

May 6, 2012

Honorable Harry Reid
Office of Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader Reid:

The Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) is an advocacy group for the promotion of the social and behavioral sciences, which acts as a bridge between the academic research community and Washington policy making community. COSSA's members include the major professional associations and scientific societies in the social and behavioral sciences as well as regional and sub-disciplinary groups, universities, and research centers and institutes.

We are writing to strongly object to recent amendments regarding restrictions on government employees' participation in meetings and conferences. These amendments were included in the "Digital Accountability and Transparency Act" (H.R. 2146) in the House, and the "21st Century Postal Service Act" (S. 1789) in the Senate. They go far beyond curing the excesses at which they are aimed. They threaten to damage essential links between research communities and the government, which will weaken the nation as well.

All of COSSA's members hold meetings each year in which academics and policy makers from federal agencies interact to present new research findings, to discuss the relevance of these findings to federal policies, and to examine evaluations of federal programs. COSSA is concerned that the provisions in the amendments would preclude or limit these kinds of important interactions, thus hampering the ability of government officials to gain valuable insight for public policy from research in the social and behavioral sciences.

The impact of Section 4, the final section of the amendment, which limits any agency from expending funds on "more than a single conference sponsored or organized by an organization during any fiscal year, unless the agency is the primary sponsor and organizer of the conference," is especially egregious. We recommend that Congress should drop it in its entirety or that Congress should change it to require a second level of review, if a person wants to attend a second conference sponsored by the same organization.

This language would preclude Department of Education officials from attending both the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in April and its special policy conference in September, even though sessions at each are of

great relevance to education policy and the rigorous evaluation of proposed reforms. The American Statistical Association, in addition to its annual meeting, may host several conferences on improving different aspects of the federal statistical system, such as increasing privacy protection and reducing costs. Very often the same experts at the Bureau of the Census or the statistical divisions of other government agencies are uniquely able to contribute to and ensure that their agencies benefit from the plans made and knowledge exchanged at such meetings. As written, no expert could attend more than one such meeting each year unless his or her agency had given the Statistical Association funds to hold the conference.

Similar stories could be told of employees of the Defense Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Intelligence Community who need to attend meetings held by the American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Association, the American Political Science Association and, indeed, almost all COSSA member organizations.

In addition, there are many government scientists employed by science agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. NSF and NIH program officers need to stay current on the latest research conducted in their fields by attending conferences of scholarly societies and by presenting their research at these meetings. In addition, limiting an agency's staff attendance at scientific conferences would have a significant adverse affect on the work done by the many intramural researchers at NIH.

Moreover, the proposed amendment may increase rather than decrease agency costs. Conferences allow broad interaction between government officials and numbers of academic experts in one place at one time. Attendance at a conference can reduce the need to bring dozens of experts to Washington whom an agency would want to consult. In addition, conferences promote contacts and serendipitous learning that can be vital to the effective functioning of government agencies.

COSSA is also concerned about the definition of "conference" in Section (1) (D) which defines "conference" as a meeting "sponsored by 1 or more agencies, 1 or more organizations that are not agencies, or a combination of such agencies or organizations." This definition encompasses almost every conference held by an association, or virtually any other non-governmental organization. Congress should change the definition of conference so that it refers only to meetings sponsored by government agencies. This would effectively deal with such excesses as those seen at the 2010 GSA conference.

However, by itself this change is inadequate for the definition would also capture small meetings, often called conferences, but which are more in the nature of working groups. These are called to focus on specific problems with the goal of, at

one end of the spectrum, exchanging information about what is known including what has been recently discovered and, at the other end, developing a concrete agenda and taking initial steps for moving ahead. To thwart efforts at either end of this spectrum or at any place in between is to diminish our capacity to establish effective evidence-based programs. One way to handle this while still limiting extravagant spending is to add to the definition of covered conferences a size restriction. Thus, conferences might be defined as “meetings sponsored by one or more federal agencies” and involving 100 or more invited attendees or 50 or more federal government employees.”

We recognize the need to increase transparency and accountability in the spending of taxpayer dollars. However, the participation of government officials in non-governmental meetings and conferences is crucial to the development of effective public policies. Such conferences provide an essential forum for give and take between researchers and government officials to ensure that the implications of the research are properly understood and applied to the challenges that are confronting American government and society. The dangers of government operating in a vacuum, with fewer opportunities to learn and exchange information with researchers and practitioners in a conference or meeting setting, are too great to ignore.

COSSA urges the Congress to re-examine and revise provisions of the amendments as the legislative process moves forward. Congress should modify the language to allow federal employees to attend scientific and educational conferences held by scholarly associations and other non-governmental organizations, without compromising the goal of enhanced federal accountability

Thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,

Howard J. Silver, Ph.D.
Executive Director

And the following COSSA Member Associations

American Association for Public Opinion Research
American Economic Association
American Educational Research Association
American Historical Association
American Psychological Association
American Society of Criminology Executive Board

American Sociological Association
American Statistical Association
Association of American Geographers
Law and Society Association
Linguistic Society of America
Midwest Political Science Association
National Communication Association
Population Association of America
Society for Research in Child Development

Identical copies of this letter were sent to

Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin
Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Whip Jon Kyl
House Speaker John Boehner
House Majority Leader Eric Cantor
House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy
House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi
House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer
House Asst Dem. Leader James Clyburn
Chairman Joe Lieberman
Ranking Member Susan Collins
Chairman Darrell Issa
Ranking Member Elijah Cummings