

# Growing number of federal health agencies are combing grants for taboo words, unnerving researchers

Trump administration flagging ‘trans’ and ‘diversity,’ but also ‘women’ and ‘Covid’

By [Usha Lee McFarling](#), [Angus Chen](#), and [Sarah Ower Mohle](#)  
Feb. 13, 2025

The National Institutes of Health and some VA regions are scouring existing grants using lists of flagged words, which include not just known trigger words for the Trump administration — trans, nonbinary, and diversity — but also “women” and “Covid.”

The purpose of the lists remains unclear. But the agencies’ directives, following reports last week of the National Science Foundation flagging grants with some similar language, are setting off fears that funding will be eliminated or reduced for certain research areas, including racial health disparities and women’s health.

Amid the uncertainty, some scientists told STAT they are considering self-censoring themselves to improve their chances of receiving grants. Early-career researchers said they may gravitate toward safer topics to ensure they can finish Ph.D.s and move into academic jobs, which often hinge on federal funding, or leave academia altogether.

“I study health equity and maternal and child health among marginalized populations — so two areas under attack simultaneously,” said one predoctoral researcher currently seeking NIH funding who asked that their name and institution not be identified for fear or reprisals. “I feel at a complete loss about how to adjust how I describe my work given the lists circulating about which words are prohibited in research. If I excluded those words from my proposal, half of it would be redacted.”

The lists seem to have been largely inspired by President Trump’s executive orders directing federal agencies to stop funding grants involving diversity, equity, and inclusion, and gender. Department of Veterans Affairs researchers in some regions received an email this week

ordering them to fill out a spreadsheet within hours to identify any work they conduct that includes keywords including: gender, transgender, trans, cisgender, or nonbinary. One such email, with the subject line “URGENT – NEW UPDATE – URGENT HOT HOT,” said no language had to be removed or changed currently, but research including those words needed to be identified because “VHA has received additional guidance and a new template regarding the collection of information related to the Defending Women Executive Order.”

One VA researcher who received the order said they were struggling with how to comply and feared their research findings on marginalized racial communities would not be disseminated to the public and that datasets they have created might become inaccessible. “This work has a high social impact and helps us understand if federal policies are working effectively, and the impacts of structural racism,” said the researcher, who asked not to be identified for fear their research team might face retaliation.

Various institutes and centers at the National Institutes of Health have also received lists from Trump administration appointees containing keywords — including Covid, gender, and diversity and equity-related terms — that make grants a target for additional scrutiny, three sources familiar with the lists told STAT. While the agency has not issued official guidance on limiting or defunding research in these areas, the Trump orders to limit gender research in particular saw swift communications within agencies to police language.

In a January email to staff at certain NIH institutes, sent shortly after Trump’s executive order on gender, an internal administrator asked for assistance identifying all contracts and orders that “promote or inculcate gender ideology” as their division is “required to terminate” them. The email obtained by STAT also instructs staff to remove terms including “he/she/they/them,” “gender,” “transgender,” and “nonbinary” from contracts.

Staff were given until Jan. 31 to comply. “I apologize for the extremely short timeframe,” the administrator ended the email.

NIH, VA, and NSF officials were asked for comments about the lists and their purpose. NSF pointed to a webpage describing how it is

implementing the executive orders and responding to federal judges' restraining orders against them.

One researcher, who asked not to be identified, said a number of grant applications they had been given to review for an upcoming NIH study section, a grant review meeting, contained many keywords; they were postponing reviewing them, assuming they would be pulled. "I've been waiting because is this how I should spend my time if they are not going to be reviewed?" they said. So far, though, they have not received any indication the grants will not be considered.

A list of words that could cause a NSF grant to be pulled became public on social media last week when Darby Saxbe, a professor of psychology at the University of Southern California, shared a list obtained from an NSF program officer. It included "biased," "genders," "female," "historically," "political," and "trauma," sparking outrage and incredulity because some of the words are so widely used across science.

"Bias is a word commonly used in statistics. Diversity could refer to bees or the microbiome or galaxies. This list is so broad it could put any grant under the microscope," Saxby told STAT. "The way they are doing it is banning all science. The tools are so blunt."

She said the list also means NSF program officers are combing through grants for keywords instead of "spending time trying to figure out the best science to fund."

Rachel Hardeman, who directs the Center for Antiracism Research for Health Equity at the University of Minnesota, said the NSF list, with some words repeated several times, "speaks to their sloppiness." "This list reads to me as people who don't do this work, and have never read any of this work," she said. "That's probably good."

Hardeman, who was among the first to use the terms white supremacy and structural racism in a top medical journal, in a 2016 perspective she published with co-authors in the New England Journal of Medicine, said it has been a decadeslong fight to have such words discussed openly in medicine, and that research on health equity would continue despite bans on certain terms. "Let them have their list," she said. "We have important work to do."

There is some indication the lists of banned words are becoming more precise. In the VA email, scientists were told they only had to flag the word “person” when used as an alternative to man or woman, as in “pregnant person.”

Arghavan Salles, a clinical associate professor of medicine at Stanford University, said she was alarmed to see the word women on the NSF list, given that research on women is considered so underfunded. While the word may have appeared as part of the administration’s disdain for transgender rights, she said its inclusion on lists, along with the government altering the websites of the NIH Office of Research on Women’s Health and the Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, signaled a bigger attack on women, and research about them.

“It’s bad enough if it’s an attack specifically on trans folks, but I think it’s bigger,” she said. “When people say of course women are part of DEI programs, I say ‘I think you’re missing the part where this is about women’s health.’”

Republican members of Congress have voiced support for the Trump administration’s attack on DEI and words perceived to fall under a broader DEI umbrella. On Tuesday, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) released a database of over 3,400 grants funded by the NSF. A statement posted by the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation said this funding was “diverted towards questionable projects” that promoted DEI or “advanced neo-Marxist class warfare propaganda.”

Cruz lauded the Trump administration’s actions in the statement and said DEI had harmed research and science. “The Trump administration has been taking a sledgehammer to the radical left’s woke nonsense,” Cruz said in the statement.

Despite being just a few weeks old, the executive orders and circulating lists are already affecting scientists.

In some cases, they are combing through grant applications to see whether they’ve used terms that could trigger concern. That’s what Justin English, an assistant professor of biochemistry at the University of Utah, did while wrapping up a recent submission that kept him up until

2 a.m. “I did look. I have such words. There is no reasonable replacement within the field for saying you’re going to make a ‘diverse’ selection of molecules,” English said. “I suppose I could dance around it in an unsatisfying way. But I chose not to do that.”

Alexandra Psihogios, a clinical psychologist at Northwestern University, said that even without direct evidence that the NIH is dinging applications for using specific words, researchers are increasingly considering going to unprecedented lengths to ensure their applications don’t get screened out during the already grueling gauntlet of grant review.

“People are starting to wonder if they should use different words instead, like ‘representativeness,’ ‘generalizable health care for all,’ to communicate that ... we want our interventions to work for all sorts of people from different backgrounds,” she said. “That conversation is coming up a lot in academic spaces.”

Even some researchers who have received substantial private funds have begun to rethink how they communicate their science to avoid controversy. In one interview with STAT, Sophia George, a researcher studying gynecological cancers at the University of Miami Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, cut herself off from using the word “diverse” when explaining research intended to broaden the collection of tissue samples that could dramatically improve AI tools to understand cancer for precision medicine. “Places around the world,” she finished the half-spoken word, after a pause.

“I want to be able to communicate beyond words that might be triggering to the general population. So, as a scientist, we have to keep innovating and thinking about how we represent the work we do. So, it is ‘a heterogeneous group of spaces,’” she said, referring to the recruitment sites for the research, which include places in Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. George, though, used the word diversity through the rest of the interview. This project is funded by the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, not the federal government.

Some young researchers say the politicization of research — even if they don’t study any of the areas that appear to be off-limits for funding — is making them consider leaving academia. Two postdocs who spoke to

STAT said they were now instead weighing veterinary school, clinical medicine, or jobs in industry over working in academic research, including those considered by their peers as highly likely to succeed.

“If I’m having second thoughts, ... imagine the people who were already struggling,” said Tyler Nelson, a researcher studying pain perception at the University of Florida who has received several NIH awards for graduate training and was pretty sure, until recently, he wanted an academic career. “It feels like a whole generation of trainees are about to just disappear.”