

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-128](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The ORISE research participation program seeks to enhance the future scientific and engineering workforce by providing students, postgraduates, and faculty with hands-on research experiences in federal agencies. The program is administered by a DOE contractor, and other agencies sponsor research participants via interagency agreements with DOE. Research participants engage in a variety of projects at DOE and other sponsoring agencies, but they are not considered federal government employees and thus are prohibited from performing inherently governmental functions.

GAO was asked to review the ORISE research participation program. This report examines (1) program expenditures by all sponsoring agencies and (2) selected agencies' assessments of program effectiveness and their guidance on inherently governmental functions.

GAO reviewed program data for fiscal years 2010-2014, the five most recent years for which data were available; examined program policies and guidance at DOE, DOD, and HHS, the three agencies that sponsored the most participants in fiscal year 2014; and interviewed officials at those three agencies.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOE, DOD, and HHS develop detailed guidance to inform their employees and research participants about inherently governmental functions. DOE, DOD, and HHS concurred with the recommendation and said they will take additional measures to provide detailed guidance to relevant parties.

View [GAO-16-128](#). For more information, contact John Neumann at (202) 512-3841 or neumannj@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

DOE, DOD, and HHS Need Better Guidance for Participant Activities

What GAO Found

For fiscal years 2010 through 2014, the 11 departments and other federal agencies that sponsor research participants collectively expended \$776.4 million for activities carried out through the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education (ORISE) research participation program (ORISE program). The three agencies with the highest expenditures for the program over the 5-year period were the Department of Energy (DOE), which oversees the contractor managing ORISE, and the Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which both sponsor research participants via interagency agreements with DOE. Expenditures increased 73 percent over that period, and the number of appointments increased 42 percent. Stipends accounted for 82 percent of expenditures over that period, with the remainder going to other participant expenses, overhead and program support, and administrative and security charges. Agencies' expenditures per appointment varied for several reasons, such as differences in methods of setting stipends.

Components within DOE, DOD, and HHS that sponsor research participants have performed some assessments of the short-term effectiveness of the ORISE program, but provide varying levels of detail to agencies' employees and research participants about inherently governmental functions—those functions that are so intimately related to the public interest as to require performance by federal government employees.

- **Program effectiveness.** Sponsoring agency components establish their own objectives for research participants and can decide whether and how to assess the extent to which the ORISE program meets those objectives. DOE, DOD, and HHS components have used questionnaires and other methods to assess how well the ORISE program meets the short-term needs of research participants and of the agency staff who oversee their activities. Agencies also face challenges in assessing the program's long-term effectiveness; for example, they do not have methods to track research participants over their careers to determine the extent to which participants' success is a result of the program. DOE has worked with other agencies on developing ways to address such challenges.
- **Inherently governmental functions.** Federal guidance directs agencies to develop internal procedures to ensure that only federal employees perform inherently governmental functions. DOE, DOD, and HHS sponsoring components' guidance for research participants that GAO reviewed had varying levels of detail on inherently governmental functions. Officials at these agencies said that research participants' projects generally do not involve inherently governmental functions, but GAO found that some research participants' projects involve activities that are closely associated with inherently governmental functions, such as participating in certain policy and strategic planning meetings, which may increase the risk of the participants performing inherently governmental functions. Development of detailed guidance could help sponsoring components reduce this risk and help officials better ensure adherence to the federal guidance on inherently governmental functions.