

Eroding trust and collaboration

It wasn't that long ago when scientific collaboration between the United States and China was enthusiastically encouraged as a means to accomplish the best science. American universities established campuses in China, set up exchange programs for students and trainees, and hired highly productive Chinese researchers. That all changed in 2018, when then-President Trump launched the China Initiative to rid US academia of Chinese spies. As reporter Jeffrey Mervis describes in this issue of *Science*, the National Institutes of Health (NIH)—the largest federal funder of biomedical research—vigorously responded to this charge. The agency's allegations and investigations have not only destroyed careers but also eroded trust in the agency and federal government across the scientific community.

This is probably not how Michael Lauer wants to be remembered. As the deputy director for extramural research at NIH, he probably hoped he'd be known for the many good things he's helped facilitate, particularly the substantial increases in funding during his tenure. But history is not always kind. Lauer has been heavy-handed with regard to policing foreign influence from China, allowing the agency to engage in secretive hardball to target researchers who receive NIH support and who are affiliated with Chinese collaborators.

Of course, Congress and the NIH get to set the rules of engagement, but the rules changed abruptly and without warning, with no allowance for the fact that researchers had been doing what they were previously encouraged to do, and with absolutely no acknowledgment of the likely repercussions. Chinese-born researchers working in the United States had competed successfully for federal funding for decades. So, it's reasonable for them and their colleagues to wonder why the rug has been pulled out from under them and to ask what has so suddenly changed. When pressed publicly for details, the NIH and the institutions have given legalistic responses that provide little reassurance.

It's hard not to conclude that the answer to what changed is Donald Trump's term as president along with the rise in power of conservative members of Congress bent on reviving the dark spirit of McCarthy-

ism, with China substituted for the Soviet Union. The result was threatening letters from Lauer and a complete change in tone from the institutions. As Mervis's story shows, since 2018, 100 institutions have received letters concerning 246 faculty members, most of them Asian and most working with Chinese collaborators. Altogether, 103 have been forced out, and many more have been enjoined from receiving NIH funds, which is almost always a career killer. Because the letters contain language portraying these scientists as being "unwelcome in the NIH ecosystem," very few institutions in the United States will hire them.

Is it possible that all of the nefarious activities implied by these actions were real? Sure. As Lauer told *Science*, "The fact that more than 60% of these cases

have resulted in an employment separation, or a university taking the step of excluding a scientist from [seeking an NIH grant] for a significant period of time, means that something really, really serious has occurred." But if true, did it suddenly begin in 2018 when Lauer started sending his letters? Doubtful. If it's real now, it's been real for a while. The NIH has not given adequate answers as to why this all started so abruptly.

Given the statements that Lauer has made in his letters, it's

no wonder the institutions have clammed up. But they owe their faculty, students, trainees, and staff an explanation as well. As Mervis describes, everyone who has asked about the firing of the outstanding researcher Yue Xiong at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (where I used to be the chancellor) has been ghosted by the administration. Has the national security apparatus demanded administrators' silence? Or is it the need for institutions to maintain their good standing with NIH?

The institutions and the NIH need to resolve this. Given the information available in the public domain, the scientific community could easily conclude that this is a xenophobic program to harm Chinese scientists and cut off international scientific cooperation. The federal government needs to figure out a way to let the NIH and the institutions reassure the community that this is all worth it.

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