

October 25, 2021

ASBMB statement on balancing open science and security in the U.S. research enterprise

The American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology is an international nonprofit scientific and educational organization that represents more than 11,000 students, researchers, educators and industry professionals. The ASBMB strongly advocates for strengthening the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) workforce, supporting sustainable funding for the American research enterprise and ensuring diversity, equity and inclusion in STEM.

The U.S. has established itself as a leader in science and has strengthened the American research enterprise by maintaining an open environment for research that thrives on international collaboration. Over the past several years, [numerous federal investigations](#) have uncovered instances of foreign influence and interference in taxpayer-funded scientific research for nefarious purposes within the U.S. However, the response from federal agencies, in particular the Department of Justice, has raised concerns of racial profiling of the Asian and Asian American community.

The ASBMB urges Congress to employ evidence-based policy solutions to address issues of research security. The Government Accountability Office, for example, has issued a [report on this topic](#) and provided the National Institutes of Health with several policy recommendations to improve their conflict-of-interest reporting requirements. The National Science Foundation has also released a [report that recommends](#) including information related to conflicts of interest and commitment in disclosure training at universities and institutions. In addition to the recommendations above, the ASBMB recommends that Congressional members consider the following policy recommendations:

1. Federal agencies should harmonize conflict of interest (COI) and conflict of commitment (COC) disclosure requirements. Doing so would ensure an equitable disclosure system that catches genuine bad actors. Harmonizing disclosure requirements across federal agencies will reduce the administrative burden on scientists and researchers and ensure accurate reporting across grant-giving agencies.
2. Federal agencies must define non-financial conflicts of interest, such as multiple professional appointments, in their disclosure policies. Currently, the major federal funding agencies do not have clear definitions for non-financial conflicts of interest. For example, the [NIH's conflict of interest policy](#) does not address or define non-financial conflicts. As a result, universities lack sufficient guidance to manage these conflicts appropriately.
3. Federal agencies must have clear written procedures for handling allegations that a scientist has failed to disclose required information to ensure fair and equitable treatment of all individuals. According to the GAO, [three of the five main federal funding agencies](#) do not have written procedures. Having clear procedures will ensure transparency and open communication between the scientific community and federal agencies.
4. Lastly, we urge federal agencies, including the DOJ, to provide the scientific community with an evidence-based report on the issue of foreign influence to research integrity and violations of research integrity with clear details on what constitutes scientific misconduct and what constitutes criminal behavior. The scientific community needs to be aware of the potential risks associated with foreign influence in order to become stewards of research integrity.

We must do better to ensure that the American research enterprise can continue to conduct vital research and discover breakthrough therapies. Without our international partners and [without attracting international scholars](#), the American research enterprise would not be able to thrive as it does now. There have been serious instances of violations of research integrity and intellectual property theft that must be addressed. However, we must also improve the current system of disclosure requirements and research security policies to ensure that scientists who are making administrative mistakes do not face criminal penalties.

[As we have said before](#), the ASBMB is a willing partner and resource for federal agencies and a conduit to the scientific community to help navigate these threats and safeguard the collaborative environment of the scientific enterprise.