

Agencies Should Assess Safeguards Against Discrimination

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A report to congressional requesters

For more information, contact: Hilary M. Benedict at BenedictH@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The federal government gives grants to individual scientists and groups of scientists through their respective research institutions, supporting both basic and applied research. Federal funding agencies must have research security policies in place to ensure that such research is free of improper foreign influence. Such influence includes, for example, malign talent recruitment activities by foreign governments or misappropriation of research findings. Agencies are required to carry out research security policies in a manner that does not discriminate against scientists based on their race, ethnicity, or national origin. The Departments of Defense (DOD) and Energy (DOE), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and National Science Foundation (NSF) have applied safeguards to varying degrees in their research security programs to help prevent discrimination.

Extent to Which Selected Agencies Have Adopted Safeguards to Prevent Discrimination While Addressing Improper Foreign Influence

Transparent improper foreign influence review processes	Collection and use of demographic data to assess agency processes	Multiple levels of review in improper foreign influence reviews	Training agency staff in non-discrimination in improper foreign influence reviews	Leadership commitment to non-discrimination in improper foreign influence reviews
Department of Defense	●	○	●	○
Department of Energy	●	○	●	●
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	●	○	●	○
National Institutes of Health	●	○	●	●
National Science Foundation	●	○	●	●

● = Fully adopted ○ = Partially adopted or plan in development; ○ = Not adopted

Source: GAO analysis of selected agencies' documents and interviews. | GAO-26-107544

While NASA and NSF documented their processes for identifying and addressing improper foreign influence, they have not documented their risk mitigation processes. By clearly documenting risk mitigation processes, agencies can create shared expectations with research institutions and researchers about how these processes are implemented fairly and without discrimination. Additionally, DOD, DOE, NASA, NIH, and NSF have not assessed their research security processes to determine whether the safeguards the agencies have in place provide reasonable assurance that discrimination will not occur. By assessing their current safeguards, agencies can provide greater assurance that discrimination will not occur and may identify additional safeguards appropriate to the agency.

Why GAO Did This Study

As a global leader in scientific research, the U.S. has benefited from recruiting international talent and international collaborations. However, concerns have grown about improper foreign influence in federally funded research.

While agency identification of improper foreign influence is critical to preventing fraud in taxpayer funded research, some stakeholders raised concerns that agencies were discriminating against certain demographic groups when reviewing grants.

GAO was asked to examine whether federal agencies ensure that research security reviews are free from discrimination. This report assesses the extent to which selected agencies have implemented safeguards to prevent discrimination in research security processes.

GAO selected the five agencies that funded the highest amounts of extramural research and reviewed agency documents and published literature. GAO also performed statistical analysis on data obtained from one agency to assess differences among improper foreign influence cases and interviewed agency officials and representatives of universities and civil society organizations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations. NASA and NSF should document their risk mitigation processes. All five agencies should assess their research security processes to determine if their safeguards reasonably ensure nondiscrimination. NASA and NIH agreed, and NSF said it would consider the recommendation. DOE disagreed, noting it designed its process to ensure nondiscrimination. GAO believes that an assessment could yield benefits. DOD did not comment.