

# The Washington Times

## University of Washington spends science grant on Hawaiian vacation, Snuggies

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March 10, 2016

A public university used federal funding for scientific research as its own personal piggy bank, spending hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars on personalized Snuggies, pottery, and a trip to Hawaii, according to a new audit report.

The University of Washington spent \$8,821 of National Science Foundation (NSF) grant money on unallowable promotional items and gifts, including personalized Snuggie blankets, according to audit from NSF's Inspector General.

The wasteful purchases included \$3,920 for canvas bags, mini optical mice and custom Snuggies and an additional \$1,179 for embroidered Snuggies.

According to the audit, the university used the NSF's transaction card as its own personal credit card. Auditors found \$12,868 worth of unsupported purchases, including \$441 "to purchase pottery for the creation of an education outreach kit," \$260 for luggage and \$2,471 for a workshop lunch.

Auditors also cited the university for spending \$23,372 on a trip to Hawaii that was "not allocable to two of three of the NSF awards to which it was charged."

University of Washington "personnel did not adequately review the expenditures charged to the NSF awards which resulted in unsupported and unallocable costs. Without a process in place to ensure costs are supported by adequate documentation and allocable to the award, there is the increased risk that funds may not be used as required to accomplish the necessary project objectives in accordance with federal and NSF requirements," the report states.

Spending watchdogs say the frivolous purchases highlighted in the report highlight the need for more federal oversight of taxpayer-funded university research grants.

"These expenditures would be laughable if they weren't squandering taxpayer dollars. Any entity that is entrusted with taxpayer money should be held to the highest standards when they use it. The fact that public funds continue to be effortlessly frittered away like this should make all Americans shudder," said Curtis Kalin, a spokesman for Citizens Against Government Waste, a non-partisan spending watchdog.

For using tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars to buy as-seen-on-TV Snuggies, Hawaiian vacations and other novelty items under the guise of scientific research, the University of

Washington wins this week's Golden Hammer; a weekly distinction awarded by The Washington Times highlighting examples of wasteful federal spending.

"The University of Washington's waste of taxpayer dollars on Snuggies shouldn't make anyone feel warm and fuzzy," said Richard Manning, president of Americans for Limited Government. "The Pac-12 university should buy their Husky Snuggies on their own dime."

In its response to the audit, the University said it would transfer the cost of the Snuggies and other novelty items it purchased from the grant awards, but it did not agree with the inspector general's assessment of the Hawaii trip expenses and said University officials believed they had already provided enough documentation to support every expense claimed.

"In reviewing the report and questioned costs we believe the audit confirms the effectiveness of our management systems as well as the dedication and commitment of our faculty and staff to manage NSF awards in a compliant manner," the university said, adding it is "committed to continually improve our oversight and management of NSF awards."

"This audit proves an opportunity to further strengthen our administrative and management controls and processes and to continue to enhance already robust outreach and training," the university added.

In total, the university spent almost \$300 million in NSF funding between April 2010 to March 2013.

Auditors also questioned other expenses charged to the NSF, including nearly \$2 million in grant funding exceeding the agency's limits on senior salary.

The inspector general said researchers were paid too much on 105 separate NSF projects because university officials did not effectively monitor senior salaries.

The university disagreed with the questioned salary costs, saying the senior salaries identified in the report were "appropriately allocated to NSF awards under institutional post-award rebudgeting authority."

The report also highlights how researchers used up federal funds on expiring projects to buy office supplies and equipment, totaling \$122,893 from 19 projects on items like MacBook Pro laptops, and a \$21,236 laser system.

Watchdogs say the audit is a reminder of how universities frequently abuse federal research grants and should serve as a warning to Congress to strict with the nation's purse strings when it comes to these studies.

"Universities are some of the most wasteful institutions in America, and continually rising federal subsidies encourages dubious spending such as custom Snuggies. Congress and the administration should work to redesign incentives, such as by cutting off schools and researchers with spendthrift grant records," said Chris Edwards, a budget analyst at the Cato Institute.

But it doesn't look like Congress has any intention of slowing the flow of federal dollars to researchers any time soon.

"The recent National Science Foundation audit of the University of Washington shows that federal grant mismanagement continues to run rampant. Last year the federal government awarded over \$600 billion in grant funding, more than doubling in the past 15 years. The number and scope of federal grants makes it almost impossible to provide adequate oversight" said Justin Bogie, a senior policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation.

"Congress should follow regular order in the upcoming appropriations cycle and use it as an opportunity to examine the benefits of these programs and eliminate or consolidate poor performers to make the process more efficient, effective, and accountable. Otherwise, taxpayers will continue to find themselves paying for other people's pajama parties," Mr. Bogie said.