

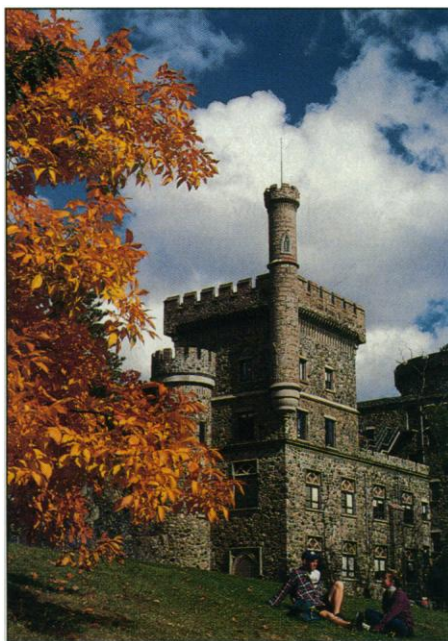
# The Cost of Scientific Pork Keeps Going Up

Most universities, believing in the value of peer review, have hesitated to lobby for “earmarked projects” (less flatteringly, pork-barrel grants) as a way of obtaining science funding. In the tight budgetary environment of the past few years, however, some schools have looked on earmarked projects as a way to pay for new science buildings. Yet even those schools may now be having second thoughts. Except for a handful of institutions with first-class political connections, most of those singled out for favors in the 1992 and 1993 defense appropriation bills have become entangled in bureaucratic negotiations and are still waiting for their money. And a few—such as Brandeis University, waiting for \$2 million for a new Center for Complex Systems—are desperate because they’ve already begun construction and face a cash-flow crisis if they don’t get their funds quickly.

Congress inserted at least 49 special academic projects in the defense bills for 1992 and 1993. But it also erected new obstacles to funding them. Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA), among others, persuaded Congress that many of these projects should undergo “merit review” before they could receive any money, and a clause in the law gives the secretary of defense power to decide who will get funded in many cases. Citing these rules, Pentagon staffers have been asking universities to submit written proposals for detailed review. The result: Many grants have been promised, but, so far, few have been awarded.

Most upset by the delay are universities whose projects were approved 18 months ago in the 1992 defense bill. And they haven’t remained silent: Through friends in Congress, they’ve been pestering the Pentagon to release the money. Pentagon documents obtained by *Science* under the Freedom of Information Act show that senators and congressmen of every political stripe have been asking the Pentagon to hurry up and spend the money. However, by the Pentagon’s tally, only four of the 17 earmarked projects from 1992 (or \$16 million worth out of \$105 million) have been approved so far. Of the 32 projects in the 1993 bill (worth \$178 million), all but one are still waiting for a decision from the Clinton Administration.

It isn’t clear whether all the projects will ultimately be funded. But what is clear is that—as in all pork-barrel scientific projects—political connections play a key role. Consider the contrasting fates of a well-greased project at little-known Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, and a not-so-well-



**Embattled fortress.** Brandeis University faces a cash-flow crisis if it doesn’t get its DOD funds.

connected project at a more famous school: Brandeis. Both won earmarked grants—Brandeis, in the 1992 bill; Bradley, in the 1993 bill. Yet while Bradley was on the later list, it received funding earlier because it was favored by the Bush Administration.

Bradley hit the jackpot in October 1992 when Congress passed an amendment in the 1993 defense appropriation saying that “not less than \$7.5 million...shall be made available as a grant only to Bradley University” for “laboratory and other efforts associated with research development, and other programs of major importance to the Department of Defense.” The project was supported by Representative Robert Michel (R-IL), the House Republican leader, a native of Peoria and a graduate of Bradley University. When President Bush signed the defense bill into law in October, it included at least 32 such direct grants to universities. But only one—Bradley’s—has been approved for funding. Why? Because the outgoing secretary of defense, Richard Cheney, wrote a personal, 7-line note to the Pentagon’s comptroller on 15 January, ordering the funds to be released to Bradley. (Cheney, now a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., was on travel last week and did not respond to phone messages.)

Bradley’s provost, Kalman Goldberg, says he didn’t procure the award and has “no

opinion or comment” on Michel’s role, though it’s “pretty clear from what I’ve read” that the congressman was involved. Michel’s press secretary, Michelle Tessier, did not respond to phone messages requesting comment. Goldberg says he has done all he can to ensure that the project—a global communications center where students are supposed to learn about foreign cultures—will meet high academic standards. However, he adds, “the details are still being put together.”

Compare this quick payout with the less successful record of Brandeis. Its National Center for Complex Systems was earmarked to receive \$2 million in construction funds in the 1992 defense bill. According to Arthur Reis, Brandeis’ associate provost, “we’re right in the heart of construction” of the new \$15 million building. It will provide a home for multidisciplinary studies that focus on “cognitive processes, perception, neuroscience ...and the application of parallel computer systems.” The aim is to “improve the design of computer hardware and software,” and to “develop powerful and novel computational models.”

The project began before Samuel Thier—the former president of the Institute of Medicine—became president of Brandeis. Nevertheless, Thier did some lobbying. Thier wrote on 26 August 1992 to Senator Daniel Inouye (D-HI), chairman of the defense appropriations subcommittee, asking for “your help in urging the secretary of defense to release the Department of Defense appropriation of \$2 million.” He had already sent a letter and a lengthy proposal to Secretary Cheney. “We desperately need the funding,” Thier continued in his letter to Inouye, because construction was under way and the “cash-flow analysis” showed a crisis looming in mid-1993. “There is still some time, but we must act *now* [emphasis in original].”

Inouye’s staff sent the letter and proposal to the Pentagon. Representative Ed Markey (D-MA) also sent a letter to the Pentagon on Brandeis’ behalf. But no one rolled out the red carpet. The university received a form letter in September 1992 saying the Defense Department’s research office would review the proposal and respond later. Staffers asked for more information, requested a revised proposal by 26 March 1993, and are now subjecting the revised version to review. If all goes well, Reis expects to hear a decision in June and to receive a check in the fall—much later than he originally expected. Meanwhile, Thier has ordered Brandeis not to look for such “direct appropriations” again.

The moral is that universities opting for the pork-barrel route will probably continue to get the funds they want for new buildings, but only if they’re willing to put up with increasing costs in the form of political headaches, delays, and peer envy.

—Eliot Marshall