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UCLA fairs show science interrupted by Trump

[**UCLA**, from A1]

Standing near their displays, these high-level researchers said they are nervous about the future of their life's work. The Trump administration has suspended \$500 million of their medical and scientific research grants. The intent of the science fair — a rudimentary act of frustration and hope — was to garner more public attention for the lifesaving and cutting-edge research they quietly conduct behind closed lab doors.

Billions are similarly frozen at Harvard and other elite universities. At UCLA, nearly all the grants on hold are from the National Institutes of Health, after a court case led to the restoration of \$81 million in briefly suspended National Science Foundation awards.

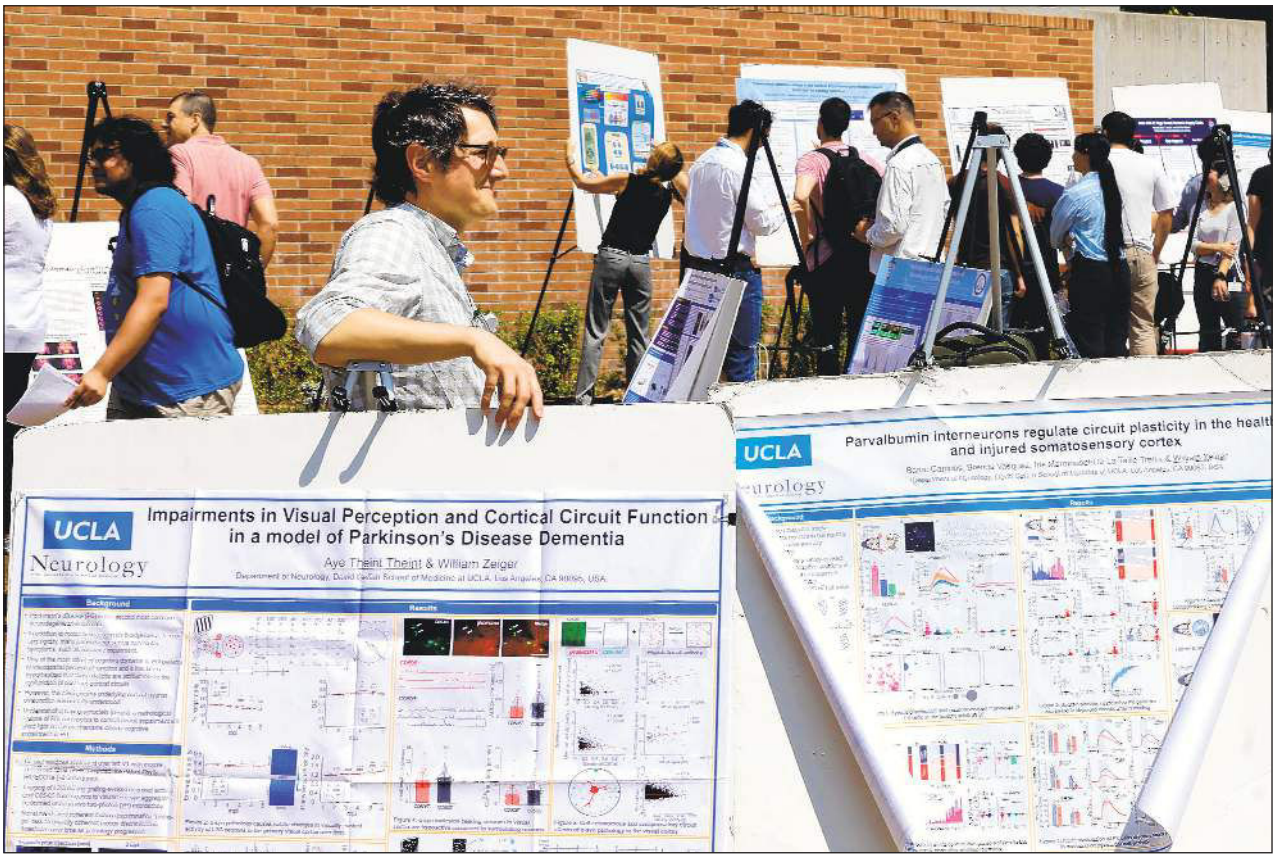
The fairs unfolded before a key federal court hearing this week that could bring back hundreds of millions of dollars in NIH funding. The UC regents will also meet for their first public discussions since the late July cuts.

"It's been very stressful," said William Zeiger, an assistant professor in the neurology department. His funding was cut in the third year of a five-year grant to study Parkinson's disease. He is using emergency funds to continue his research, which does experiments on mice. But he may have to eventually cut staff.

"Even if we were to physically stop doing the research, we still have an obligation to maintain the tools, the people, the animals that we've been caring for and have been so central to doing this research," Zeiger said, uncertain about what's ahead and how to preserve years of work.

"It's not like you can just hit pause and pick it up and continue," said Vidya Saravanapandian of UCLA's Brain Research Institute. She stood at a table Wednesday displaying two 25-year-old preserved human brains she placed on cafeteria trays. Office workers out to lunch got an impromptu lesson on its parts.

Saravanapandian earned her doctorate from UCLA in 2021 using an NIH training grant, and her research led to a brain discovery related to Dup15q syndrome, a chromosomal disorder that can lead to autism. The discovery is now part of clinical trials. But the same grants for current students are suspended.



Photographs by GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

WILLIAM ZEIGER stands by his Parkinson's research at UCLA's "Science Fair for Suspended Research."

"The time that we're losing now hugely impacts the progress that we've been making in science," Saravanapandian said.

Stroke recovery

Elle Rathbun, 29, set up Wednesday on the grassy patch across from a Chipotle and Pret a Manger. Like a sidewalk marketer, she handed out fliers with an image of the brain that said, "Neuroscience research matters."

A sixth-year neuroscience doctoral candidate, she lost a \$160,000 NIH grant in July. Her research looks at potential treatments to repair the brain after a stroke.

She memorized her pitch:

"After a stroke, affected cells in the brain die and the area forms a scar that shrinks over time. Our research displaces that dead tissue with a biomaterial also known as a hydrogel. It reserves that space and acts as a scaffold to rebuild that part of the brain," said Rathbun, who runs experiments on mice.

Like many doctoral students whose salaries and lab work are paid for by federal grants, Rathbun is now applying for funding from private organizations and stretching the non-NIH funds left in her lab's budget.

But the clock is ticking. "Everyone is floating



RESEARCHERS display their work after \$500 million in federal grants were suspended this summer.

right now as best as they can, but I think it's going to get much, much worse" if funding isn't restored soon, she said.

Cigarette addiction

A few steps away was Michael Apostol, also a neuroscience doctoral student. He stood in front of a poster that said, "Re-calibrating the mind: how brain stimulation can treat depression and addiction."

He also brought a prop. He pointed to a transcranial magnetic stimulation device, a small handheld machine that has been proven effective in treating depression by boosting helpful brain activity and reducing harmful brain patterns. His

defunded research studies how to use the device to reduce cigarette cravings and nicotine withdrawal.

Apostol had an NIH training grant that covered his salary. Now he is trying to find a teaching assistant job to make up for losses.

Some passersby were in the area for doctor's appointments at UCLA facilities, while others were running errands at the nearby UPS and Amazon stores.

"So this is what the Trump cuts are all about," said one visitor, glancing at a display about how studying communities of ants can help humans understand supply chains and disease transmission.

"What does this have to

do with Jewish people? I'm confused," he said.

These days, what doesn't make sense to Daboussi is Trump's raft of reasons for canceling her lab's mission — allegations around anti-semitism, UCLA's admission process and the equal treatment of transgender people on campus.

"Our research grant touches none of those topics," she said. "To my knowledge, we have participated in none of these activities."

Evolution within

Those who showcased Wednesday were largely from the medical school, one of the hardest-hit areas among the hundreds of grant suspensions at UCLA.

On Thursday, members of the UAW 4811 union also held a science fair outside Rolfe Hall on campus. The union represents graduate student teaching assistants, researchers and other academic workers who work closely with faculty.

One of the displays at the UAW event was titled, "Evolution in your tummy: on the hunt for adaptations in the microbiome to improve health." The project lost \$2 million between two suspended grants, leading to a slowdown in research to develop new treatments for inflammatory bowel disease.

UC's next moves

In addition to grant cuts and fine demands from UCLA, the Trump administration has also proposed sweeping changes at the Westwood campus. They include the release of detailed admissions data — the government accuses UCLA of illegally considering race when awarding seats — restrictions on protests, and an end to race-related scholarships and diversity hiring programs. The Department of Justice has also called for a ban on gender-affirming care for minors at UCLA healthcare systems.

UC leaders, led by Miliken and the Board of Regents, are negotiating to restore funding. But wide gulfs remain between the government's proposals and UC.

The regents have also considered whether to sue the Trump administration at the encouragement of Gov. Gavin Newsom.

Times photographer Genaro Molina and staff writers Marcos Magaña and Brenda Elizondo contributed to this report.

A gang shooting, an LAPD scandal and an innocent man

[**Eagle**, from A1]

"This is what I've been dreaming of every day," a tearful Eagle, 45, said during an interview in late July.

Formed in 2015 and expanded under former Dist. Atty. George Gascón, the conviction review unit has seen continued commitment from Hochman. After facing criticism for recording just four exonerations from 2015 to 2020, the unit has been involved in 12 in just the last four years, according to a district attorney's office spokesperson.

"I think that a D.A. sends a strong message when you appear in court, that it's both a case of serious concern to the D.A.'s office, and it's one where you want to see justice done," Hochman said.

Seeing L.A. County's top prosecutor personally endorse his release is a stark turnaround for Eagle, who spent most of his life believing police would do anything to keep him behind bars.

After entering California's adult prison system as a teenager, Eagle said he watched a friend die in a riot at Pelican Bay. He spent years in isolation after he says he was erroneously connected to the Mexican Mafia.

Both of his parents died while Eagle was locked up, and he can't even mention their names without tearing up to this day.

Eagle said he grew up in a section of Pico-Union where all his neighbors were affiliated with a local gang set, the Burlington Locos. A young tagger who went by "Clown," he too wound up part of the crew.

In the late 1990s, Eagle became a target of detectives with an infamous LAPD unit known as C.R.A.S.H., short for Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums.



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

OSCAR EAGLE, 45, was wrongfully convicted of attempted murder as a juvenile.

At the time, the LAPD's Rampart division was home to C.R.A.S.H. officers who falsified reports and framed civilians, later triggering a scandal that ended with the U.S. Department of Justice placing the LAPD under a consent decree.

Eagle says that in 1996 he was wrongfully arrested for gun possession as a juvenile by Rafael Perez, the central figure of the Rampart scandal. Perez later admitted the report that led to Eagle's first arrest was falsified, according to court records.

But it was Eagle's next run-in with police that proved far more consequential.

In March 1998, 18th Street Gang member Benjamin Urias was shot twice on Burlington Avenue in what police believed to be retribution for a prior attack on a Burlington Locos member, court records show. Urias, who was hospitalized for two

days and released, told police the shooter walked with a limp.

Investigators from a C.R.A.S.H. unit based in Rampart locked onto Eagle, due to his gang connections and the fact that he was said to be walking with a limp after he was injured in a shooting, according to his attorney, Megan Baca, of the California Innocence Project.

Charges against Eagle were initially dismissed after Urias failed to show up for a preliminary hearing. But a month later, LAPD homicide detectives Thomas Murrell and Kenneth Wiseman prodded the shooting victim to pick Eagle out of a photo lineup, according to the motion to vacate his conviction.

Urias initially told police he did not recognize anyone in the lineup, records show.

"OK, circle that guy ... Number 4 is the one you were pointing to," Murrell said to

Urias, according to a recording of the interview described in court records.

An LAPD spokesperson declined to comment. The audio recording that called the validity of the identification into question was never raised at Eagle's trial, according to Baca.

Despite concerns about the behavior of the detectives, Hochman said he was not immediately ordering a review of other cases involving Murrell and Wiseman. Neither Rampart detective was part of a C.R.A.S.H. unit.

Murrell denied any wrongdoing and told The Times he remembered Eagle's name because the then-teenager was a suspect in multiple gang homicides at the time.

He did not offer specifics, but dismissed Eagle's medical alibi, contending the teen "wasn't on crutches" when police arrested him.

"If he made an ID, we didn't cheat, I can tell you that ... I've never done that," said Murrell. "We did everything by the book."

Attempts to contact Wiseman were unsuccessful.

Eagle said things were only made worse by his former attorney, Patrick Lake, who didn't make an opening statement at trial or raise any of Eagle's alibi evidence. When Eagle questioned his lawyer, Lake joked that he was "saving the best for last."

As Eagle's family grew frustrated in the gallery, he said his mother passed him a note that simply read "fire him." Eagle tried to get rid of Lake, but a judge denied his request. Eagle was convicted of murder. And since he was tried as an adult, he faced 25 years to life.

Lake did not respond to a request for comment. Baca said she had one conversation with Lake, in which he claimed he didn't remember Eagle or his case.

At the time, prosecutors in California could directly file charges against teens in adult court, sending hundreds of children every year to adult prisons such as Pelican Bay, where Eagle wound up. That practice has been abolished by a change in state law, but Baca said she's encountered too many cases where teens had their lives stolen because they were wrongfully convicted and tried as adults.

"It's egregious, but I think that it happens all the time," Baca said. "So many of my clients were juveniles and they got adult life."

Eagle said his stay in prison was long and painful. He spent six years in segregated housing, essentially isolation, after Baca said her client was wrongly labeled as a Mexican Mafia associate. He denied any affiliation with the powerful prison-based

syndicate. Eagle said prison officials took a leap in logic to link him to the gang based on a "kite," or prison note, sent by another inmate.

As he grew older behind bars, Eagle started to read voraciously. His father sent recommended books. Eagle says he gravitated toward the Bible.

Even though he knew he hadn't committed the crime that put him in prison, Eagle said he still realized there were things about his life that needed to change.

"I was 30 years old. My perspective started to change. And I started to see this past life that I was living was nonsense," he said. "I started to have a conscience."

In 2023, after repeated failures to get his case overturned on appeal, some of Eagle's friends got the attention of Baca and the California Innocence Project, which worked to bring the case before the conviction review unit.

At the same time, Eagle said, he started exchanging letters with an ex-girlfriend from high school, a woman named Monica.

In July, the two squeezed next to each other on Baca's couch at the lawyer's Long Beach home, hands interlocked. They've since gotten married and are looking to move to Arizona, away from the city and county that nearly took everything away from Eagle.

There's still a lot for Eagle to get used to — he's never driven a car, the concept of Uber is still bizarre to him — but Monica says there's one silver lining to the prison term Eagle never should have served. She wouldn't have married the guy who was sent away all those years ago.

"He's a whole new person from when he went in," she said.