

Pilot Program Cuts Red Tape for Federal Grants

"Do science project" in Florida aims to reduce role of federal agencies in managing details of research they fund; broader application is possible

WHEN a group of chemists and physicists at the University of Florida received a 5-year, \$2.9-million grant from the Department of Defense last June to develop polymers that conduct electricity, the project got under way in record time. Under experimental procedures that five federal agencies are now using to administer grants in Florida, chemist Kenneth Wagener and his colleagues were able to start work months before the grant money actually arrived in university coffers. This allowed them to hire quality research assistants quickly and they were able to save \$20,000 by buying an essential spectrometer before the price went up.

The National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Office of Naval Research (ONR), and the Departments of Energy and Agriculture are participating in the project. It aims to cut bureaucratic red tape and reduce the role of federal agencies in grant management.

According to Robert Newton, the recently retired head of grant and contract policy at NSF, the experiment grew out of widespread frustration in the university research community with proliferating bureaucratic requirements attached to federal funding. The Government-University-Industry Research Roundtable, soon after it was established under the aegis of the National Academy of Sciences in 1984, brought together an ad hoc committee of government research administrators, including Newton, to tackle this "bureaucratic accretion." Newton and his colleagues developed plans for the 2-year experiment, known as the Florida Demonstration Project, and persuaded their agencies to give it a green light.

Under the project, the agencies have turned most routine project management tasks over to universities, including authority to approve line-item changes in a project's budget and one-time program extensions of up to 1 year. To assure accountability, the trial system foresees efforts to monitor and strengthen university management of federal grants, said Thomas Dolan of ONR.

Edward R. Block of the University of

Florida, whose medical research is funded by a grant from NIH, "literally dreaded" getting the agency's approval for numerous changes in his grant's budget but found that the new procedures accelerated that process dramatically. The experiment is "the single greatest forward step in grant administration that I have seen," wrote Block to university grant administrators.

Subject to agency approval, the experiment also allows university researchers to combine related grants received from different agencies into a single "program of research." This, rather than a single grant or contract, becomes the administrative unit of account. Florida State biologist Larry Abele, for example, pooled four NSF grants dealing with the evolution and physical structure of crustaceans. By doing so, he was able to buy equipment that is used in all of his research but would be difficult to justify under any single one of the grants.

The project began in March 1986. NIH and NSF have been the largest participants, each handling some 350 grants under the new procedures. Together, all five agencies have passed out some \$200 million under the program.

Backers of the experiment see it as the start of a wider effort to cut down on the administrative work load of university researchers, improving productivity and cutting indirect costs. Newton and Dolan noted that the experiment has caught the attention of state and university officials in Florida, causing them to review their own administrative procedures to see if more red tape could be cut. Newton would like to see more agencies adopt the flexible procedures and apply them to a wider range of research projects. An interagency group headed by William Raub, deputy director of NIH, is considering follow-up steps to the Florida experiment.

Project supporters hope that the Florida procedures will be incorporated into government-wide regulations governing the administration of university grants. These regulations, contained in Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-110, are due to be revised this year. "The A-110

review is a perfect opportunity to consider some of these proposals," said an OMB official. Although OMB was informed of the Florida trial, the agency was not asked formally to approve the experiment.

Other agencies, particularly within the Department of Defense (DOD), have been reluctant to join in the initiative. Army and Air Force officials said that allowing university researchers to drop money from different agencies into a common pot might violate laws that require DOD-sponsored research to be "mission-related."

According to a preliminary evaluation conducted by the National Academy of Sciences' Research Roundtable, university researchers are enthusiastic about the program. "The response is just uniformly laudatory," said Tom Walsh, director of Sponsored Research at the University of Florida at Gainesville, where the experiment is known as the "do science project." Turn-around time for approval of research budget changes has been reduced from 6 weeks to a few days, said Walsh. Several universities outside Florida, including the University of California system, Johns Hopkins, the University of Virginia, and the State University of New York system have contacted federal officials to express interest in the project. ■

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Briefing:

Broader Public Role Sought in Biotechnology

More than a dozen environmental and public interest groups, including the National Wildlife Federation and the Environmental Law Institute, have been asked by the Joyce Foundation of Chicago to submit by 1 April proposals to increase their role in the development of policies affecting biotechnology. The foundation says its grant will not exceed \$100,000 for the first year, but it is prepared to make a multiyear commitment to the organizations that are ultimately selected.

This is the first time the foundation has supported any activity related to biotechnology. "Our interest is in ensuring that all sides of the debate are heard," says Anne Dickson, a Joyce program manager. The Joyce Foundation was started in 1948 by Beatrice Joyce Kean, heir to a timber fortune. ■ M.C.