

‘Riff-raff’ charge angers young researchers

An essay about the declining quality of grant reviewers draws ire on social media.

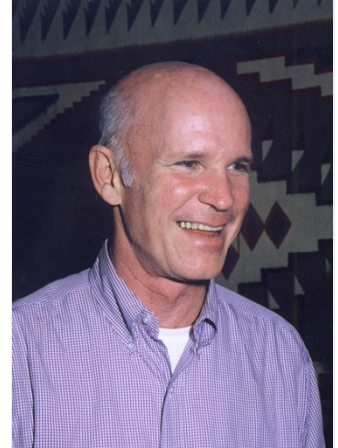
Chris Woolston

08 October 2014

Reminiscing about the glory days is a favourite pastime for many, but when the president of a major US scientific society publicly complained about the “riff-raff” that has infiltrated the research world, nostalgia quickly turned to controversy. Steven McKnight, president of the [American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology](#) (ASBMB), found himself in the social-media spotlight after his ‘President’s Message’ was published in the society’s September newsletter.

He argued that the grant-review system run by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is failing partly because of mediocre researchers serving on review committees. “The average scientist today is not of the quality of our predecessors,” writes McKnight, who chairs the biochemistry department at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

Many researchers found the article insulting. Michael Hendricks, a neuroscientist at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, tweeted:



Steven McKnight, president of the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology.



In an interview, McKnight said that he regrets his choice of words, but still stands by his arguments.

In [the essay](#), written for the ASBMB’s more than 12,000 members, McKnight recalled a simpler time when it was easier to pursue big ideas without constantly struggling for funding. He expressed two major criticisms of the current US system for securing grants for biomedical research. First, he said that the committees that review grant applications for the NIH have become too narrow and compartmentalized in their focus. His other main complaint: with the vast expansion of US biomedical science, it now attracts researchers who “never would have survived as scientists in the 1960s and 1970s”, he wrote. And as a result, the NIH review committees have been “undoubtedly contaminated by riff-raff”.

The comparison of scientists from today and yesterday didn’t sit well with many online commenters. Steph Cameron, an engineering researcher at the University of Arizona in Tucson, responded by quoting a [mission statement from the ASBMB’s website](#) in her tweet:



In an interview, Cameron noted — as others have — that the era that McKnight fondly remembers happened to be a time when few women or minorities were in the field.

Hendricks, who was especially vocal about the essay on Twitter, continued his critique in a follow-up interview. “Most senior scientists that I talk to make the opposite argument that there is an unprecedented pool of talent,” he said. “McKnight’s essay reads like someone who is angry at who his private club is giving membership to these days.”

Biochemist Jeremy Berg at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine — who is a past president of the ASBMB and a former director of an NIH institute — [posted a lengthy comment](#) (using the name [Datahound](#)) in response to a [Drug Monkey blog](#) about McKnight’s essay. Berg agreed with McKnight that the current grant system is under stress. However, he argued that the biggest problem is not the quality of the scientists on review committees, but the lack of funding to support all of the worthy proposals.

The director of the [NIH’s Center for Scientific Review](#) concurred with Berg. Richard Nakamura said that of the 17,000 reviewers who were enlisted by the NIH in 2013, slightly more than half were full professors, and the rest were also “productive researchers from the science community”. He pointed out that in 1975, the NIH approved more than 40% of all applications, but in 2013, the approval rate was less than 17%. “Data-driven and constructive suggestions for change are welcome,” said Nakamura, “but going back in time is not possible.”

Reached for comment, McKnight said that he was “saddened” by suggestions that he has any gripe with young researchers or with diversity. He meant to criticize review committees as a whole, not just young scientists, he added. “A level of mediocrity has crept into the grant-review system,” he said. He recalled that earlier in his career, grant-review committees were packed with well-known scientists with established credentials. “Now when I look at the list, I’ll know zero names. Five or six of them will be people from fly-by-night biotech companies.” He said that he hasn’t done any quantitative research on this trend, “but I think I’m probably right”.

Emil Lou, a gastrointestinal oncologist at the University of Minnesota Medical School in Minneapolis, was one of few researchers who publicly supported the essay. Lou tweeted:



E Lou, MD, PhD

@cancerassassin1

 Follow

I'm glad a senior researcher was bold enough to write this. President' s Message: The curse of committees and clubs [asbmb.org/asbmbtoday/201 ...](http://asbmb.org/asbmbtoday/201...)

 Reply  Retweet  Favorite  More

6:05 AM - 30 Sep 2014

Lou later clarified that he didn't agree with everything in McKnight's message, but did think that the essay "demonstrated a willingness to at least reexamine the status quo". He added that he wasn't sure what to make of the "riff-raff" comment. "For all I know, that might include me," he said.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2014.16082