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LETTERS

Federal Graduate Aid: Errors in Planning and Support

A recent letter by Demerath, Lehman, and Little (31 July) makes three points concerning the crucial problem of federal aid to graduate students:

"First, such a loan program might well produce a sharp decline in the number of individuals going into graduate study." My first reaction to this probably correct statement is, "What's wrong with that?" At least in my own area of physics, there is an oversupply of trained physicists. Why actively encourage individuals to enter the field and train them for the disappointment of not finding employment in the area of their expensive training?

The authors continue, "there is a distinct possibility that he [a prospective graduate student] will elect those fields where the anticipated payoff is much greater, thus producing a major change in the distribution of students to fields—and for the wrong reasons." Exactly what are the correct reasons for selecting a profession? In a free marketplace, supply and demand are supposed to fix the cost of goods and services. A highly paid profession is supposedly the result of a shortage of trained personnel in that profession. If one has an interest in a subject, what better reason exists for selecting it as a profession than the feeling that one is needed?

The second point takes note of the job squeeze on Ph.D.'s but states, "In anthropology, psychology, and sociology there is a well-documented need for increasing numbers." Does it occur to the authors that the current glut of scientists and the purported need in other areas might be related to the federal financial support of graduate students in science over the past few years? This is an excellent example of how artificial student support upsets the supply of trained people. Without this support, perhaps many physicists, who are now underemployed, would have gone into anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Who, among us who have attended graduate school in science, did not know at least one fellow graduate student who would really rather have studied music or languages or art, but chose science because he was capable and he could get financial support for study in science but not in art?

"Third, quite apart from graduate students, graduate schools would almost certainly suffer a major blow." Again,

what is wrong with that? What axiom of nature states that most of the 50 states must maintain two or more graduate schools to train graduate students who are not needed in the society that supports the schools? Before continuing this type of support, I would like to see some solid evidence that these highly trained people are needed. It is no service to mankind to "give" a student several years training in a highly skilled profession when there is no opportunity to practice the profession at the successful completion of training.

This is not intended as a tirade against financial support of graduate study but rather against the level of that support and the strings which are attached to it. It is difficult for a small funding group to plan accurately 5 years in advance and even more difficult to get the machinery of government to respond to changing needs. It is now clear that federal support of graduate study in science has continued well past any shortage of scientists. Perhaps it would be better if that small group disseminated the best possible information on future needs in the hope that many small errors in planning made by individuals would cancel out statistically.

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Is the Budget Bureau Objective?

Vic Reinemer's report ("Budget Bureau: Do advisory panels have an industry bias?" 3 July, p. 36) and Robert P. Mayo's response to it greatly interested me although I have no more involvement than that of any other citizen. Reinemer gave considerable details and specifics of the behavior of the advisory bodies so that it appears that Mayo's "unfair and misleading" charge needs more supporting evidence. Nor can I agree with Mayo that the events Reinemer refers to are "ancient history" since new practices, if any, were evidently introduced by the Bureau of the Budget only during the current year.

In view of the long history of regulatory agencies being largely staffed from, and being quasi-captives of, business interests, it is not enough for the budget bureau to merely open committee and panel hearings "to all interested parties, without exception." A responsible attitude would cause the Bureau of the Budget to exert considerable