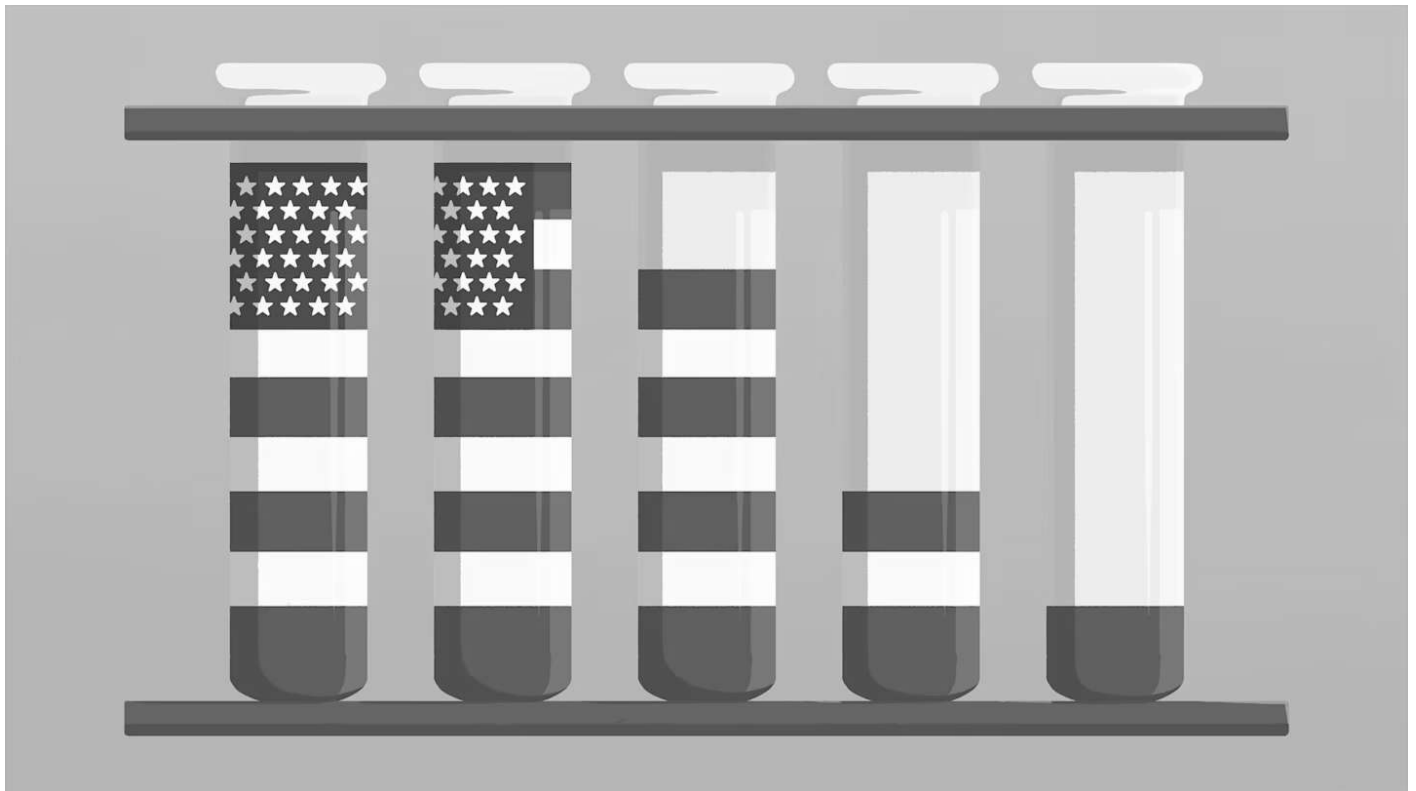


Opinion **Science****The next generation of American scientists is fading away**

While the Trump administration racks up 'wins' in its anti-woke crusade, the US is eroding its talent pipeline

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A survey by academics at MIT, Harvard and Australia's Monash University began as a piece of management research, intended to explore how biomedical scientists across the US run their labs. It turned into a dispiriting snapshot of how funding cuts and executive orders from the White House are unsettling young scholars.

Of the junior scientists who responded, a third who once envisaged careers in academia had changed their minds by early 2025, with some PhD students and postdoctoral researchers even rethinking their plans to stay in the country. The survey was published this summer as a non-peer-reviewed working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research. These are not the gripes of career bureaucrats bitter at slashed budgets, the survey's authors point out, but "the stated intentions of the next generation — the scientists who would, in ordinary times, become the principal investigators of the future".

These are clearly not ordinary times, and the biomedical research community is now bracing for another potential body blow: according to Politico, an imminent White House executive order will seek to install a political board to vet all National Institutes of Health grants, to weed out "woke" science. As the Trump administration continues to lob ideological grenades at the nation's premier centres of scientific research, it is no surprise that some future drug developers, device inventors, life savers and wealth creators are opting to walk away.

Raffaella Sadun, from Harvard Business School, told the Harvard Gazette this month that the survey of lab management practices started early last year, just as billions of dollars in grants from the NIH and National Science Foundation were being terminated or frozen, sometimes for falling foul of Donald Trump's anti-DEI crusade. Sadun and colleagues from MIT and Monash pivoted to capturing the views of young scientists caught in the crossfire.

They sent around 13,000 junior researchers a survey with several questions, including "how likely are you to stay in academia?" and "how likely are you to stay in the US?". Respondents were asked to answer twice: once for "now" (in March 2025, at the time of the survey) and once for six months prior. More than 900 replied from 134 institutions. While 66 per cent wanted to stay in academia six months before the survey, that fell to 44 per cent by March 2025. When it came to remaining in the US, just 72 per cent were keen, a drop from 93 per cent six months earlier. The authors acknowledge there may be "recall bias", and that intentions change, but describe young researchers as "the canary in the coal mine" for US scientific research.

Brady West, a research professor and statistician at the University of Michigan who has studied health disparities among sexual minorities, saw some of his own grants terminated last year and others restored on appeal. West told me he feared young researchers were walking away from federal research amid the turmoil, leaving potentially world-changing ideas unrealised, and said the notion of “woke” science irritated him: “Good science that meaningfully impacts lives is good science, no matter what the subject matter is. If your expert peers believe [it] will advance your field *and* benefit society . . . then that work should be done.”

The White House Office of Management and Budget has already tried to grant reviewing powers to political appointees at federal agencies, a proposed rule change rightly rejected by Congress. Resorting to an executive order workaround is no less toxic. “This plan will pull the plug on clinical trials that families are depending on right now, delay breakthroughs that are within reach, and hand America’s biotech edge to our global competitors,” said Erika Sward, executive director of United for Cures, a coalition of patient groups.

Judging grants on political priorities rather than scientific merit, warned the American Association for the Advancement of Science, “[risks] passing over exactly the kind of unexpected research that has produced some of America’s biggest breakthroughs”. The NIH, OMB and the Department of Health and Human Services did not respond to a request for comment.

The administration’s actions on health so far do not inspire confidence: axing grants over censored keywords, undermining childhood vaccines, mandating testosterone screening for some soldiers, the baseless scare over painkillers in pregnancy and autism. As tomorrow’s lab leaders drift away from the precarity and chaos, all those quick political wins risk adding up to a mighty loss for US health.

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