

MAR12-2011-009295

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the MAR12 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

Why Physicists Have a Responsibility to Society

CHARLES FERGUSON, Federation of American Scientists

The debate and controversy over the NSF criterion on broader societal impacts of NSF-funded research have served the important function of challenging the physics community to reexamine why public money should support pure and applied physics research and what is the role of physicists in society. I will argue that the criterion, while well intentioned, appears ill informed and runs the risk of creating a check list of activities that will seemingly fulfill physicists' responsibility to connect their work to larger societal issues. Moreover, I will argue in favor of having a portion of government-funded research for scientific investigations based primarily, if not solely, on the intellectual and scientific merits of the proposals. Most government-funded research is already connected to larger societal impacts such as national defense, energy research, and economic issues. While I will call for reassessment of the NSF criterion on broader societal impacts, my talk will explain why physicists, as citizens and scientists, must reenergize their efforts to positively effect society and will offer advice about how they can do so.