

OPENING STATEMENT

Chairman Mo Brooks (R-AL)

Subcommittee on Research and Science Education
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

*Innovation Corps: A Review of a New National Science Foundation Program
to Leverage Research Investments*

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The National Science Foundation funds basic research which is oftentimes too costly and too risky for industry alone to undertake, but has many times proven to be groundbreaking and economic successes in the end. For example, current nanotechnology initiatives, marked by a transformative technology which allows scientists to manipulate matter at the atomic and molecular levels, was preceded by scientists funded by NSF who were learning how to detect activity at the scale of individual atoms. Now, companies are making plans to utilize this pioneering technology to produce nanoscale products which will enter the marketplace.

I could list more examples, but I think my point is clear – that NSF has contributed to America’s economy and competitiveness in invaluable ways. Unfortunately, today the United States faces unsustainable budget deficits which limit the spending Congress is able to appropriate. While I am proud to Chair a Subcommittee which oversees such important research and development activities, it is the role and responsibility of Congress to work to prevent overspending, ensure that federally funded programs do not impede the work of the private sector and provide the best return on the taxpayer dollar. The question that we must address is which activities fall under this purview.

NSF created a new Innovation Corps program (I-Corps) to assess the readiness of emerging technology concepts for transitioning into new products through a public-private partnership. According to NSF, the program will “bring together the technological, entrepreneurial, and business know-how to bring discoveries ripe for innovation out of the university lab” and “increase the number of entrepreneurs emerging from university laboratories.” While this certainly sounds like a worthwhile endeavor, I have a number of questions, including the degree to which the federal government should determine which companies succeed and which fail, but, if so, whether it is appropriate for this kind of decision-making to be made by an agency whose primary mission is basic research. At a time when businesses are struggling to compete with big government and funding is already scarce, and at a time when there are already a number of questions arising over the federal government picking commercial winners and losers -- and rather badly I might add in the case of Solyndra, Abound Solar, and Beacon Power -- I need to better understand how and why NSF is best equipped to make these similar types of decisions for university research.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and to working with my colleagues to further explore I-Corps and determine its viability as a program funded by valuable taxpayer dollars.