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Problems of Science Faculties

During the past 2 months I have had casual conversations with about 20 professors from widely scattered universities. If their attitudes are an indication of the spirit on campus, the long-term future of science in America is in jeopardy. Not one of those 20 conveyed the impression that life is great, science is fun, and that academic research is the best possible of all activities. Rather the majority were gloomy—some were bitter. How could such individuals inspire the young and foster in them a love of knowledge and a zeal for lifelong scholarship?

Some of the factors contributing to poor morale include problems in obtaining adequate research support, the proliferation of a federally mandated inefficient bureaucracy on campus, a perception (perhaps not correct) that the public no longer values scientists, failure of salary adjustments to keep up with inflation, the scrambling for tenure, and an aging faculty.

Both private and state universities share these factors but the private schools seem somewhat less affected. They have had to retrench and are reluctant to increase tuition further, but loyal alumni have been helpful and the boards of trustees understanding. The state universities must deal with governors and legislatures that too often are capricious and quick with the meat-ax. A conspicuous example is the great University of California system, which is now in peril. Proposition 13 is only the latest blow. But California is not alone. Many other states had earlier followed destructive practices and they too now are placing further financial restrictions on their institutions. Many of them have refused to make adequate cost-of-living salary adjustments for professors so that during this decade a cumulative deterioration of personal purchasing power of 20 percent is common. This is without taking into account higher income and social security taxes. Considering the hours that assistant professors work each week, their pay per hour often is considerably less than that of many unionized blue-collar workers.

While it is less visible than state governments in its contribution to problems at the universities, the federal government has had a greater, longer-range impact. Although few abuses or financial irregularities were ever pinpointed, the government in the name of accountability required the universities to create vast bureaucracies which produce nothing while devouring hundreds of millions of potential research dollars annually. When a scientist notes that high grant proposals are inflated by as much as a 90 percent overhead charge and then later has to deal with arrogant clerks, morale sinks.

Many years ago the government allowed universities to charge to grants part of senior investigators' salaries, including summer salaries. In addition, universities came to expect that scientists should obtain all their own research funds. A professor in the sciences who could not get a grant lost part of his salary and, more seriously, his ability to function as a scholar.

Depending on their age, scientists react differently to the deterioration of their working conditions and prospects. The elder of them are sad but not disconsolate. When they were in graduate school they thought that in pursuing knowledge they had made a Spartan choice between science and material goals. Later, when money flowed and prestige was high, they enjoyed it but the baubles did not matter that much.

In contrast, the younger people chose science after the public had been shocked by Sputnik and great efforts had been made to steer young people into scientific endeavors. After many years of struggle, they have reached the stage of experience where they could expect to obtain tenure and good research support. For many, broken expectations have brought bitterness.

Senior faculties, university administrators, and the federal government should regard the needs of these people with understanding. Remedial measures are overdue.—PHILIP H. ABELSON