

AAU president Robert Rosenzweig says that "budget, tax policy, accounting rules, and a reduction in student aid, all emanating from different sources, converge to work against these institutions of higher learning." Further, he notes, "Congress is not designed to handle this sort of issue," where policy coordination is key. Says Magrath, what we have here is "a silent crisis." ■

BARBARA J. CULLITON

... But They Endorse The Supercollider

The annual spring meeting of the Association of American Universities (AAU) appears to have been dominated by discussion of the grim financial prospects facing higher education (see above). However, the members of the association, which consists of the presidents of some 50 of the nation's leading research universities, took the unusual step of endorsing the most expensive basic research project ever proposed, the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC).

The meeting approved a letter urging Secretary of Energy John Herrington to back the project. It was hand delivered to him on 22 April by David Gardner, president of the University of California. Herrington must decide this summer whether to seek funds to begin construction of the SSC in fiscal year 1988. A decision to go ahead would require White House approval in the fall and a budget proposal would go to Congress in January 1987.

The letter noted that "budgetary restraints threaten the vitality of a number of critical areas of science," including high energy physics. "The SSC project is undeniably expensive," the letter stated, "But failure to proceed would also be very expensive. . . . Beyond the loss of potential technological benefits, failure to build the SSC would inevitably diminish our scientific and technical advantage in the rest of the world."

The letter goes on to urge that "the SSC must not be funded at the expense of other or related disciplines." This addresses the fears of many scientists that the SSC's \$6-billion construction cost could squeeze out other science programs at a time of overall budget constraints. AAU president Robert Rosenzweig says the AAU members do not view the SSC "as a substitute for anything." If they did, he said, "there would have been a different response."

Rosenzweig says the AAU does not intend to make construction of the SSC a top legislative priority. "We have said what we are going to say on it," he said. ■

COLIN NORMAN

Days May Be Numbered For Polygraphs in the Private Sector

"It either works or it's broken. It's a simple, medical machine." So testified renowned criminal lawyer F. Lee Bailey at a recent hearing on polygraphs conducted by the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

But Bailey's is a minority opinion. The legislative noose appears to be tightening on the use of polygraphs in the private sector. On 12 March, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 1524, which would outlaw their use for employee screening or testing. Exceptions are made for federal and local governments, security services, companies dealing with controlled substances, public utilities, child care centers, and nursing homes. The Senate companion bill, S. 1815, sponsored by Orrin Hatch (R-UT) and Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), exempts only government use.

Federal legislation to restrict polygraph use has been in the works for a long time, with about 40 bills having been introduced

"THERE IS THAT ONE SMALL PROBLEM"



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in the past 12 years. Strong bipartisan support has been developing since 1983, when the Office of Technology Assessment released a report saying that the technology was valuable for criminal investigations, but it is virtually worthless as a screening device.

The American Polygraph Association has been lobbying hard for substitute bills that

would tighten standards for the conduct of examinations and the training of polygraphers. The Reagan Administration strongly opposes "federalizing the law in this area." (Thirty-two states now have laws restricting polygraph use.) But the purport of most of the testimony at the hearing was that polygraph use outside law enforcement and national security areas is not justified on scientific, constitutional, or practical grounds.

The overwhelming majority of the estimated 2 million polygraph tests conducted each year are conducted by private business, with 80% of these for the purpose of screening employees. Many jewelers, bankers, and retailers with high employee turnover claim that the availability of polygraphs can radically cut internal thefts, which are estimated to amount to anywhere from \$5 billion to \$40 billion a year. But several witnesses countered that polygraphs are often used as a "quick fix" to substitute for careful background checks and better auditing procedures.

There do not seem to be convincing data to support some of the sweeping claims of polygraph advocates. Psychologist Leonard Saxe of Boston University said there are only a handful of published field studies, which show far less validity for polygraphs than do laboratory studies. He said that if rigorous standards, such as those of the American Psychological Association, were applied to polygraphers, "I have no doubt that polygraph tests would be relegated to the same historical position as sensory tests that were once thought to be indicative of intelligence."

Psychologist David Raskin of the University of Utah said "there is not a single scientific study which demonstrates any reasonable degree of accuracy for general employment screening tests." He also noted that "the vast majority of major successful companies do not use polygraphs." Indeed, a statement submitted by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers said that a survey of 33 large electric utilities (a category proposed for exemption), 15 of which had licensed nuclear plants, showed that only 5 used polygraphs.

Polygraphs have suffered much adverse publicity of late, including the outraged reaction by Secretary of State George Shultz to the Administration's decision last November to authorize expanded testing in federal agencies. An Associated Press poll conducted in March revealed that, while two-thirds of the respondents said they would be willing to take a polygraph test for employment, only half that number thought employers should have the right to administer such tests. ■

CONSTANCE HOLDEN