Congress to Investigate Charges That OMB Is Obstructing Data Collection

Dissatisfaction with what is perceived as meddling and obstructionism by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in data collection efforts by federal agencies has been simmering for several years. Now the House Committee on Science and Technology has asked the General Accounting Office to investigate OMB's data collection process to see if OMB is "improperly and unnecessarily limiting executive branch agencies in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information."

When a government agency wants to survey members of the public to gain information on the effects of its programs, it has to get clearance from the OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), under which all government information collection was consolidated by the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980. The main problems concern the collection of voluntary information by regulatory agencies on matters under their jurisdiction, such as health effects, service usage, and civil rights compliance.

In recent years, OIRA has blocked or delayed many of these requests, citing the paperwork act, which says information gathering must be necessary to an agency's mission and must not impose an undue "burden" on respondents. Included among complaints are that OIRA staff do not have the expertise to evaluate proposals, that they often arbitrarily decide that the information sought is unnecessary or already available from other sources, and that decisions are influenced by the Administration's political agenda and the generally low value it places on social science research.

The request for the investigation coincides with a report on OMB's review of research supported by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which was prepared by the Harvard School of Public Health. That report, done at the request of the House Energy and Commerce Committee's oversight and investigations subcommittee, documents how "scientifically untutored OMB officials sought to second-guess the professional judgments of agency scientists" and review panels, says subcommittee chairman John Dingell (D–MI).

The study, directed by Ian A. Greaves, found that between January 1984 and March 1986, "six major peer review studies from CDC were either significantly delayed, seriously altered in scientific design, or disapproved entirely by OMB." This despite the fact that the law states that review is for paperwork reduction purposes only and that there should be no interference with the substantive programs and policies of the agencies. Three studies—of worker exposure to dioxin, video display terminals and abnormal births (*Science*, 27 June, p. 1594), and worker exposure to the carcinogen MBOCA—were disapproved by OMB and only approved after congressional inquiries.

On reviewing all 51 studies submitted to OMB during the time period, the Harvard study found that OMB was "seven times more likely to reject studies with an environmental or occupational health focus" than those focused on conventional diseases. "Studies with a reproductive focus . . . also were more likely to be rejected by OMB." Says the report: "OMB is clearly interfering with the substance of CDC research."

The Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) has been tracking the situation and has collected a number of examples, including the following:

- OMB rejected all or parts of questionnaires developed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Veterans Administration that involved the collection of racial and ethnic data for the purpose of monitoring discrimination in their programs. Congress subsequently wrote specific directives to collect such data into the FY 1986 HUD authorization. Efforts by the Commerce Department's Minority Business Development Administration to obtain detailed data on minority businesses were also repeatedly thwarted before finally gaining approval.
- The Department of Defense, at a congressional request, asked the National Science Foundation to do a survey of the research facilities–infrastructure issue in U.S. universities. OMB refused clearance, suggesting that to do the survey would be "self-serving" of NSF and a departure from its basic mission.
- The Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management developed a survey covering uses of federal lands and attitudes toward reclamation, but OMB said the bureau was not in the research business.
- The National Institute of Mental Health proposed a survey of psychiatrists to assess the prevalence of treated mental disorder, which had implications for outpatient insurance reimbursement. This was turned down, as was a survey by the Health Resources and Services Administration designed to locate areas underserved by psychologists.

COSSA reports that OMB's actions are having a "chilling effect" on agencies, which in many cases are "so demoralized by the process and the climate that they fail to submit reasonable requests." ■

CONSTANCE HOLDEN

France to Keep New Research Degree

Paris

The French government has changed its mind about abolishing a new 3-year doctoral degree that was introduced only 2 years ago by its socialist predecessor to bring the French research community closer into line with the practices followed in most other Western countries.

Under its initial proposals for a series of administrative reforms in universities, published during the summer, the government had announced that it intended to return to the previous two-tiered system of doctorate awards. Under this, the two main research qualifications are a "third cycle doctorate," based on a thesis written during the final 2 years of a 6-year university course, and the "state doctorate" (*doctorat d'état*), which requires on average 7 to 8 years of research following the successful completion of university studies.

The decision to revert to the old system, however, brought a strong outcry from the higher education community. Top administrators from both universities and the prestigious grandes écoles argued that the lack of comparability with foreign systems made it more difficult for French research workers to find posts abroad—or to offer posts in France to foreign scientists. Some even threatened that, if the government went ahead with its plans, they would introduce their own independent system of Ph.D. degrees.

The French minister for research and higher education, Alain Devaquet, has now announced that both the old and the new systems will be allowed to coexist, leaving it to universities and the research community to decide how to maintain the appropriate balance between the two types of doctoral qualifications.

Devaquet's announcement was made during a debate in the French Senate on his proposed reforms. These have been prompted primarily by demands from right-wing

members of the two political parties that make up France's ruling conservative coalition for steps to counterbalance the effects of changes introduced 2 years ago by Devaquet's predecessor, Alain Savary.

A major thrust of the new proposals, for example, is to restore to senior university academics much of the power on administrative and academic committees that had been taken away from them by the socialist government and distributed more widely among junior faculty members and labor unions representing technical and administrative staff.

Other important moves have been the decision to grant greater financial independence to individual academic units within a university, and to allow universities a limited degree of discretion both in the selection of students (currently they are required to accept all students with the appropriate entry qualifications), as well as to set teaching fees (now decided by the government).

The Senate passed the bill by a substantial majority. It is now due to be debated in the lower of France's two legislative bodies, the National Assembly, and is expected to pass into law before the end of the year. ■

DAVID DICKSON

Division, Confusion Found on Campus

Examinations of American undergraduate education typically concentrate on the college curriculum or on the purposes of a liberal education. A new report from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has a wider focus. "College: The Undergraduate Experience in America," as the title suggests, explores the broad institutional and social setting in which undergraduate education takes place.

While the report finds considerable strength and vitality in the eneterprise, it characterizes the undergraduate college as a "troubled institution." And in what serves as a summary of the report's analysis, Ernest L. Boyer, president of the foundation and author of the report, writes that "The college suffers from conflicting priorities and competing special interests. During our study we found deep divisions that dramatically diminish the intellectual and social life on campus and restrict the capacity of the college effectively to serve its students."

In dealing with factors outside the classroom, the study reflects the reality that undergraduate education is, among other things, a business and one that declining demographics and rising costs have made increasingly competitive. A sober economic note is that for the past 5 years tuition at private colleges has been going up at roughly double the rate of family incomes. One development that the study views with some alarm is the use of sophisticated marketing techniques in student recruiting. A strict code of conduct for college recruitment should be drawn up based on work already done by registrars and admissions officers, the study concludes.

The core of the study deals with the relationships of students, faculty, and administrators, relationships found to be increasingly vexed by a confusion over goals. Students are seen as poorly prepared academically and animated by a narrow careerist concerns that shape their attitude toward learning.

Faculty are described as correspondingly poorly prepared to teach undergraduates and conditioned by their own training to place a higher value on scholarship than on teaching, a tendency reinforced by an academic reward system that links career advancement and professional reputation to accomplishment in research.

Lamenting a "great separation" between academic and social life at many institutions, the study notes that the scrapping of the in loco parentis principle has led to a dormitory life very different from that prevailing a generation ago. The study does not dwell on blaring stereos, sex, or drugs, but does comment, "We are especially impressed that many faculty and academic administrators distance themselves from student life and appear to be confused about their obligations in nonacademic matters. How can life outside the classroom support the educational mission of the college? How should tensions between student freedom and institutional authority be resolved. And how can the college leave space for privacy while also providing activities that sustain community and encourage service?"

"College: The Undergraduate Experience" draws on national surveys of students, parents, faculty, and administrators commissioned for the 3-year study, but the main basis seems to be the information and insights gathered by a corps of "observer-reporters" recruited by the foundation, who spent several weeks at each of 29 varied institutions.

The study does put forward a series of recommendations, more than 80 in all. These amount less to a comprehensive recipe for reform than urgings to confront the shortcomings in college life today identified in the report. The aim of the study seems to be equally to fuel the discussion of undergraduate education and to expand the discussion agenda. ■ JOHN WALSH

Briefing:

California Ballot

California voters rejected two ballot initiatives that could have resulted in major salary cuts for university faculty and the possible quarantining of AIDS victims. Proposition 61 gave voters a chance to cap compensation for all state employees except the governor at $64,000; many University of California professors make more and, now, can rest assured that they will continue to do so. Proposition 64 was a controversial measure aimed at controlling AIDS by legally (and incorrectly) defining it as an "easily communicable disease." Health officials, who called the proposition a potential public health disaster, could have been forced to quarantine AIDS patients and carriers. ■

B.J.C.

NASA Looks to Ariane

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is planning to use the European rocket Ariane to launch some of the scientific missions that were to have been flown by the space shuttle. NASA administrator James Fletcher said in London last week that Ariane, developed under the guidance of France's National Center for Space Studies on behalf of the European Space Agency, was being included with Delta and Atlas-Centaur rockets, as well as the shuttle itself, in plans for launching future scientific payloads. "We have to look at Ariane and our own launch vehicles and see the appropriate mix between the three," Fletcher said. ■ **D.D.**

Soviet Nuclear Plans

The recent accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant has done little to alter the Soviet Union's commitment to the rapid expansion of nuclear power. Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai I. Ryzhkov said last week that the U.S.S.R. and its Eastern Bloc allies intended to increase the production of electricity by nuclear power between five and six times before the year 2000. Ryzhkov was addressing the annual meeting of the heads of government of the ten member countries of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon). According to the Soviet press agency TASS, an agreement was signed during the meeting under which the Soviet allies agreed to increase from 15 to 31 the number of nuclear power plants in their various countries. ■ **D.D.**