The Supporting Early-Career Researchers Act (H.R. 144/S. 637)

*Introduced by Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-Tex), Rep. Frank Lucas (R-Okla) and Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn)*

The Supporting Early-Career Researchers Act (H.R. 144/S. 637), legislation introduced by Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-Tex.), Rep. Frank Lucas (R-Okla), and Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn), would create a new fellowship program through the National Science Foundation (NSF) for early-career researchers to help mitigate the negative effects from COVID-19 on the U.S. research workforce and diversify the research workforce pipeline.

Specifically, H.R. 144/S. 637 would create a two-year pilot program to award grants to highly qualified early-career investigators to carry out an independent research program at an institution of higher education chosen by such investigator by:

- Authorizing $250 million to NSF for fiscal years 2021 and 2022;
- Recruiting fellowship applicants from all regions of the country, including historically underrepresented populations; and
- Giving special consideration to researchers who graduated from or are intending to carry out research at a variety of institutions of higher education (IHE), including: Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and IHEs not among the top 50 in annual Federal research funding.

**Targeted aid to early-career scientists is needed and will yield broad benefits to the research community.**

The Nation’s universities and research labs are facing unprecedented budget pressure because of this public health crisis with fewer openings for research and teaching positions. Over the past year, research institutions have enacted substantial changes to experimental protocols which have resulted in social distancing guidelines in the lab, virtual data collection, facility closures, and diminished research activities. While scientists across career stages have been upended by this monumental shift, early-career scientists such as graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty are particularly vulnerable.

The interruptions to science during the COVID-19 pandemic threaten the research careers of an estimated 668,000 graduate students and 64,000 postdoctoral fellows according to the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. Early-career scientists are often just beginning to establish research independence and the negative impacts of the pandemic may be significant and long-lasting. Destabilizing fluctuations in research productivity, faculty positions in academia, and funding opportunities will impact early-career scientists in the immediate and late phases of their careers.

Additional funding can help curb the potential loss of research talent likely to occur if early-career researchers are forced from the pipeline due to circumstances which attenuate career progression and threaten their professional futures.
Adapting to online Clinical duties Funding on hold Access (computers, data) Mental Health Teaching Delayed grant/manuscript Lab closure Home needs Recruitment

People of color and female researchers are particularly vulnerable to negative outcomes from the pandemic

Recent evidence also indicates that female researchers and scientists of color are disproportionately affected. The pandemic has had a negative impact on productivity, networking and community building, and mental well-being of women in academic sciences. Mothers have also been struggling during this period, with many forced to bear the gendered effects of remote work conflicting with caregiving. Women have published fewer papers and received less recognition for their research between March 2020 and December 2020. The harm to early-career scientists of color is also devastating as many are forced to cope with the intersectionality of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and Latino communities and the stress of being a productive scientist – this may negatively impact their collective job stability and future capacity to obtain research funding.

National Science Foundation

The National Science Foundation (NSF) is an independent federal agency, the only one whose mission includes support for all fields of fundamental science and engineering, except for medical sciences. With an annual budget of $8.5B (FY21), NSF is the major source of federal backing in many fields such as mathematics, computer science, and the social sciences.

References