As Congress negotiates budget, new survey highlights strain of sequester cuts on university research

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WASHINGTON -- The automatic federal budget cuts, known as sequestration, that took effect in March have forced universities to lay off research-related personnel, delay projects and admit fewer graduate students, according to a new survey [1] released Monday.

Eighty-one percent of responding institutions said that sequestration was directly affecting their research activities. More than half of universities said that the decrease in new federal grant opportunities -- and the shrinking value of some existing grants -- had prompted them to reduce research-related positions, and nearly a quarter of institutions said they had already laid off research employees.

The survey of 74 public and private research universities was conducted last month by the Association of American Universities, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the Science Coalition.

Figure 1: People Costs - Percent of Respondents Reporting Sequestration Effects

Higher education and research advocates have long blasted [3] the sequester budget cuts, which first took effect in March, as detrimental [4] to scientific discovery and the nation’s economic competitiveness. But college presidents and their lobbyists in Washington have again stepped up their criticism of sequestration as a group of Congressional budget leaders meet [5] to decide
whether, or in what form, the budget cuts will continue in 2014.

At a news conference Monday, the leaders of several research universities highlighted the woes sequestration has inflicted on their campuses and warned that the consequences would become more severe if the cuts were to continue. A second round of sequester cuts will hit federal agencies in mid-January if Congress does not act to stop them.

The chancellor of the University of California at Los Angeles, Gene Block, estimated that his institution had lost $50 million in federal funding because of sequestration. He said that further reductions, coupled with declining state support, would severely cripple research projects.

Other university leaders said they were concerned that the reductions in federal research funding would drive young scientists out of the field, reduce the economic benefit university research provides to local economics, and more broadly undermine the nation’s long-term economic competitiveness.

They said that a second round of federal budget cuts would be even more detrimental than the first, largely because their institutions have largely exhausted the one-time measures they took this year to soften the impact of the cuts.

Stony Brook University President Samuel L. Stanley, for instance, said that having to cover for millions of dollars in lost federal funding had put “tremendous stress” on the institution’s own finances that was not sustainable for another year. “It becomes difficult to manage the future,” he said.

In addition, the university leaders said they were concerned of sequestration’s effect on students.

Nearly one-quarter of universities in the survey released Monday said they had already admitted fewer graduate students because of the budget cuts. Thirty percent of respondents said sequestration had led to a reduction in research opportunities for undergraduate students.

The panel of lawmakers tasked with resolving the $91 billion gap between the budgets proposed in the Senate and House earlier will meet publicly for the second time on Wednesday. Since the group first met last month, lawmakers in both parties have lowered expectations that they will reach a “grand bargain” that curbs spending on mandatory entitlement programs and makes changes to the tax code.

Even if lawmakers were unable to come to an agreement on ending sequestration and the budget cuts continue, some higher education leaders have said they are hopeful that Congress will exempt research funding from the cuts. Earlier this year, Congress passed legislation averting cuts to the Federal Aviation Authority and eliminating the need for furloughs of Agriculture Department meat inspectors.

Although federal funding of scientific research tends to enjoy broad bipartisan support in Congress, generally speaking, it’s unclear whether lawmakers will consider such a special exemption for research.

M. Peter McPherson, the president of the APLU, on Monday brushed off questions about
whether universities would be pushing for such an exemption, saying that he was focused on ending sequestration and lobbying Congress to fix long-term funding problems that will affect the overall pool of available research money.

The top appropriations leaders from both parties have urged [8] the panel to come to an agreement on the overall spending level for the rest of the fiscal year by Thanksgiving so that Congress will have enough time to pass individual budget bills before the current stopgap measure funding the government expires on January 15.

![Figure 2: Opportunity & Financial Costs - Percent of Respondents Reporting Negative Sequestration Effects](image)


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