

Defending Science in 2025

Steven T. Piantadosi (stp@berkeley.edu)

Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA, 94720

Anonymous (co-organizer)

Abstract

Higher education and science are facing unprecedented challenges. What can we do as scientists? This symposium aims to highlight ongoing efforts to protect our research, institutions, and academic rights, provide concrete actions we can take, and collectively brainstorm a strategy going forward.

Keywords: advocacy, organizing

Overview

The past few months have seen an unprecedented situation arise for science and higher education. This has included cancelling grants to labs and entire institutions, firing of staff and researchers at NIH and NSF, and stopping grants which use now-forbidden terms (O'Rourke, 2025). Many of these actions are contrary to existing legislation (Spitalniak, 2025). Action is needed to prevent a decline in US science and academic freedom (Stanley, 2025).

While many researchers are strongly opposed to these changes, there has been a notable lack of coordinated effort outside of the legal challenges being led by universities. It seems that many people in the field are uncertain of what would be productive steps they can take to combat these changes. Our symposium brings together researchers in the field who have been working on supporting science and scientists in this new environment. Each will make concrete suggestions about what can be done.

Talk 1: Steven Piantadosi & Jessica Cantlon will provide a brief introduction to the current situation, and then present their work on Science Homecoming. This began as an effort to get scientists to publish opinion pieces in their hometown newspapers highlighting the important role that NSF and NIH play in everyday communities. In their first months, they will have approximately 100 opinion pieces placed in small papers across the US, reaching an estimated 800,000 readers who are outside of many mainstream news sources. They will discuss ongoing efforts to secure philanthropic and corporate support in order to scale up these efforts.

Talk 2: A current scientist at NIH, who will be completing their position before the Cognitive Science Society conference, will present on the current state of NIH, as well as the efforts of NIH scientists to preserve their own jobs and research. They will talk about their personal experience being part of unionization efforts by research fellows at the NIH several years prior to 2025, and describe how the union subsequently became the foundation for a broader, unified campaign. They will highlight how researchers across career

stages, backgrounds, and prior experiences at the NIH were brought into the campaign through deep, relational organizing, engaging in hundreds of one-on-one conversations. The talk will conclude with tips for how others can become involved in similar efforts in their workplaces, as well as for connecting across unions, departments, and schools.

Talk 3: Another (early career) researcher in cognitive science will discuss how scientists can build real, sustainable, collective power, drawing on their experiences as a labor and tenant organizer with groups like the United Auto Workers (UAW) and others. They will argue that building and exercising power requires sustained, mass coordination, whether for going against multinational landlords, bargaining across the table from increasingly corporatized universities, or standing up for science. Building on the previous talk, they will offer a brief lesson on how we can organize ourselves to move as one large voice, emphasizing that like science, grassroots organizing takes training, practice, and discipline (McAlevy, 2016). The talk will conclude with concrete steps that scientists across ranks and locations can engage in together, to build power and support higher education.

Talk 4: Roundtable Discussion All speakers will join a roundtable discussion and brainstorming session on how students, postdocs, faculty, and other staff can work together toward a collective goal. The session will include a short practical component where attendees will be guided through an organizing task to carry out during the remainder of the conference, to continue efforts to build our collective power.

References

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