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Universities and National Research Policy

The postwar ebullience and national prosperity has given way to austerity and national insecurity. This new environment poses special dangers for the research university. Our political system naturally produces pressures to satisfy the majority and spread resources evenly over a large number of claimants. If there is too little money to satisfy all claims, the needs of institutions of special quality are readily dismissed as elitist and unnecessary. A period of national insecurity also reinforces the tendency to concentrate on immediate problems and ignore or defer long-term needs. Finally, a period of austerity impels public officials to insist that every expenditure be justified as objectively as possible. Such accountability is not kind to the intangible values that characterize so much of the work of universities.

These pressures have already left their mark on the nation's research effort. Federal support for R & D and basic research has steadily declined in real dollars, and other nations are beginning to surpass us in the share of the gross national product that they devote to these purposes. Applied research is targeted heavily at urgent domestic problems, such as cancer and energy, to the neglect of longer-range international needs in such fields as basic biological research devoted to agriculture and tropical disease. Funds for equipment and facilities have fallen off to such a point that experimental science is threatened in many private universities. Investigators are hampered by instability in federal funding and by increasing red tape in the administration of contracts. Financial stringency has limited the career opportunities of younger university scientists and threatens to drive promising investigators into other, less productive environments.

These developments call for greater efforts from universities to press the case for research support. This task has been largely left to individual scientists, who have worked effectively with their counterparts in the National Science Foundation and Health, Education, and Welfare. But scientists cannot fully appreciate the needs of the university as a whole. They have little contact with members of Congress or with the Office of Management and Budget or with other key officials in the Executive Branch. And they lack the capacity to attract support from representatives of business and other sectors with a stake in a vigorous science program.

What can be done to improve the situation? To begin with, university organizations—especially the Association of American Universities—must make a sustained effort to develop an effective policy for the support of research and to create an effective forum in Congress and the Executive Branch where they can discuss this policy not only at budget time but on a more informal, long-term basis.

University presidents must also do more to help formulate an adequate research policy. Presidents cannot impose their opinions in matters beyond their competence. But they must see to it that all the interests of the institution are identified, that conflicting needs are reconciled, and that these needs are presented in convincing form to those who make the ultimate decisions in Washington. And they must make efforts to enlist the aid of allies outside the universities who share an interest in the progress of science.

Above all, a much more forceful case must be made for the importance of research universities to the nation's welfare. It has become fashionable today to belittle the value of education and to question the contributions of knowledge. We are doing very little to counter these arguments. Perhaps we have lost our nerve, or perhaps we have grown too accustomed to having our importance taken for granted. Whatever the reason, we run the risk of having our needs quietly ignored in favor of all the other urgent claims being made on the government. We will do a disservice to ourselves and to the public interest if we allow this situation to continue.—DEREK C. BOK, *President, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138*

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