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National Science Foundation Priorities

The recently passed Daddario bill gives the National Science Foundation new and additional responsibilities. The same Congress that adopted this bill is about to give the NSF an appropriation almost 20 percent below the \$500 million level of the past 2 years. The figure will be between the \$400 million already approved by the House and the \$410 million approved by the Senate. The amount that can be spent may be somewhat different; carry-over of funds from earlier years may allow expenditure of as much as \$460 million, or the reductions required by the Revenue and Expenditure Control Act may limit expenditures to less than the appropriated amount.

Someday soon the Bureau of the Budget will tell NSF how much it can spend in the fiscal year that started on 1 July. Present indications are that the deepest cuts will be in support for the construction of scientific facilities and for improving promising scientific institutions. New grants for these purposes will be few. Funds for research will not be so severely reduced, but, even so, research grants will probably be made to slightly fewer institutions than received them in recent years.

The new law requires NSF to report annually the amount of federal money received by each college or university and other appropriate nonprofit institution in the United States. Congressmen are always interested in what flows into their districts. This year some of them will be disappointed. Some members of Congress, however, were quite aware that they were restricting the spread of NSF funds. During the Senate discussion, Senator Pell said that the reduced appropriation would necessarily bring a disproportionate decrease in the funds available for "developing the science resources of institutions which are promising but which have not been in the top levels of science achievement because NSF cannot disrupt important ongoing activities and must honor prior commitments."

This result is inevitable. Prior commitments must be honored. Research projects and institutional development programs that are already well started must have priority over new ones. Quality must remain the primary criterion of selection. In the first annual report of the Foundation, the chairman of the National Science Board, James B. Conant, wrote: "In the advance of science and its applications to many practical problems, there is no substitute for first-class men. Ten second-rate scientists cannot do the work of one who is in the first rank."

These general policy lines are clear enough. But applying them will require the NSF staff to squeeze project budgets into tighter molds, to reject more proposals, and to contract the geographic and institutional spread of NSF funds. There will inevitably be much debate over the relative priority of different programs.

Altogether it will be a difficult year, and from this distance fiscal year 1970 does not look much brighter. Unless national and international problems have abated more than seems reasonable to expect, the new President will probably have to ask Congress to extend the income tax surcharge beyond 30 June 1969. Congress may then insist, as it did this year, on a reduction in expenditures. Even if these speculations turn out to be inaccurate, a substantial increase for the NSF seems unlikely. The policy decisions, priorities, and curtailments required this year are likely to be governing for at least another year.—DAEL WOLFLE