

EXCLUSIVE

U.S. NEWS

# UC Berkeley researchers team up for first-of-its-kind lawsuit over Trump funding cuts

University of California staff members hope to use a class action lawsuit to restore their research funding.



— Some of the University of California, Berkeley, staff members who have lost federal funding or whose funding is at risk with Claudia Polsky, top center, who organized a lawsuit on their behalf.

Jason Henry for NBC News

June 5, 2025, 9:14 AM MDT / Updated June 5, 2025, 1:55 PM MDT

**By Tyler Kingkade**

BERKELEY, Calif. – University of California faculty members and researchers filed suit against President Donald Trump and several federal agencies late Wednesday in what they hope will become a first-of-its-kind class action challenging the administration’s sweeping cuts to research funding.

The flurry of grant terminations has resulted in layoffs, the lawsuit states, and halted a variety of projects, ranging from studies on the effects of wildfire smoke to an effort to make all of Mark Twain’s work available to the public.

[The lawsuit](#), filed in U.S. District Court in San Francisco, is the brainchild of Claudia Polsky, founding director of the environmental law clinic at the University of California, Berkeley. Though she didn't face funding cuts herself, she said she felt inspired to organize colleagues – without any institutional backing – to file a suit that could have significant implications for other academics nationwide.

“I really think the faculty are ultimately going to have to stand up for themselves,” said Polsky, who is also one of the attorneys on the case, along with UC Berkeley Law Dean Erwin Chemerinsky.



---

— UC Berkeley law professor Claudia Polsky was on sabbatical when she decided to devote the semester to organizing a lawsuit to recover research funding. Jason Henry for NBC News

The University of California system is squarely in the crosshairs of the Trump administration. Apart from cutting research grants it deemed unnecessary, the administration has accused UC of failing to adequately address antisemitism on its campuses.

Late last month, Leo Terrell, a senior counsel at the Justice Department who leads the federal antisemitism task force investigating the UC system, [told Fox News](#) there would be “massive lawsuits” against the UC system and other colleges.

A UC system spokesperson said it is cooperating with the administration. “The University of California abhors antisemitism and is diligently working to address, counter and eradicate it in all its forms across the system.”

The UC system, which has 10 campuses, [conducts around 8%](#) of all academic research in the country. The lawsuit was filed by five UC Berkeley staff members and one at UC San Francisco, all of whom recently lost funding, according to the suit. It accuses a host of government agencies of disregarding federal regulations and violating the researchers’ free speech and due process rights by cutting funding for their studies

based on questionable financial concerns or because of their subject matter and failing to follow legally required steps.



— The University of California system conducts around 8% of all federally funded academic research in the country.

Jason Henry for NBC News

Asked about suit, White House spokesman Kush Desai defended the cuts. “Research grants are not a government entitlement that is guaranteed by the First Amendment,” he said, adding that Trump is eager to “restore common sense

and realign government spending to match the priorities of the American people.”

The litigation represents a new approach among the now vast array of lawsuits against the Trump administration, one fittingly born at UC Berkeley, known for its role in the [Free Speech Movement](#). Faculty members there have pressed university leaders to mount a vigorous defense if and when Berkeley faces government demands like those at [Columbia](#) and [Harvard](#) before they suffered additional funding cuts.

“Individual UC Berkeley faculty have every right to pursue litigation on their own behalf,” Dan Mogulof, a UC Berkeley spokesman, wrote in an email. “The campus administration has played no role in the initiation, development, or funding of this legal action.”

A University of California spokesperson said the regents [have joined](#) two lawsuits [challenging funding policy changes](#) and dispatched administrators to Capitol Hill to meet with lawmakers multiple times since March.



— The University of California schools are some of the largest recipients of federal research funding in academia; they took in \$4 billion cumulatively last year. Jason Henry for NBC News

“These cuts threaten to stifle lifesaving biomedical research, hobble U.S. economic competitiveness and jeopardize the health of Americans who depend on cutting-edge medical science and innovation,” Stett Holbrook, a university system spokesman, said in an email. “Appeals to grants are being handled on a case-by-case basis.”

Peter Lake, director of the Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy at Stetson University in Florida, sees a benefit to legal action that comes from university staff members.

“It makes a really powerful statement that the professors themselves are stakeholders and that it’s just not the institutions alone,” he said. “It’s a way of saying, ‘Well, if you’re slow to the battlefield, we’re going to get there first.’”

The University of California schools are some of the largest recipients of federal research funding in academia; they took in \$4 billion cumulatively last year.

And they’ve been hit hard by the cuts. Though it’s difficult to track exactly how much universities – in California or elsewhere – have lost, UC administrators have said that it’s in the hundreds of millions of dollars and that it led them to [impose a hiring freeze](#) in February.



— A mural depicting alumni at UC Berkeley's law school.

Jason Henry for NBC News

The lawsuit names Trump, the Department of Government Efficiency and 16 federal agencies – including the National Institutes of Health; the departments of Agriculture, Education, Health and Human Services, State and Transportation; the National Science Foundation; and the Environmental Protection Agency – as defendants. The EPA; the Agriculture, Interior and State departments; the NSF; and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said they do not comment on pending litigation.

A Department of Transportation spokesperson said the agency “acted lawfully when it terminated woke university grants.” The other agencies did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the suit.

Early in his presidency, Trump [signed executive orders](#) that directed government offices to end funding for programs deemed to promote diversity, equity and inclusion, along with green energy initiatives. The Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency also [canceled a swath of grants](#) across many federal agencies that it considered wasteful. Government officials at multiple departments then sent notices to researchers who’d already been approved to receive grants and who were often in the middle of multiyear investigations that their funding would be cut off

immediately. Some cuts were blocked by injunctions, but many still stand.

Researchers can usually appeal their individual grant cancellations to the agencies, but Polsky compared such appeals to “trying to prop individual trees back up when the entire forest is being lit on fire.” And even successful appeals may [come with new conditions](#) attached by the Trump administration.



— Jemma Foreman lost funding that supported efforts to find better ways to teach science. Jason Henry for NBC News

Jemma Foreman, director of the Center for Environmental Learning at the [Lawrence Hall of Science](#), is one of the plaintiffs. Her interactive museum at UC Berkeley [lost over \\$6 million](#) from nine grant cancellations, according to the suit. Some funding from the NSF, for instance, supported projects intended to broaden interest in science education across different communities, she said.

The NSF declined to comment on the terminations but said it canceled some awards because they were “not in alignment with current NSF priorities.”

Another lead plaintiff, history professor Christine Philiou, lost a \$250,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant to study [Greek Orthodox Christians in 19th century Turkey](#). It was canceled in April with no explanation other than that the agency’s priorities had changed, leaving her team “flabbergasted,” she said. The National Endowment for the Humanities didn’t respond to requests for comment.

“We believed in rule of law and felt like, ‘Well, we have this grant; they can’t just take it last-minute,’” Philiou said.

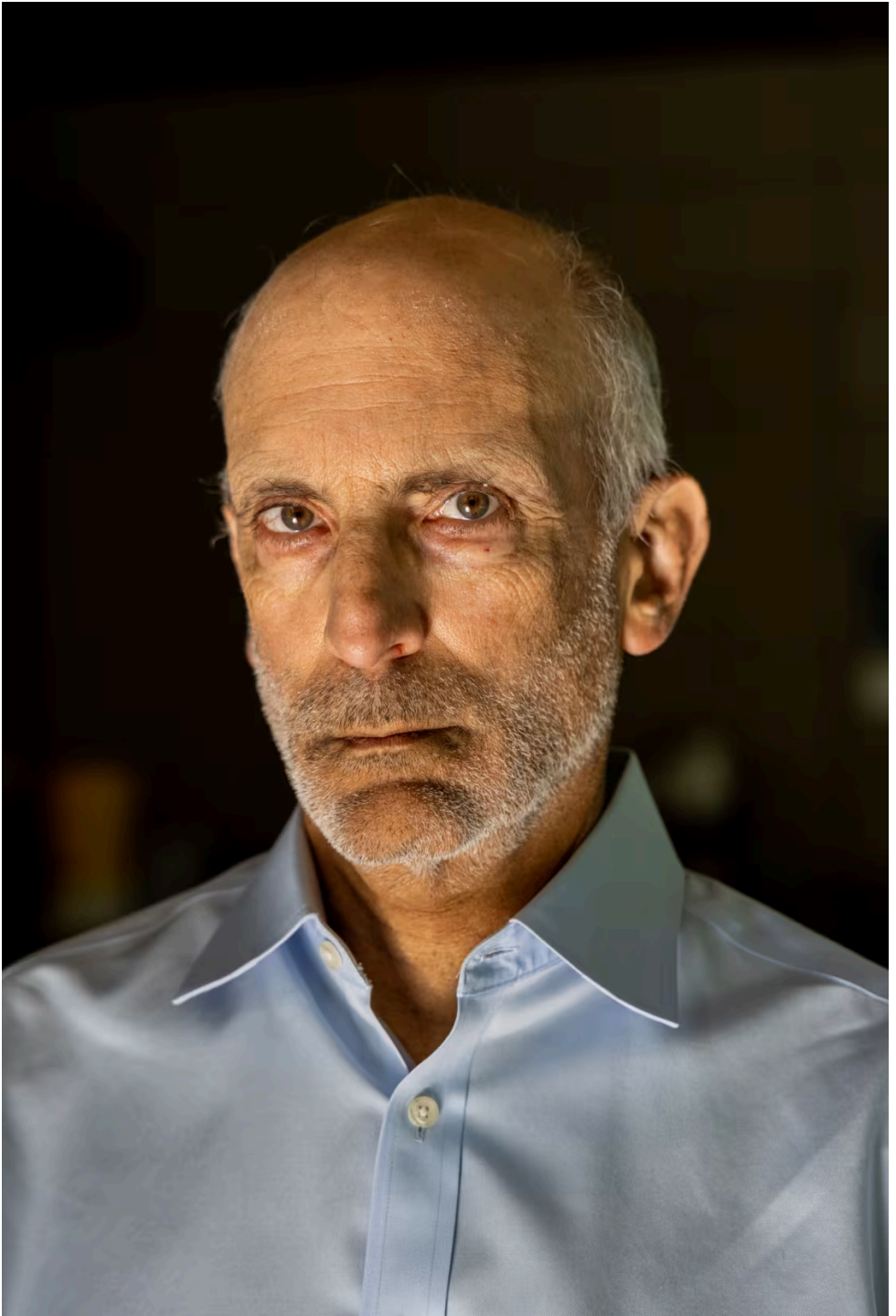




— History professor Christine Philliou was surprised her research grant to study Greek Orthodox Christians in 19th century Turkey was suddenly terminated. Jason Henry for NBC News

Ken Alex, director of [Project Climate](#), UC Berkeley Law's initiative to advance solutions to global warming, is another plaintiff. He had been in the middle of a three-year study, funded by the EPA, using drones and robots to find cheaper ways to monitor methane emissions from landfills, a major contributor to climate change.

But the EPA cut off Alex's funding in late April. Like many of the stop-work orders, it said only that the study no longer meets government priorities.



---

— Ken Alex lost financial support for research on landfill methane emissions, a significant contributor to climate change.

Jason Henry for NBC News

The EPA declined to comment on funding for UC Berkeley but said it continues to invest in research “to advance the mission of protecting human health and the environment.”

The Trump administration’s impact on UC Berkeley goes beyond funding cuts.

In addition to a federal investigation into how the UC system addressed allegations of antisemitic incidents, the Education Department is [probing UC Berkeley’s finances](#). And the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has demanded and received information from university administrators about more than 800 faculty members who signed open letters about student activism against Israel’s strikes on Gaza. Several have already received calls from one or both of the agencies.

The scrutiny has put professors on edge. Polsky and others [organized demonstrations](#) against the funding cuts this semester – unusual for faculty members, even at a hotbed of activism like Berkeley. The Academic Senate also [passed a resolution](#) urging the school administration to resist any intrusive government demands for reform.

“Never in the 12 years I have been at Berkeley have I seen this much faculty agreement about anything, period,” said Poulomi Saha, an associate professor of English at UC Berkeley, one of the faculty members who organized rallies.

If the suit survives to be certified as a class action – a process that usually takes months – it could be opened up to any other UC faculty members or researchers whose funding has similarly been terminated since Trump returned to office.



— If the federal court approves class action status, it would open the suit to other University of California staff members who have lost funding since Trump returned to office. Jason Henry for NBC News

Sabeeha Merchant, a Berkeley professor of plant biology, could become one of them. Her Department of Energy grant for research developing biofuels is at risk, but a separate lawsuit has kept it in place, at least temporarily. She said she sees the UC lawsuit as sending a message to the government about the haphazard way research funding has been cut.

“You can’t just snap your fingers and say, ‘I don’t like you and I don’t like what you study; I’m going to take it away,’” she said. “I think that if we fight back and we show that our laws still work, it means something to people.”



Tyler Kingkade

Tyler Kingkade is a national reporter for NBC News, based in Los Angeles.

---