



Best Practices for Protecting Researchers and Research: Recommendations for Universities and Institutions

With nearly 36,000 members, the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) is the world's largest organization of basic scientists and physicians who study the brain and nervous system. As part of its support for the responsible use of animals in research, SfN offers guidance to scientists under attack by groups attempting to eliminate the use of animals in research and also by educating the public on the value of this research. SfN's Committee on Animals in Research (CAR) serves as a resource for all SfN members under attack or concerned about attacks and guides Society leadership on SfN's position on animal research.

Recently, the number of campaigns of harassment and intimidation, often at researchers' homes and involving their families, against researchers has increased sharply. SfN members reported more attacks in the first six months of 2007 than in the five-year period from 1999 to 2003.

The Society believes that the safety and security of those using animals in their research depends heavily on the proactive involvement of their research institutions. Thus, SfN recognizes that responsible and humane animal research is a major mission of most research institutions around the world. Most of this research is funded by national governments; in the U.S. the major funding agencies are the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and National Science Foundation (NSF). Part of the institution's obligation to its sponsoring government and other sponsors of such research is to ensure the ability of researchers to conduct their research in a safe environment.

SfN supports the efforts of governments worldwide to combat these anti-research campaigns. A linchpin of U.S. efforts is the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, a law that strengthens and codifies penalties for illegal animal rights activity.

SfN asserts that the university or institution bears the primary burden of maintaining the fundamental principles of academic freedom.

SfN believes it is the university or institution's obligation to provide an appropriate and safe environment free from attacks for its researchers and that this safety should extend to personal residences.

As the primary scientific society for neuroscientists in North America, SfN asks other societies and individual researchers worldwide to encourage research institutions to implement the following recommendations.

Recommendations

To support the vital progress of scientific research, as well as the health and economic wellbeing of the university or institution, the nation, and the global science community, each university and research institution should adopt the following plan in order to pre-empt and react to anti-research activists:

1. Leadership and Administration

Provide regular, explicit public affirmation from the institutional leadership in support of academic freedom and state the institutional commitment to ensuring the protection of those individuals exercising it. The responsibility for protecting researchers under attack lies at the highest level of the executive and academic administration. The president or chancellor will demonstrate strong interest and leadership in cases of attack and communicate that leadership is personally responsible for the safety of the researchers.

In cases where researchers are under attack, pursue legal measures, public declarations, statements of support, provisions of accurate information to the public and other forms of sustaining moral and psychological support. Successful implementation of these actions must start at the top of the institution; administration, security personnel, and public affairs and communications departments also have important roles to play.

When illegal activities occur, publicly support and encourage prosecution to the fullest extent of the law. Where appropriate and whenever possible, the administration and its counsel will pursue legal actions on behalf of the researcher, relieving them of the burden of seeking legal protection.

Request formal support from the academic senate or equivalent body. Such an entity should bring forward and vote on a resolution condemning the attempt to intimidate or use violence against any member of the university or institution who is appropriately engaged in research activity and would be supplemented by an annual and explicit statement from administration endorsing the same principles.

2. Security

Assign staff to monitor security efforts, deploy campus resources as necessary, and communicate with affected researchers. Ensure that these personnel are on call at all times and have the ability to easily communicate with top administration officials. The burden of designing and executing a security plan lies with the university or institution, not the researcher.

Develop a plan with local law enforcement. An effective, rapid, coordinated, and sustained response by local law enforcement will provide adequate physical security measures for targeted researchers on and off campus.

Develop a formal process for responding to threats against personal and physical safety. This process will be initiated, formulated, and communicated by upper-level administration, and maintained by the appropriate staff.

Establish an organizational structure that anticipates and forestalls threats to a researcher. This will not require the investigator to initiate protective measures.

Establish or strengthen security protocols. Immediate response services will be created or extended to better support faculty who experience harassment at their home.

Ensure regular and effective communications between security personnel and community law enforcement to avoid gaps in protection. Researchers under personal attack should not be “outside of the jurisdiction” of law enforcement.

3. Public Affairs and Communications

Actively pursue the introduction and passage of federal, state, and local legislation and regulations that would protect research. Similarly, it is in the best interest of the scientific community that research institutions oppose federal, state, and local legislative activity that would restrict responsible research.

Urge lawmakers to ensure consistency of protective coverage across jurisdictions. They will work to standardize laws enforced by state and local governments that protect researchers.

Proactively build relationships with reporters to convey accurate information about responsible research, as well as specific research being conducted at the facility. Communications staff will maintain a welcoming environment for media who can accurately portray animal research and its benefits.

Regularly examine student-university organizations, in keeping with standards of protected activity. They will ensure that such organizations are not using their university “sponsorship” to interact with potentially dangerous non-university organizations advocating violence, particularly those classified by law enforcement as domestic terrorist organizations.

Ultimately, research institutions must make an unwavering commitment to ensuring the safety, security, and ability of researchers to pursue responsible research. When protests extend beyond constitutionally protected activities and become personally violent or intimidating, the leadership and administration are obligated to demonstrate that protection of researchers is a core responsibility and directly affects the livelihood of both the institution and the global research enterprise.

Developed by the SfN Committee on Animals in Research

For more information: Training and Advocacy Department, The Society for Neuroscience
advocacy@sfn.org, (202) 962-4000