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A Time for Steadiness

Forty years ago Vannevar Bush challenged the nation to establish and maintain a peacetime science program on major university campuses. Congress responded with authorization, appropriation, and oversight. Since then we have been learning how to make that partnership work, with trust and mutual confidence. Now that partnership seems deeply periled. On 12 February, the Office of Management and Budget unilaterally issued a change in Circular A-21, the guidelines determining the recovery of research costs.

Basically, OMB decided that this 40-year partnership between government and universities—a partnership that has taken us into space, conquered disease, defended us, improved our quality of life, and made us the food basket of the world—needed to be changed quickly, unilaterally, and fundamentally. The principles that costs are to be fully identified and reimbursed and that consultation over major changes should occur, are central to the partnership. By its action, OMB made clear that either it misunderstood or rejected these principles.

This is not a budget problem. We have lived with budget cuts before and can do so again. Nor is it a problem with indirect costs. All of us recognize and share with principal investigators the commitment to contain these costs wherever possible. The problem is the lack of consultation with the academic community on an issue that has major consequences for the conduct of research in this country.

It is not that our consultative relationships have been sundered. It is that they have been ignored. Discussions on these issues move ahead in the White House and Congress. The President's own White House Science Council Panel on the Health of U.S. Universities and Colleges, chaired by David Packard and D. Allan Bromley, has prepared an important and comprehensive report on these very matters, and this report has been circulating in draft for several months. And these arrangements are now being systematically examined by a task force on science policy of the House Committee on Science and Technology under the chairmanship of Don Fuqua. These are serious inquiries being conducted with impartiality and care.

The treatment by OMB of A-21 is not by any means the only critical issue. We have a broader problem. Rule changes are being proposed on many fronts in response to budgetary pressures. For example, in February, the director of the National Science Foundation advised the university community that science faculty salaries for research conducted during the 1987 summer term might be eliminated and that the NSF fellowship program might face a 12 percent cut given current budget pressures. Although his candid and timely report was appreciated, we certainly hope that any final changes will involve full consultation with our community. Similarly, we hope that the discussion of trade-offs between the number of new awards at the National Institutes of Health and their funding levels would follow the same kind of consultation.

As an analytical community we are prepared to cooperate fully in the accumulation of data and open evaluation leading to the rendering of judgments. Information collected by organizations like the Association of American Universities, the Council on Governmental Relations, OMB, NSF, the Defense Department, and the Department of Health and Human Services should be discussed around a common table where the issue is how to deal with the opportunities and problems of this partnership. Systematic and open review will be followed by appropriate change. At stake is the industrial competitiveness of the nation, which is based on and grew out of the vitality of our educational and scientific enterprise.

Four decades of fruitful sponsorship and execution of quality research programs on university campuses have not occurred by happenstance. Budgetary pressures and uncertainties have been known before and coped with; occasional management and audit problems have led to new controls and generally more efficient expenditure of funds; solutions have come from a mutual spirit of cooperation, hard work, and good will.

We do not have less need for knowledge and innovation or the productivity gains they foster. We must reestablish serious consultation. If that requires congressional action to achieve, then perhaps that should be explored. Steadiness is needed.—CORNELIUS J. PINGS, Provost, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90084-4019