

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, ACADEMIC SENATE

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*Chair of the Assembly of the Academic Senate
Faculty Representative to the Regents
University of California
1111 Franklin Street, 12th Floor
Oakland, California 94607-5200*

August 28, 2014

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
United States Senate
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Feinstein:

Re: Conference Accountability Act of 2014

On behalf of the University of California Academic Council, which is the executive committee of the Assembly of the Academic Senate, I write to express the University of California faculty's significant concerns over the Conference Accountability Act of 2014 (S. 1347), currently under consideration by the United States Senate. This bill would codify and add to the 2013 restrictions on travel to scientific conferences put in place by the Office of Management and Budget that we know negatively impact the work of UC scientists who conduct federally sponsored research, especially at the UC-managed National Laboratories.

The Academic Council's Special Committee on Laboratory Issues (ACSCOLI), which oversees UC's relationship with the laboratories, is concerned that S. 1347 will further deter Laboratory scientists from attending important scientific conferences. These conferences are vital to the mission of the National Laboratories. They offer scientific personnel opportunities to meet and collaborate on important scientific challenges facing our Nation, and often result in breakthroughs that benefit science, society, and national security. I am attaching ACSCOLI's letter articulating these concerns in more detail.

Recognizing the need for careful stewardship of federal resources, the Academic Senate requests your help in ensuring that legitimate travel and conferences that are vital to US scientific advancement and economic and national security are not undermined. We also respectfully ask that you vote against S. 1347 in its current form.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill Jacob".

Bill Jacob

Encl. (1)

Cc: President Janet Napolitano

Chief of Staff Seth Grossman
Vice President for Laboratory Management Kimberly S. Budil
Associate Vice President for Federal Government Relations Gary Falle
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*Vice Chair of the Assembly and the Academic Council
Faculty Representative to the Board of Regents
ACSCOLI Chair
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August 25, 2014

**BILL JACOB
CHAIR, ACADEMIC COUNCIL**

Re: Conference Accountability Act of 2014

Dear Bill:

In FY 2013, the Office of Management and Budget ordered all federal agencies to reduce travel and meeting expenses by 30 percent from 2010 levels, as well as implementing certain onerous reporting requirements. While these restrictions were designed to target excessive spending on non-scientific conferences, they have had a significant deleterious impact on the Department of Energy (DOE), and especially travel by its National Laboratory scientists and engineers to important scientific conferences. These conferences offer Laboratory scientific personnel opportunities to receive valuable feedback on their work. As well, conference attendance enables individuals to meet, collaborate, and work together on the important scientific challenges that face our Nation. These collaborations result in important scientific breakthroughs for science as well as society. In addition, scientific conferences contribute to peer review, professional development, mission execution, and recruiting.

A bill is now pending in Congress that would codify, perpetuate, and add to the 2013 restrictions on travel that we know negatively impact the science being done at the National Laboratories. In brief, the Conference Accountability Act of 2014 (S. 1347) would put into statute an onerous reporting requirement for any conference costing more than \$50,000 in travel costs per agency. It would also prohibit sending more than 50 personnel to any single international conference or spending more than \$500,000 to support or host a scientific conference.

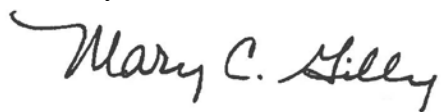
Although the Act's reporting threshold may seem high, our concern is that these reporting requirements are already having a chilling effect on attendance at scientific conferences. Our colleagues at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL), the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), and the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) tell us that agencies with restricted budgets limit the numbers permitted to attend DOE-sponsored conferences in order to remain below the approval threshold and avoid the labor involved in the onerous reporting requirements. In addition, the current process and uncertainty associated with approvals discourages scientists to such a degree that they are not even seeking permission to attend such conferences in the first place. For instance, LANL's conference attendance has declined by nearly a third since FY 2013. Finally, these restrictions have added significant costs to the management of conferences –

both in the administrative burdens and the increased travel costs due to late approvals. In short, these added costs offset, much, if not all, of the savings associated with reduced attendance at scientific conferences.

These National Laboratories are addressing the Nation's energy, environmental and nuclear challenges through transformative science and technology solutions. Scientists and engineers cannot make optimal progress in isolation from others in their fields. Our colleagues at these laboratories are already demoralized by the existing restrictions and adding to them risks driving the most promising and most accomplished scientists and engineers to seek other career opportunities. Indeed, the prospect of additional restrictions on travel to scientific conferences will make scientific careers at the National Laboratories even less attractive to bright young PhDs. While the intent of this legislation is transparency and fiscal accountability, both laudable goals, the unintended consequence of restricted travel to scientific conferences is real and alarming. Enacting these restrictions into statute will only further undermine the DOE's ability to ensure that the nation will have the scientific and technical leadership essential to meeting future national security challenges.

ACSCOLI therefore respectfully asks Academic Council to write to Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer to call their attention to the negative effects of this bill on science and to vote against or amend it to eliminate damaging impacts on national security and US scientific advancement. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary C. Gilly".

Mary C. Gilly,
Academic Council Vice Chair
ACSCOLI Chair

Copy: ACSCOLI
Martha Winnacker, Academic Senate Executive Director