

Research Coterie Meets At NAS to Assess Budget

NAS assembles 400 representatives of academe, industry, and government to discuss priorities for science

JUST how Congress will address the macroeconomic issues surrounding the Reagan Administration's fiscal year 1987 budget may not be resolved for months. But without a clear shuffling of program priorities, rejection of deficit-reduction targets, or new taxes, the financial well-being of the nation's universities and research centers appears certain to deteriorate. Indeed, the implication for the future is that the academic world will have to accommodate to stagnant or declining federal support.

To assist the academic and scientific communities in understanding the depth of the funding problem, the National Academy of Sciences gathered together 400 members of academic, industrial, and scientific communities in Washington on 26 and 27 February. The question put to them was: "What research strategies best serve the national interest in a period of budgetary stress?" No promising new solutions were unearthed and participants left knowing that their options are limited and in instances painful.

The deliberations were closed to the press because NAS president Frank Press was concerned that invited guests might not speak frankly if the media was present. Nevertheless, a news briefing and conversations with participants indicate there was strong support for preserving and bolstering basic research. No clear consensus, however, was reached on how best to achieve this. A number of themes, though, did emerge from the proceedings.

Roland Schmitt, senior vice president of research at General Electric Company, and chairman of the National Science Foundation's National Science Board, noted that there is a need for a campaign to get federal mission agencies to devote more of their R&D budgets to support basic research at universities. Agencies such as the Department of Defense, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Department of Agriculture, and the Environmental Protection Agency were cited by Robert Frosch, vice president of General Motors Research Laboratories, as examples of agencies that ought to redirect their research funds.

The need for upgrading and overhauling

deteriorating university infrastructure was cited as justification for healthy increases in basic research by the mission agencies and in the budget of the National Science Foundation. But at the same time, says Robert Rosenzweig, president of the Association of American Universities, "there has to be a dawning of realism on campus that federal research funds are going to be harder to come by and that getting them is going to be more competitive." The NAS meeting,



Frank Press

Called budget meeting.

says Rosenzweig, seemed to reinforce participants' views that a tough budgetary climate will prevail for the next several years—even if the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings budget-balancing law is overturned. The Supreme Court is slated to rule by July on the legality of legislation's automatic mechanism for reducing annual deficits.

The budgetary climate, says Rosenzweig, may force university and research institutions to reassess their current programs and decide whether to discontinue some. GE's Schmitt noted that those university and laboratory institutions that may best weather this storm are those that have focused missions. Even so, Peter Likins, president of Lehigh University, who chaired NAS' panel

on "the stewardship of human resources," foresees the quality of the university research and the number of institutions declining, if looming federal actions take place.

Behind this gloomy forecast, says Likins, are the proposed federal cutback in student aid, reduction in indirect costs paid to universities as overhead on research grants, and federal tax reform. While research institutions have stepped up drives for corporate and private foundation support, Likins notes that available resources are finite and will not offset federal aid that may be lost. Participants on the panel concluded that the academic community can sustain modest annual decreases in federal support of perhaps 5 percent. Beyond that, the institutions' ability to hold together academic and research programs is doubtful. Even at a level of 5 percent, says Likins, there is a penalty to pay. Universities may be forced to halt paying professors summer salaries and to reduce support for research, which means fewer graduate students.

There was near unanimous concern with the Office of Management and Budget's 14 February announcement about reducing university overhead charges on research grants (*Science*, 7 March, p. 1059). Under the action, overhead charges on federal research grants are to be limited to 26 percent of the direct costs of the research. A lower cap of 20 percent will be applied in 1988 and may extend to other federal agencies. Marvin Goldberger, president of the California Institute of Technology, says that OMB's 30-day phase-in period and failure to consult the academic community was the subject of much protest at the meeting. Joseph Wright, deputy director of OMB, after giving a brief speech on the Administration's budget, slipped away from the conference before he could be questioned on the Administration's budget priorities.

In fact, the 2-day program basically operated in an atmosphere shaped by the Reagan Administration's budget proposal. There was no attempt to consider the fundamental economic precepts of the Administration's budget or its priorities for defense over non-defense missions. But a former House Budget Committee member, Representative Leon Panetta (D-CA), did advise participants that Congress could well settle on a budget freeze, if the budget process breaks down. That would be good for technology development, the National Institutes of Health and other research programs that are slated to be cut, because it would hold their funding at FY 1986 levels. But for institutions that rely heavily on the support of NSF, it would mean stagnation, because NSF's proposed budget increase would not be realized. ■ **MARK CRAWFORD**