



30 June 2014

Erin K. Behrmann, Senior Analyst  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G St. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20548

Re: Scientific and Technical Conferences - GAO code 100008

Dear Ms. Behrmann,

I am writing to share the views of IEEE-USA on federal policy restricting participation in science and technology conferences by U.S. federally-funded scientists and engineers (S&Es). This policy has caused a significant reduction in participation by government employees, government contractors, and federally-funded academics in professional science and engineering conferences that have historically served as an effective and efficient means for advancing critical federal research and related missions.

With over 200,000 engineers, scientists, and professionals employed in all sectors of the economy as members, IEEE-USA strongly supports active participation in professional conferences by federally-funded S&Es regardless of whether they are employees of the U.S. government, Federally-Funded Research and Development Corporations FFRDCs, and industrial contractors, or academics.

Participation allows federally-funded scientists and engineers to exchange ideas on novel research, remain current in their technical disciplines, and form valuable collaborations. Professional conferences tie together the U.S. science and engineering community, promote the dissemination of research and technical innovation, facilitate peer review of research, provide training opportunities, create venues for recruitment of talent, and help educate graduate students. Furthermore, international conferences allow U.S. S&Es to collaborate and remain competitive with the international community.

Federal agencies, such as DoD, DOC, DOI, and DOE, use technical conferences as opportunities to engage a wide collection of researchers. By drawing technical groups together in a single location, these conferences allow agencies to efficiently review a large collection of independent research projects, stay abreast of their R&D investment portfolio while realizing significant cost savings over multiple site visits to each researcher's laboratory, scheduling and equipping individual teleconferences or paying for individual researchers to travel to their program offices. Limitations on conference attendance by basic research program managers across the United States Government are particularly harmful in this regard.

Scientific and technical conferences also play a catalytic role in encouraging technology transfer from defense or national laboratories, FFRDCs, national institutes, and academia to the private sector. Collaborations, partnerships and information-sharing are most effectively done face-to-face, which is what conferences provide.

Active participation of federally-funded S&Es in the broader professional community is also essential to competitively recruit and retain top scientific and technical talent for federal-funded research and development positions. Without the opportunity to present and publish their research, engage in peer review and collaboration, and obtain continuing education, highly qualified technical professionals will be discouraged from pursuing careers in the public sector. The importance of professional development through participation in professional conferences was recognized in the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) memo, “Scientific Integrity”, dated 17 December 2010, and in numerous department and agency policies implementing that memo. (DODI 3200.20 explicitly mandates “professional development of DoD scientists and engineers by encouraging: Professional presentations and peer-reviewed publications [and] Participation in professional societies”.)

Participation in S&T conferences, including presentation of thesis results, is widely recognized as an important component of STEM graduate education. Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) and Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) faculty privately have shared their concerns that AFIT and NPS graduate students are being deprived of this important educational experience.

Participation in overseas conferences additionally provides valuable insights into the more than two-thirds of the world’s research that is not performed in the U.S., including access to foreign researchers whose ability to enter the U.S. may be inhibited by visa-processing constraints. Overseas conference attendance permits U.S. scientists and engineers to attain and retain leadership in a globally competitive R&D environment. Recognizing the importance of S&T interactions with foreign researchers, DoD has maintained overseas technical liaison offices for many years. Yet, even DoD scientists and engineers stationed at these offices often are prevented by current policy from attending technical conferences nearby.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) took a useful step last year by issuing a Controller’s Alert to federal departments and agencies noting that:

“as each agency reviews its travel and conference-related activities, it is critical for each agency to continue to recognize the important role that mission-related travel and conferences can often play in Government operations. Given the unique travel and conference needs of each agency, there are circumstances in which physical collocation is necessary to complete the mission. These circumstances may include, but are not limited to, collaborations in the scientific community...”

DoD Undersecretary Kendall likewise stated that:

“The Department is the single largest employer of scientists and engineers in the United States. Maintaining professional currency is an important part of this investment in human capital. Science and technology (S&T) conferences and symposia, at which technical data and information is exchanged, are potentially beneficial both for maintaining technical competence and for the professional development of DoD scientists and engineers.”

Unfortunately, neither memo appears to have had much impact in practice.

In closing, we would note that Federal policy driving disengagement of federally-funded S&Es from the national S&T community is encouraging organizations like IEEE to consider relocating major technical conferences out of the U.S. We have been frustrated, and our nation is being embarrassed, by the number of invited talks by prominent U.S. government researchers that have been cancelled. Some hosts in the EU are discouraged from inviting U.S. speakers, because travel approval processes result in cancellations that come too late to make program changes. In an age of globalization of scientific and engineering R&D collaborations, our nation’s ability to collaborate on science and technology is waning.

As a consequence of these and similar self-inflicted wounds, our global competitiveness is being challenged, and in some cases overrun, by China and the EU.

For a more detailed description of the issue and its policy implications, please refer to IEEE-USA’s position statement on “Participation in Professional Conferences by Government Scientists and Engineers”, which is attached and also available on-line at: <http://www.ieeeusa.org/policy/positions/profconferences1012.pdf>.

Thank you for your consideration this important matter. Please call upon us, if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary L. Blank". The signature is written in a cursive style and is placed over a light gray rectangular background.

Gary L. Blank, Ph.D.  
2014 President, IEEE-USA