

The Impact of Federal Grant Terminations at CUNY
CUNY Board of Trustees Written Testimony: May 12, 2025 Queens Borough Hearing
Claire Wladis, Professor, Borough of Manhattan Community College

On May 2, 2025, the National Science Foundation (NSF) abruptly terminated our \$2.25 million research grant to study STEM majors across CUNY whose academics are negatively impacted by illness, injury, disability, or physical/mental health conditions. The only information given in the termination notice was that it “no longer effectuate[s] the program goals or agency priorities”. I am writing today to share not only the specific impact of this research grant loss, but also the larger collective implications of these grant terminations for CUNY and the consequences of not taking action.

The negative impacts of these federal grant terminations cannot be overemphasized. There are immediate negative impacts to students, staff and researchers employed on these grants who abruptly lose health insurance and income that they depend on to pay living expenses, including educational expenses for their children and unreimbursed medical costs. Most of the terminations at the NSF have been to educational research, which is critical to improving student outcomes and providing a quality education to all students, regardless of background or resources, which is the fundamental core of CUNY’s mission.

But beyond the negative consequences for individual grant cancellations, there are much larger issues at stake. All federal funding for research and higher education is at risk of abrupt and unpredictable termination if we do not fight terminations that have already taken place. More and more grants are being terminated in an ever-expanding net and there is no sign that this will stop.

The government started by stating that it was eliminating “DEI programs” from federal funding. But then the NSF went further and cancelled projects that were **researching** a protected group, even when no outreach activities or programs were part of the project. Research projects that investigated questions such as what factors impact the educational outcomes of women, racial/ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities were terminated. Now, projects are being terminated that are not even researching protected groups. Our terminated NSF grant was a fundamental research grant that was not focused on a protected class. Our research collected surveys from **all** STEM majors at CUNY, looking at how illness, injury, disability, or physical/mental health conditions impacted them academically, and investigating what colleges can do to support their degree progress.

Half of CUNY STEM majors during our large-scale survey data collection indicated that they had experienced at least one of these conditions last term and that it had affected them academically—illustrating the widespread impact of this issue on STEM degree completion. Students who identified as having legal disabilities only made up 10% of our data—yet our grant was terminated anyway, with only the vague statement that it “no longer effectuate[s] the program goals or agency priorities”, even though it is in line even with current NSF

broadening participation guidance. Our grant is not the only example of this expanding overreach. This process of terminating research grants and federal funds for universities seems unlikely to stop until and unless we come together and take decisive legal action to stop it.

Terminating our NSF research grant was not only a blow to science, but also a complete negation of the experiences of many CUNY students. In the 9 months that we collected data before the grant was terminated, 1,558 students responded to survey questions and 58 completed in-depth clinical interviews. The students who let us interview them for the grant-funded research each took 1-2 hours of their time to relay a broad array of personal details about themselves and their college experiences because they believed that the research would help others toward STEM degree completion. Students related a wide range of experiences, including severe injuries from car accidents, pregnancy complications, mental health disorders like anxiety or major depression, neurodiversity like autism spectrum disorder or ADHD, mobility impairments, blindness, short-term and chronic illness, and a wide variety of other conditions. Yet almost none of these students had sought formal accommodations or official support for their condition from their college.

Many students had taken informal steps to support their degree completion in the face of illness/injury or disability, but college-level factors often got in the way. Despite this, and despite delayed degree progression, these students continued to persist in their pursuit of a STEM degree, often at high personal cost and without needed support. And while the students we researched had persisted so far in their pursuit of a degree, it is not clear how many of them will be able to reach degree completion without additional supports or structural changes at the college level. There is no existing research investigating at a large scale how chronic or acute illness, injury, disability, and physical or mental health conditions impact STEM majors' pursuit of their degree, or what colleges can do to more efficiently support them to degree completion. The remaining four years of the research were supposed to address this critical knowledge gap and answer these pressing questions for both research and practice. The answers to these questions have critical implications for CUNY students.

Many of the students that we interviewed cried during their interviews as they related the wide area of life experiences that impacted them personally and academically, but they insisted on completing their interviews anyway because they thought that it would help other students in their shoes in the future. One older student who had a severe undiagnosed illness vomited during the interview but likewise insisted on continuing because they felt that the research was so important. But funding was abruptly terminated before we could formally analyze any of the data or write up any of the results. So, these students' stories will remain untold, and their voices will never have a chance to impact policies and structures at CUNY or other colleges around the country. CUNY will have broken trust with these students if we allow this grant termination to stand without doing everything we can to oppose it.

We cannot continue this research project without funding. While I have been very fortunate in my success at securing external funding, managing a roughly \$1 million-per-year portfolio of grants as a PI prior to this termination, I am also a community college faculty member who does not have time for this level of research built into my appointment. Without external grants, I do not have the reassigned time to dedicate to this research. The research also requires extensive student recruitment, payment of research subjects, management and collection of large datasets from survey and interview responses, and time-intensive data analysis and dissemination. This requires staff such as research assistants and project managers, whom I cannot employ without funding. The termination of this grant cut all of their salaries, as well as summer salary that researchers had been counting on to pay children's educational and medical expenses. In addition, we cannot pay research subjects to participate in the research without funding, and it is problematic to ask CUNY students (who are already extensively time-poor due to work and family responsibilities) to essentially donate their time to research—we need funding to reimburse students for the time that they spend answering surveys or being interviewed.

Even if funding is eventually restored through legal action, large research projects like this one cannot simply pause and start back up again once the funding is back. Data agreements with CUNY offices expire; new staff have to be hired and trained from scratch all over again; students who were part of the research project have moved on and new research subjects need to be found. The time and resources it would take to start up the research again after a substantial pause would set the research back at least a year or two. This is why bridge funding is so essential. CUNY needs to look for ways to provide bridge funding for research that was terminated—this is critical to ensuring that research can continue if/when funding is restored, or that at least some of the results of existing research can be brought to completion so that they can impact practice.

The reason my research was able to grow to a \$1 million per year externally funded enterprise was that I was able to receive a number of different internal CUNY grants to collect pilot data and build the needed research capacity for applying for large federal grants. Without these internal CUNY grants, I would never have been as successful as I have been with external funding. However, CUNY cut most of these internal grant programs during the pandemic and they have not been restored. Now there are few internal grants left. Even with the existing internal grants, researchers who have had their federal grants terminated cannot apply for them—the deadlines have already passed. Moving forward, CUNY needs to reinstate and expand its internal funding opportunities and provide additional ones with extended deadlines for researchers whose federal funding has been terminated without warning. Otherwise, the most promising research at CUNY (federal awards are very difficult to get and represent some of the most competitive science) will wither on the vine.

Termination of federal grants has squeezed researchers' time twofold: not only do they now have to sacrifice personal time outside of their paid appointment to keep research going for which federal funding has been abruptly halted, they also have to put in extra hours on their own time to write new grant proposals. The average federal funding application takes

hundreds of hours to write¹, and the average successful NSF grant takes 2.3 submissions before being funded², adding up to months of full-time work. CUNY doesn't provide reassigned time to write external grant proposals—researchers, especially those at community colleges, have to write external funding proposals on their own time—during evenings, holidays and weekends, on top of their normal workload.

Given that the researchers with terminated grants are proven entities who have already been able to successfully obtain external grant funding, it would be a good investment for CUNY to pay these researchers (in the form of reassigned time and summer salary) for the time that it will take them to write subsequent proposals for external funding to make up what has been lost. This is an investment in CUNY's future.

Weathering this storm requires specific action, and there are several steps that CUNY can take:

- CUNY needs to provide funding to support research previously supported by terminated grants by:
 - providing bridge grants to researchers whose federal funding is abruptly terminated;
 - reinstating and expanding internal research funding (most of which was eliminated during the pandemic); and
 - extending deadlines for internal funding opportunities for researchers whose grants have been unexpectedly terminated.
- CUNY needs to provide reassigned time and summer salary to researchers with terminated grants both
 - to complete some part of the research that was terminated by federal agencies; and
 - to apply for new sources of external funding to support the canceled research or other related research.
- CUNY needs to support PIs on terminated federal grants who want to submit an appeal.
- CUNY needs to actively generate collaborations with other universities and national organizations to pursue legal action to stop the illegal termination of federal research grants. Recent NIH lawsuits have successfully achieved injunctions and are moving forward. Many legal scholars have stated that NSF grantees with terminated awards have a strong case. CUNY does not need to pursue legal action on its own—there are many other universities and professional organizations in the same boat and we need to band together to restore federal research funding.

¹ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0118494>

² <https://www.nsf.gov/funding/overview>