BROADER IMPACTS:

An Analysis of Media Coverage of the National Science Foundation

(January 2025–January 2026)

Research Infrastructure

Analysis of Media Coverage

This analysis examines the sentiment and substance of media coverage of the National Science Foundation in over 3,800 articles published from January 2025 through January 2026. It explores how a range of media sources — magazines, newspapers, and other news outlets as well as television stations, radio stations, and university websites — have portrayed the agency's broader impacts and value amidst budget cuts and project terminations. While media coverage often focuses on the "Intellectual Merit" of scientific achievements, this analysis focuses on NSF's "Broader Impacts" — the tangible benefits to society that matter most to the public including improvements in daily life and stronger communities.

This series is organized around six key Broader Impacts dimensions:

- Economic Competitiveness and Innovation
- National Security
- STEM Education
- Workforce Development
- Societal Well-being
- Research Infrastructure

The findings illustrate that NSF remains a vital engine for maintaining America's strength, fostering innovation, and building a foundation for families to thrive across every state.

Research Infrastructure

Perhaps the most unseen, but fundamentally essential part of NSF's work is the research infrastructures it supports across the country. At private research institutions and public universities alike, NSF infrastructure investments are the bedrock on which scientific discoveries are made.

NSF-supported infrastructure includes data and computing capacity for making advances in artificial intelligence and complex problem solving; research instruments from those that explore the boundaries of space to those that sequence genes for understanding disease; research facilities that serve the broad scientific community on land, sea and ice; and cyberinfrastructure such as cloud-based research platforms and secure data storage. These investments enable collaborations among institutions across the country and ensure that Americans have the capacity to be leaders in cutting edge science.

Without investments in infrastructure, the other areas of NSF broader impacts — economic competitiveness, workforce development, national security, STEM education and societal well-being — would not thrive. NSF-supported infrastructure is the backbone of American groundbreaking science now and in the years ahead.

NSF-supported research infrastructure is the essential foundation that enables scientific discovery, national competitiveness, and American leadership in cutting-edge innovation.

The Shield: Infrastructure Protecting Lives & Property

NSF maintains the "infrastructure of survival"—a network of massive facilities and sensors designed to protect Americans from natural disasters and environmental threats. These investments act as the nation's early warning system, protecting our homes against storms and securing our health against invisible dangers.

- **Engineering Against Disaster:** When a hurricane strikes, the difference between a roof staying on or flying off often comes down to research conducted at the Natural Hazards Engineering Research Infrastructure (NHERI) Wall of Wind in Florida. This facility is the only university site capable of simulating Category 5 hurricane winds up to 157 mph. Its testing led to critical changes in Florida's building codes—specifically the requirement for "ring-shank" nails—that have saved billions in property damage and insurance payouts.
- **The Planetary Early Warning System:** To predict weather and protect coastal economies, NSF deployed the Argo Array, a fleet of 4,000 robotic floats that drift across the global ocean. These robots provide the temperature and salinity data that serves as the bedrock for modern climate modeling and weather forecasting. Complementing this is the Ocean Observatories Initiative (OOI), a cabled network on the seafloor that detected "The Blob," a massive marine heatwave that devastated West Coast fisheries. By monitoring these events in real-time, OOI provides the data necessary to manage marine resources and protect the blue economy.
- **Solving Invisible Threats:** The value of long-term infrastructure is perhaps best illustrated by the Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) network. At the Hubbard Brook site in New Hampshire, decades of continuous monitoring allowed researchers to discover "Acid Rain" and link it to fossil fuel emissions. This data directly informed the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments. The EPA estimates this single policy intervention has saved the U.S. over $2 trillion in avoided healthcare costs by preventing thousands of premature deaths and asthma attacks annually.

NSF's life-protecting infrastructure—from hurricane-testing labs and ocean sensor networks to decades-long ecological monitoring—acts as a national early warning system that saves lives, protects property, and turns scientific data into real-world resilience.

The Engine: Powering the Economy & AI

NSF infrastructure acts as a bridge across the "Valley of Death"—the gap between a lab discovery and a commercial product. By providing access to billion-dollar tools, NSF facilities ensure that innovation isn't limited, fueling startups and accelerating life-saving discoveries.

- **Incubating "Hard Tech":** The National Nanotechnology Coordinated Infrastructure (NNCI) operates as a "rent-a-lab" network, allowing startups to access prohibitively expensive billion-dollar nanofabrication tools they could never afford independently. This infrastructure directly incubates the semiconductor and sensor economy; at the Cornell University node alone, the facility supported 127 startups in a single decade. Simultaneously, Platforms for Advanced Wireless Research (PAWR) establishes city-scale testbeds—from Salt Lake City to rural Iowa—where companies test 5G, 6G, and drone delivery in the real world. This secures U.S. sovereignty in future wireless standards projected to enable $12 trillion in global economic output.

- **The Blueprint of Health & AI:** The Protein Data Bank (PDB) acts as the "Google Maps" of biology, housing the 3D blueprints of life. This digital archive was essential for the development of 88% of all new drugs approved by the FDA between 2010 and 2016, and 100% of recent cancer drugs. In the digital realm, TalkBank served as the "training gym" for early AI, providing the massive, coded human speech datasets used to train Large Language Models (LLMs) while also establishing clinical baselines for diagnosing aphasia and autism.

- **Democratizing Supercomputing:** The Frontera supercomputer ran urgent simulations to model the COVID-19 virus structure, while the upcoming Horizon system (launching 2026) will offer a 100x improvement in AI applications for climate and energy research. Crucially, the NAIRR Pilot and CyVerse democratize access to this power. These initiatives ensure that researchers at small colleges and non-elite institutions can access the high-performance computing necessary to check the work of tech giants and solve complex problems like agricultural crop resilience.

NSF's shared infrastructure powers the U.S. economy by bridging the gap between discovery and market—giving startups, researchers, and institutions nationwide access to world-class tools that accelerate hard tech, biomedical breakthroughs, and AI innovation.

The Compass: Leading the World

NSF infrastructure provides the tools of exploration and logistics that enable the United States to navigate the unknown. From the South Pole to the edge of the universe, these facilities ensure American leadership in fundamental discovery and maintain the precise global standards required for economic and military navigation.

- Navigating the Global Economy: The Very Long Baseline Array (VLBA) is a continent-spanning network of ten radio telescopes. While designed for astronomy, the VLBA performs the essential Geodesy measurements that track the Earth's orientation and wobble in space. Without this astronomical data, the Global Positioning System (GPS) would drift and lose accuracy, degrading everything from military navigation to high-frequency stock trading and ride-sharing apps.
- Dominance at the Poles: The Antarctic Infrastructure (McMurdo Station) serves as the logistics backbone of the United States Antarctic Program (USAP) and the "nerve center" for an entire continent. This infrastructure—including the South Pole Traverse overland tractor train, specialized LC-130 ski-equipped aircraft, and heavy icebreakers—ensures a persistent presence that underpins U.S. geopolitical leadership.
- Extreme Engineering & Future Horizons: Buried under a mile of Antarctic ice, the IceCube Neutrino Observatory transforms a cubic kilometer of the ice sheet into a sensor for "ghost particles". Built using specialized hot-water drills, this feat of extreme engineering opened the era of "multi-messenger astronomy" by tracing high-energy particles back to black holes.

One area of infrastructure coverage highlighted NSF investments in major equipment and facilities essential to keep the U.S. at the forefront of scientific innovation. For example, *University of New Mexico News* reports that with funds from NSF's Major Research Instrumentation program, the University's Center for High Technology Materials now has two new instruments at the disposal of its researchers — electron beam lithography (EBL) systems that have unique writing and imaging functions. These tools use electron beams as we might use a pen to write extremely small features on hard materials that are about 10,000 times smaller than the thickness of a human hair. The tool will benefit multiple disciplines and be available not only for students and researchers at UNM, but also to other academic institutions, local companies and national laboratories.

Similarly, Kūkala Nūhou at the University of Hawaii Hilo reports that the university is home to a new open AI system. There, NSF and NVIDIA are jointly sponsoring "the first fully open AI system designed specifically to accelerate scientific research and innovation." Travis Mandel, associate professor of computer science will lead a community engagement dimension of the project to ensure that "the AI models meet the needs of diverse scientific communities, including researchers across Hawai'i." Mandel also explains that AI will now be integrated into the University's academics, noting "one thing that society in general is struggling with right now, is everybody's starting to use AI to help them in various ways….but there's so few people that actually understand what goes on under the hood of that AI."

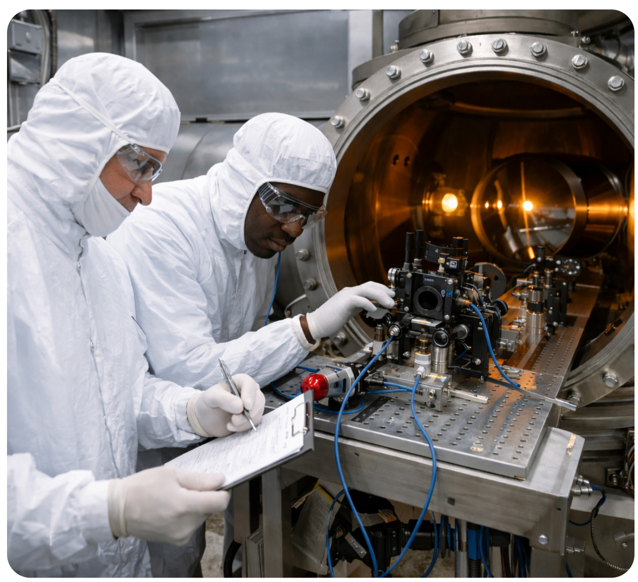
NSF investments in university-based infrastructure comes with the understanding that the tools and facilities developed are available to others in the country; not only academics, but researchers and innovators in industry as well. For example, the University of Washington reported on NSF funding for its partnership with Oregon State University known as the Northwest Nanotechnology Infrastructure, one of 16 sites in NSF's NNCI program. NSF funds support UW's Washington nanofabrication facility, which is the largest publicly accessible fabrication in the area. As an NSF official explained, "Research and education through NNCI will continue to yield nanotechnology innovations - from interconnects for quantum systems to high-resolution imaging to brain-implanted sensors - that bring economic and societal benefits to us all."

Other coverage highlighted that NSF's Infrastructure investments are focused on more than physical facilities and tools — they also boost American advancement by supporting data infrastructure. *Lane Report 40*, reported on an NSF grant to the Kentucky Science & Engineering Foundation (KSEF) to provide them with the data they need to predict and respond to climate-related natural disasters. KSEF will build a statewide data bank to make information essential to addressing climate risks available to the public. They will compile data from university and industry partners and translate that data into a decision making tool available to all. "We're providing access to critical data that will empower communities to prepare for and respond to climate-related events," said KSEF executive director.

NSF also invests in innovative approaches to future infrastructure. The Santa Clara School of Engineering reported on their multi-university collaboration to bring together computer scientists, engineers, economists and other stakeholders to create what they call "Recyclofacturing." The project leaders aim to reinvigorate local manufacturing across the country by transforming recycling facilities into fabrication hubs. "Recyclofacturing will provide an end-to-end solution that enables customers to request custom products that will be built by utilizing scrap metal, Artificial Intelligence, Extended Reality, and Collaborative Robots."

Coverage also showed that Infrastructure investments have not avoided the threat of NSF budget cuts. *Boulder Reporting Lab*, for example, reported on the possible breakup of the headquarters of National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR). NCAR, funded by NSF and the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research, is composed of seven laboratories on a 450 acre site that was originally purchased by the state of Colorado and donated to NSF. Governments and emergency managers rely on NCAR, which is viewed as a "world-leading institution whose work extends far beyond climate science, encompassing weather forecasting, space weather, atmospheric chemistry and foundational Earth system research." As Texas Tech University climate scientist said in *ENR Mountain States and Southwest*, "Dismantling NCAR is like taking a sledgehammer to the keystone holding up our scientific understanding of the planet."

Scientific American reported on another possible consequence of reducing NSF's budget. LIGO, the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory was the first to listen in on the collision of two black holes and recently announced the "most massive merger of two black holes ever seen." Gravitational-wave astronomy is at the forefront of astrophysics, measuring the expansion of the universe and contributing to knowledge about how stars live and die. The coverage explained that slashing the NSF budget would force the shutdown of one of LIGO's two detectors, reducing its detection at only 10-20% of what two detectors can reveal to scientists. The reporting asserts that with 1.4 billion dollars already invested as of 2022, "abandoning half this project now would constitute a gigantic waste."



Another threat to research infrastructure identified in the analysis, was the proposed reduction in NSF's previously negotiated indirect rates. Indirect costs, sometimes referred to as facilities and administrative costs include the costs not easily attributed to a single project but are necessary for the ongoing functioning of the research organizations. According to the *National Law Review*, most universities reported rates between 50-65%; the proposed reduction to 15% would threaten America's research infrastructure. *Nature* reported that this reduction would be "devastating to science." After legal challenges, *Forbes* and other publications reported that a federal judge ruled that the change would not go into effect.

Investing in Supercomputers Across the Country

The University of Texas at Austin (UT) is now home to a powerhouse of computing power for public, open source AI. There, NSF has funded "Horizon," the largest academic supercomputer in the country. NSF's Leadership Class Computing Facility program aims to "revolutionize U.S. computational research."

The UT president expressed his gratitude for the partnerships behind the infrastructure investments including NSF, Dell Technologies, NVIDIA and the state of Texas whose legislature has appropriated twenty million dollars for the project. This infrastructure is a "game-changer", says the article, in that it will "expand research and development capacities in generating AI while also creating opportunities for society-changing discoveries that support America's technological dominance."

Ian Buck, vice president of NVIDIA's hyperscale and high-performance computing business agrees, saying "The system will enable U.S. researchers to model the planet's climate, advance biomedical discovery, and unlock insights across physics, energy and beyond - pushing the boundaries of what's possible in science through AI-driven computing."

NSF is also setting out to make computing power accessible to audiences across the country. Specifically, NSF has invested in a project at Stony Brook University. This project, a partnership with the University at Buffalo is titled "Sustainable Cyber-Infrastructure for Expanding Participation" and aims to operate a "high-performance, highly energy-efficient computer" that will support advanced computing research, broadening access for universities and researchers across the country.

Stony Brook University News reports that the new system will use low-cost and low-energy processors that "excel in artificial intelligence inference and imperfectly optimized workloads that presently characterize much of academic research computing." It explains that the NSF funding will support projects in fields not targeted by other national resources. According to one of the project leaders, Robert J. Harrison, the project will have multiple initiatives that will reach audiences from high school students to faculty.

The Giant Magellan Telescope - a Hallmark of American Ingenuity and Global Leadership

Space discovery has long captured the American imagination. Now, understanding events in our Universe is closer than ever.

The University of Arizona reported that the Giant Magellan Telescope received NSF approval to advance to NSF's Major Facilities Final Design Phase. The Giant Magellan is already backed by $1 billion in private funding and represents the best of national and international scientific collaboration. Fifteen institutions, including the University of Arizona, Texas A & M University, Harvard University, Northwestern University, Arizona State University and other institutions across the globe have created an international consortium. The Giant Magellan is strategically located in Chile, where there are 300 clear nights a year and "direct access to the…galactic center of the Milky Way."

The report asserts that without the telescope, cutting edge discoveries would be "largely out of reach for U.S. astronomers, and the transformational science it enables will be led by other nations." "This is more than an investment in a telescope," said Dr. Walter Massey, Board Chair for the Giant Magellan Telescope and former NSF Director. "It is a strategic necessity for the United States to maintain leadership in astrophysics, engineering and artificial intelligence."

Protecting Against Earthquakes - the World's Only Outdoor Shake Table

Can a ten-story building withstand a 6.9 magnitude earthquake? Scientists at the University of San Diego wanted to find out. There, NSF has invested in a "shake table" designed to determine the height limits of buildings able to withstand earthquake turbulence.

UC San Diego Today reported on the test of a building made of cold-formed steel (CFS), a lightweight material composed of 60-70% recycled material. Building codes restricted buildings made of this material to six stories; researchers wanted to know if builders could extend this to ten.

In 2022, NSF invested in an upgrade to the shake table. Previously, the table could only shake east to west. But earthquakes don't move in only one direction. Now, Joel Conte, one of the lead researchers explains, the table moves "back and forth, up and down, side to side and can even wobble." He continued, "Here we are able to simulate what we call near-real world earthquake conditions."

Building Computer Chip and Semiconductor Manufacturing in America

If there were ever a time to expand domestic chip and semiconductor manufacturing, it is now. Recognizing this, *UChicago News* reports that NSF has invested in "The NSF ACE-3D Chip Design Hub" at the University of Chicago.

Farah Fahim, a Senior Scientist at the University's school of molecular engineering, explains that the U.S. has historically excelled at chip design innovation but hasn't connected that innovation to domestic manufacturing. She explains, "By giving academia access to advanced manufacturing resources, we can propel manufacturing efforts across the country."

The Hub aims to transform chip design by moving from flat squares used in laptops and cellphones to vertically stacked chips. They intend to grow a user community and develop new advanced technologies that translate to "real-world tools."

Previously, Fahim explains, users had difficulties accessing the manufacturing tools they needed. Now, she hopes "the country's future workforce will find it easier to innovate in the domestic semiconductor space."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- NSF infrastructure serves as the “invisible backbone” of American science, providing the massive, shared facilities—from AI supercomputers to particle detectors—that no single university or company could build alone but upon which the entire ecosystem relies.
- These investments function as an “infrastructure of survival,” protecting the nation against natural disasters through facilities like hurricane simulators and seismic shake tables that directly inform building codes, protect property, and save lives.
- NSF democratizes access to the cutting edge of science and innovation, ensuring that startups and researchers in every state (not just at elite institutions) can access the “hard tech” tools and high-performance computing necessary to compete in the global economy.
- Retreating from infrastructure support threatens U.S. sovereignty, risking the loss of critical capabilities in GPS navigation accuracy, Antarctic presence, and next-generation astronomy to strategic adversaries.
- Budget volatility and cuts to indirect costs threaten to dismantle these facilities, creating a “ceiling” on American potential by leaving the nation’s talent pipeline without the physical platforms required to lead.

Conclusion

This analysis of over 3,800 articles and broadcast segments confirms that the National Science Foundation’s infrastructure is widely viewed not merely as a collection of facilities, but as the “invisible backbone” of American scientific leadership. The coverage illuminates that these investments function as an “infrastructure of survival,” providing the early warning systems and testing grounds—from hurricane simulators to seismic shake tables—that protect American lives and property. Furthermore, the analysis highlights that NSF democratizes access to the cutting edge, ensuring that researchers and startups in every state can utilize the high-performance computing and “hard tech” tools necessary to compete in the global economy.

However, the analysis also illuminates a flashing warning light: budget volatility and cuts to indirect costs threaten to dismantle these facilities just as their strategic value peaks. Reports warn that reducing support for operational hubs like NCAR is akin to taking a “sledgehammer to the keystone” of our scientific understanding, while abandoning capital projects mid-stream constitutes a “gigantic waste” of previous investments.

Ultimately, the coverage suggests the United States faces a stark choice: maintain the physical platforms required to lead in AI, astrophysics, and polar research, or cede that territory to strategic competitors. To secure national resilience and economic sovereignty, the coverage concludes that America must decisively invest in the physical and digital platforms that power its future.

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About the authors

Dr. Jeanne Century is the founder of Outlier Research & Evaluation at the University of Chicago and a Senior Research Fellow at the University's Data Science Institute. Century's work has almost exclusively focused on advancing equity in education primarily through applied research collaborations with leaders in large and small urban school districts. During her nearly 38-year career, Century has been the principal investigator of numerous federal and foundation research grants focusing on a range of topics including inquiry science instruction, computer science education, STEM schools, sustainability of reform and data science education. Century's primary research focus is on understanding, measuring, and supporting education innovation implementation, spread and endurance through implementation science and component-based research approaches. Century has also conducted numerous evaluations on out-of-school and in-school programs, district and state reform efforts, higher education, teacher preparation, and civic leadership. In addition to research, Century has developed instructional materials, supported professional learning efforts for teachers and administrators and has provided technical assistance and strategic planning for leaders at the school, district, and state levels. Century also has policy experience at all education system levels including serving on a Presidential transition team where she was responsible for STEM education as well as the U.S. Department of Education Agency Review.

Dr. Eric M. Tucker is the President and CEO of the Study Group. He has served as President of Equity by Design, Superintendent and Executive Director of Brooklyn Laboratory Charter Schools, CEO of Friends of Brooklyn LAB, Cofounder of Educating All Learners Alliance, Senior Research Scientist at UCLA Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), Cofounder and Executive Director of InnovateEDU, director at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Executive Director and Chief Academic Officer of the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues, and Founder of the Rhode Island Urban Debate League. As an entrepreneurial, strategic, and impact-focused leader, Dr. Tucker has 25 years of experience building catalytic partnerships in education, securing over $300 million of investments for enterprises and initiatives that have transformed outcomes for diverse learners and educators. Dr. Tucker has expertise in measurement and assessment system innovation, inclusive and advanced R&D, analytics, and human infrastructures for improvement. Dr. Tucker co-edited The Sage Handbook of Measurement and the Handbook for Assessment in the Service of Learning, Volume I, II & III. He earned a doctorate and a masters of science in measurement sciences from the University of Oxford and bachelors degrees from Brown University.

About the Study Group

The Study Group exists to advance the best of artificial intelligence, assessment, and data practice, technology, and policy; uncover future design needs and opportunities for educational systems; and generate recommendations to better meet the needs of students, families, and educators.

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