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Expenditure Ceilings

In exchange for approving the increase in income taxes requested by the President, Congress has insisted that federal expenditures be decreased by \$6 billion in the 1969 fiscal year. Congress refused, however, to decide where all of the reductions should be made. The President must therefore decide, within appropriation ceilings, how much money can actually be spent during the year for each of a wide variety of activities and programs approved by Congress. In this way Congress has given the President (partially) a power it has steadily refused him in the past: the power to veto individual items within a bill.

All the science-supporting agencies must plan to reduce expenses this year. Their plans take different forms. The National Science Foundation has computed an expenditure ceiling for each of its grantee institutions and has delegated authority to the institution to decide how funds, within that ceiling, will be allocated among its NSF grants.

These changes, beginning with Congress, can be thought of as examples of the practical political principle: when budgets are expanding, take the credit for yourself; when budgets are contracting, make someone else take the blame. But there is more to look for than that. Authority to allocate funds within a ceiling amount is not wholly equivalent to an institutional grant, for the funds can be used only for projects and programs that NSF has approved, but there is a great shift in the locus of authority, and each grantee institution must decide how to use its new authority.

(The National Institutes of Health, which involves many different institutes and appropriations, has not found it feasible to establish ceilings for each grantee institution, and plans to negotiate reductions individually with its grantees.)

Universities are adopting different methods of reducing expenses under NSF grants to the ceilings set. Some have asked a faculty committee or an administrative body to decide how the ceiling amount can best be used. This procedure will give the institution added experience in corporate responsibility, but the responsible central body is likely to get much of the blame from disappointed project personnel.

Other universities are apportioning their ceiling amounts among individual departments (or other organizational units) in proportion to last year's expenditures of NSF funds. If the shortage of funds is brief, and if the institution can defer some major new expense (such as a building), apportioning available funds by departments will permit many activities to be kept alive while everyone involved hopes for more normal funding in a year or two. But if the shortage continues for longer, dividing the available money on a department-by-department basis is an invitation to mediocrity, for the money will be scattered too thinly, and the poorer projects may fare relatively as well as the more brilliant ones.

Moreover, if the actions of this year presage a permanent shift in emphasis from a budget expressed in terms of appropriations or obligations to one expressed in terms of expenditures, we must expect substantial further changes in grant management at both agency and grantee levels.

All in all, if there were an annual prize for the greatest impact on national science policy, this year's winner would be Wilbur Mills, chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means and chief advocate of the budget reduction.—DAEL WOLFE