerly supportive federal agencies, including the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the world's largest public funder of biomedical research. Specifically, agencies withdrew eight grants from the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle; seven grants from Health Research Inc. in Menands, New York; five grants from Rockefeller University in New York City; three grants from the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center in St. Louis; and two grants each from the La Jolla Institute for Immunology in La Jolla, California, the Scripps Research Institute in San Diego, and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Falmouth, Massachusetts.
- The other AIRI member to suffer multiple grant terminations, RTI International in Durham, North Carolina, is in a category all its own: In the first seven months of the new administration, according to DOGE's database, RTI received notice that federal agencies were terminating no fewer than 57 of its research grants and 52 of its contracts.
- As for other federal contract cancellations, Rockefeller University had one, the Broad Institute and the New York Genome Center in New York City had two each, and the Lovelace Biomedical Research Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico, had four.

The report also examines the various strategies that IRIs have employed to offset grant and contract terminations and/or mitigate the impact of future cuts. Some organizations have resorted to layoffs and other cost-saving measures. Most have stepped up advocacy efforts, both individually and collectively, and taken additional steps to showcase their achievements. Moreover, not surprisingly, many of the organizations have redoubled efforts to reduce their long-term reliance on government funding by emphasizing financial commitments from the private sector. A few have even built capital campaigns around the administration's perceived attack on science.

The full report, which features a case study, a geographic breakdown, and institution-specific tables, is attached.