Coburn wrong on research
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Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) wants to end federal funding of basic research in the social and behavioral sciences. This is the key recommendation in his report, "The National Science Foundation: Under the Microscope." The senator is eager to reform the foundation, the nation's premier scientific research organization, reporting directly to the president.

Some recommendations are sensible: greater emphasis on research that can transform science; stronger focus on institutional transparency and accountability, and new rules to prevent waste and abuse of federal money. But, the senator is dead wrong when he calls for terminating federal research that can strengthen our understanding of how we think, live, work and play.

There is no sound research for Coburn's recommendation to abolish the entire social, behavioral, and economic sciences directorate within the National Science Foundation. The SBE directorate has an annual cost of about $255 million — a relatively small part of the foundation's $6.9 billion overall budget.

Coburn fails to understand that scientific research must investigate the familiar as well as the obscure. Even in tough fiscal times, we should resist the temptation to put a brake on the imagination of a productive researcher. What seems like a silly idea today could yield valuable results tomorrow.

Essentially, Coburn does not believe the federal government should invest in the social and behavioral sciences — a position advocated by Sen. Kay Baily Hutchison (R-Texas) some years ago. Like many politicians, they are both prepared to spend billions on the "hard sciences," like biology, computer science, mathematics and physics, but not one penny on fields like economics, cognitive neuroscience and political science. Coburn even wants to cut the research unit that collects and produces statistics about the condition of the nation's population, which informs key policy decisions.

For Coburn and many others, the social, behavioral and economic sciences are a luxury that do not warrant federal support, especially when there is "common sense" to guide us through the challenges of everyday life.

Yet the key challenges we now face are not only due to gaps in our knowledge of the physical world. There is a serious need to improve the way we function as individuals, manage the environment, foster economic growth and communicate. These are precisely the areas of research that Coburn would close down: psychology, geography, economics, and linguistics.
If there is one lesson we should have learned from the recent disaster in Japan and the tornadoes in Missouri and Alabama, it is the need for humans to plan for and respond to natural and man-made catastrophes. This requires more — not less — research about human behavior and how neural networks and social systems influence how we respond to crises and challenges.

It is easier to manage physical systems than to intervene effectively in human communities. We know how to redirect a river — but it is far more difficult to mobilize a community to assure the quality of its water supply.

To end federal support for social and behavioral research is especially costly, if the shortfalls in our knowledge lead to further environmental damage in the places where we live.

In any effort to control federal spending, we must be vigilant in fighting waste and reducing needless bureaucratic requirements that drain time and money from basic research. Certainly, universities and research organizations should prune overgrown administrative hierarchies. But, eliminating NSF funding for the social and behavioral sciences would be a major scientific catastrophe.

For example, U.S. research in linguistics and anthropology, fields that receive their main funding from the foundation, would not survive. Generating knowledge is a messy business and we would be risking future gains in our understanding of human behavior — gains that could transform our society.

It is scientifically irrational and fiscally shortsighted to end federal support for the social and behavioral sciences. In fact, the opposite would be closer to Coburn’s goals, since in the social and behavioral sciences, relatively small investments can go a long way.

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