

National Science Foundation Decides to Close China, Japan, & Belgium Offices

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More bad news awaits the scientific community as the year rolls in. The US-based National Science Foundation (NSF) has announced that it will close its overseas offices in Beijing, Brussels, and Tokyo. These offices have been very important in helping the US build connections and collaborations with the international scientific community. As a result, the decision to close them has shocked many researchers and institutional directors. However, [the NSF international office defends its decision](#) as a strategic move that will ultimately strengthen US scientific collaboration with overseas organizations.

A Difficult Year- and it is Not Even Spring

Although it is only March, 2018 has already been a difficult year for the scientific community. Trump has reduced the status of [federal scientific advisory boards](#), removing the Department of the Interior (DOI), the Department of Energy (DOE), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) from their previous role as critical advisors to

the government. The NIH has [eliminated PubMed Commons](#), which was an experimental forum allowing comments on published scientific research, after deciding that the site was not receiving enough comments to justify its continued support. South Korea is dealing with a [fraudulent paper scandal](#) since the national government discovered that professors at 29 universities, including the top three in the country, had used their children's names as co-authors in order to help them enter university. The announcement from the National Science Foundation of its intention to close overseas offices in Beijing, Brussels, and Tokyo is yet another blow in the wake of these challenges.

Is the NSF following the 'America First' Policy?

Why is the NSF closing its overseas offices? The answer depends on who you ask. Rebecca Keiser, head of the Office of International Science & Engineering (OISE) at the National Science Foundation (NSF), defends the change as an "updated approach". She believes that this step will help the NSF "transition our international engagement to a new model that allows us to expand our outreach and cooperation around the globe." Rather than have static offices operating on a permanent basis in a few strategic locations, NSF plans to send small teams of employees on short, exploratory missions. These missions would go across the whole globe to find new opportunities to collaborate with foreign scientists and institutions. Keiser emphasizes that this will increase the reach and impact of NSF. She also claims that the elimination of physical overseas offices will "modernize" the way the agency is able to collaborate. The funding that was previously used to sustain the overseas offices will now be used to support these small teams in their travel.

However, the manner in which the move was executed was unusual. The NSF [secretly recalled the heads](#) of its Beijing and Brussels offices in January 2018, re-assigning them to the agency headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. The agency then announced that the remaining staff at those offices would be assigned to local US embassies. The suddenness of the change has led some members of the international scientific community to suspect that it is another part of Trump's 'America First' strategy to focus US resources domestically.

Mixed Responses from International Scientists

As expected, those directly affected by the change have been critical of this new development. For example, William Chang has disapproved this step. He had opened NSF's Beijing office and is now a special adviser for the Asia-Pacific region for the University of Hawaii system. He called the change "the wrong move" and "really short-sighted." He explained that it is very important and useful for the agency to have on-the-ground capacity. Implementing this policy, people can build connections to foster cooperation and resolve crises if needed. Former US ambassador to the EU, Anthony Gardner, agreed to this opinion. According to him, the US needs "eyes and ears on the ground in China" to help with "unblocking problems." Hitoshi Murayama, a theoretical physicist at University of California (UC), Berkeley, and the Kavli Institute for the Physics

and Mathematics of the Universe at the University of Tokyo has a similar opinion. He has also worked with NSF's Tokyo office. He states NSF did not seem to recognize "the importance of personal connections [in promoting] critical international collaborations in science."

[Researchers who previously worked](#) with the office in Brussels were also disappointed. They believe that they would miss the ease of cooperation that having the agency close by allowed. But Peter Chase more optimistic perspective. He is a senior fellow in the Brussels office of the German Marshall Fund, and former US Chamber of Commerce vice president for Europe. Pulling NSF out of Brussels and Beijing may not be wrong, according to him, provided it frees up budget for programmes. He also stated that the NSF was not the US's only agency on the ground in Europe, and collaboration between the two regions would no doubt continue.

What do you think of NSF's announcement that they will close their offices in Brussels, Beijing, and Tokyo? Is it necessary to have permanent staff to facilitate international collaboration? Please let us know your thoughts in the comments section below!

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