

Assessing the societal impacts of scientific research

Congress and science funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation are searching for ways to better assess the real world effects of public investments in basic scientific research. These concerns are now known as the “broader impacts” of science. This project will critically evaluate approaches to characterizing the broader impacts of science and develop an agenda for advancing understanding of how and how much impact scientific progress has on societal well-being. By generating a unified conceptual grounding for broader impacts evaluation, and sponsoring the creation of an ongoing community of broader impacts researchers and user groups, this project has the potential to transform our thinking about how to best assess the value of scientific research.

This project will begin by engaging a team of researchers representing a broad range of relevant disciplines who will work together to survey and organize the existing scholarly literature on the topic of broader impacts. This interdisciplinary team will critically assess the different approaches to evaluating the broader impacts of science, with the goal of developing a general account of the various strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches existing today. The team will then prepare a report synthesizing these approaches in order to identify the current ‘best practices’ within the field. To engage even broader input, the research team will convene a two-day workshop with leading academics working in the area of broader impact assessment to offer criticisms and advancements on the analysis of the research report, toward the goals of further extending and improving this analysis as well as sharing their differing assumptions and perspectives with one another. Second, the workshop will have these perspectives vetted by representatives of US agencies such as the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, along with representatives from European, South American, and Asian science agencies. This will help foster the creation of a community of broader impacts researchers and interested groups.

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