Evaluation of the Minerva Research Initiative

The Minerva Research Initiative is a U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) social science grant program that funds unclassified basic research relevant to national security. The goal of the program is to make use of the intellectual capital of university-based social scientists to inform understanding of issues important to DoD and the broader national security community.

At the request of DoD, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convened a committee of experts to evaluate the program's successes and challenges during its first decade of operation and to offer guidance on the best path going forward. The committee's report, *Evaluation of the Minerva Research Initiative* (2019), concludes that the Minerva program has demonstrated its ability to make meaningful contributions to the body of social science research on a range of topics related to national security. The report also highlights ways to build on the Minerva Research Initiative's vision to strengthen the program's foundations and take advantage of opportunities for broadening its reach and usefulness.

RESEARCH SUPPORTED BY THE MINERVA PROGRAM

Between 2009 and 2017 the program funded more than 100 projects, and the grants are competitive. Minerva research has been published in top journals and tends to have strong citation records. The research has also resulted in books and produced policy-relevant statistical models, databases, and mapping tools, reflecting the value placed by the program on innovative outputs.

Many of the projects have been built on interdisciplinary collaborations that have incorporated perspectives from a variety of social and behavioral sciences, as well as other fields, such as computer science, engineering, and mathematics. Grantees reported that the program has had a positive impact on the amount of dialogue between DoD and the social science community, the number of social science researchers with an interest in research relevant to national security, and the amount of collaboration among researchers working on topics relevant to national security.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS
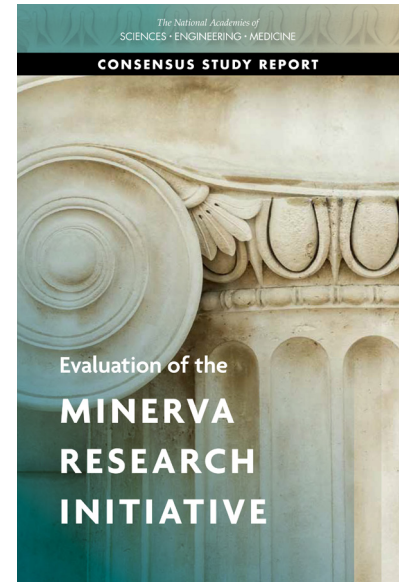
PROGRAM PRIORITIES

The Minerva program is a collaboration between research and policy divisions within DoD, and the grants are managed by the military service branches. One of the challenges the program has faced has been balancing the funding priorities emerging from differing perspectives and priorities. While it is clear that the vision and goals of the Minerva program still resonate in the national security community and among academic researchers, a key task for DoD is to define the program's priorities more clearly and make decisions going forward with these priorities in mind.

Recommendation

• The Minerva program office should specify its priorities for the Minerva Research Initiative, and, as needed, refine the program's approach to topic selection and grant award to reflect these priorities.

STAFFING

In recent years, the Minerva program experienced challenges associated with staff turnover. The report emphasizes that successfully implementing the recommendations offered by the committee will depend on ensuring stable staffing of the Minerva program office.

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Recommendations

- The U.S. Department of Defense should ensure that the Minerva Research Initiative has a leader with appropriate credentials and stature in a full-time, civil service position.
- The U.S. Department of Defense should evaluate what additional support staff are needed for the Minerva Research Initiative to achieve its goals and implement the recommendations in this report.

STRATEGIC OUTREACH AND DISSEMINATION PLAN

The Minerva program needs a strategic outreach and dissemination plan to make better use of opportunities for the funded research and researchers to inform the policy discourse, and to expand the communities that can benefit from the body of knowledge generated through the grants, as well as from the expertise of the grantees.

Recommendation

- The Minerva program office should develop a strategic outreach and dissemination plan for distributing information about the Minerva Research Initiative and about the studies and researchers funded.

CENTRALIZED DATABASE

The development of a centralized database of all Minerva grants awarded to date should be a key task for the Minerva office, as a tool for more efficiently managing the program and as a foundation for outreach and dissemination activities.

Recommendations

- The Minerva program office should make completing the centralized database of the projects and researchers funded under the Minerva Research Initiative a high priority.
- The public-facing component of the grantee database to be developed by the Minerva program office should include detailed information about the funded projects, providing a current and historical picture of the portfolio of research that has been conducted and an inventory of the researchers' expertise. The database should be user friendly and searchable.

OUTREACH AND DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES

Several activities need particular attention as part of a comprehensive outreach and dissemination strategy.

Recommendations

- The Minerva program office should develop relationships with potential supporters of the Minerva Research Initiative and users of the research, both among U.S. Department of Defense leadership and externally, to increase awareness of the program and expand use of its funded research and the expertise of its grantees.
- The Minerva program office should develop mechanisms for facilitating interaction between grantees and potential users of their research or expertise in the broader national security community.
- The Minerva Conference should continue to serve as a key mechanism for outreach, dissemination, and interaction and should be held annually, on a predictable schedule.

COMMITTEE TO ASSESS THE MINERVA RESEARCH INITIATIVE AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE TO ADDRESSING SECURITY CONCERNS

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