

# Grassley Vows To Pressure NIH Over Grants

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The ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee wants the National Institutes of Health to revoke grants to academic scientists who fail to report financial conflicts of interest to their institutions, the Iowa Senator tells [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#).

His remarks come after targeting [Harvard University](#), [Stanford University](#) and [the University of Cincinnati](#), because some academics underreported their own financial interests in research projects supported by the NIH. Institutions are required by federal regulation to report the existence of those conflicts to the agency. Grassley is seeking info from 20 other institutions about financial conflicts among their scientists, including Brown University's [Martin Keller](#), and the [American Psychiatric Association](#).

Since 1995, an NIH regulation has required scientists to report to their universities any "significant financial interests" they hold in research projects financed by the agency. Those are defined as income or equity interest of \$10,000 from a company or 5-percent ownership of its stock. The universities, in turn, are required to tell the NIH whether they were able to manage or eliminate the conflicts in order to avoid bias in the research findings, the paper notes.

A January report by the inspector general of the Department of Health and Human Services, the NIH's parent agency, said the NIH rarely checks up on the universities' reports. Grassley's staff found discrepancies when they asked drugmakers to list their payments to researchers and then asked universities to describe financial disclosures by those same scientists, the paper notes.

Rather than lean on universities themselves, he expects to use the NIH as the lever to pressure them. "If University X isn't doing their job, they pull one grant; that's all they'd have to do, it would send a very clear signal," he tells the paper. "I don't know if I want to blame the university, although I don't see how a university can be blameless...I've got oversight over the NIH, and I want them to do their job."

Grassley tells the paper the NIH informed his staff that it believes the agency lacks the legal authority to revoke a grant on those grounds. But the senator disagrees. "If you don't

have the authority to do it, I'll work to get you the authority to do it," he says. But the NIH needn't wait for that. "What university is going to sue the NIH because they pulled a grant because the university wasn't doing what NIH says they have to do anyway?...That's like being caught with your hand in the cookie jar."

He also thinks the NIH has failed to ride herd on universities adequately because the agency wishes to maintain "buddy-buddy relationships with universities and with researchers," ties that "are conflicts of interest in and of themselves."

The agency is working to change the senator's view. In a letter last week to Mr. Grassley, the NIH's director, Elias A. Zerhouni, wrote that the agency was working to ensure that its oversight of financial conflicts "is both vigorous and effective." The NIH will soon formally request public comments about how the existing reporting requirements should be "enhanced."