

SCIENCE

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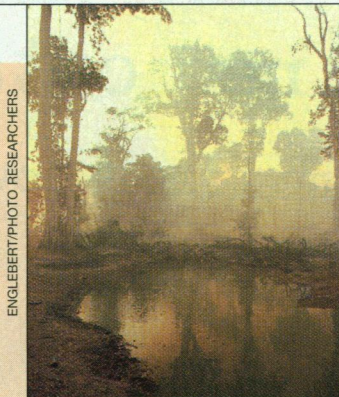
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Information for Contributors appears on pages 112–114 of the 6 January 1995 issue. Editorial correspondence, including requests for permission to reprint and reprint orders, should be sent to 1333 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005.
Science World Wide Web address: <http://www.aaas.org>
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LETTERS



ENGLEBERT/PHOTO RESEARCHERS

Burning matters

This week's letters cover a variety of topics, including data ownership policies, ranking of journal articles, biomass burning in Brazil (left), an alleged threat to universities from on-line instruction ("more likely to come from within the university," says the letter writer), the Chinook salmon catch in Alaska, environmental epidemiology, postdoc job security in Spain, and a traditional Japanese custom of saving umbilical cords that may help provide some needed genetic information.

Collaboration and Data Sharing

I applaud Barbara Mishkin for her timely Policy Forum "Urgently needed: Policies on access to data by erstwhile collaborators" (10 Nov., p. 927). The topic of ownership and retention of data has been of great interest and concern to me since I became involved in a controversy between two co-investigators on a federal grant. One of the investigators was leaving the university and wanted to remove all of the primary data, while the other scientist needed to have many of the original results to carry on the research project at the home institution. After this highly debated occurrence, I became an advocate of institutions establishing explicit policies for data management, not only as a means to avoid many of the problems to which Mishkin alludes, but also as a deterrent to scientific misconduct. As mentioned by Mishkin, some universities have developed and implemented policies; however, many of these policies do not clearly define under what circumstances and by what means data that are not easily or accurately reproduced may be "transferred" with the scientist who is relocating. Also, such policies frequently are silent on the issue of data sharing, including access to unique research resources. Mishkin concludes by urging "the [U.S.] Public Health Service to develop regulations as soon as possible." I would like to also encourage scientific journals and professional societies to establish guidelines for universities and academic scientists to consider in developing and implementing policies on management of scientific data.

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On-Line Instruction

In his Policy Forum "Electronics and the dim future of the university" (13 Oct., p. 247), Eli M. Noam predicts that commercial vendors of on-line instruction will out-compete the universities, driving the latter out of business. This argument does not account for the role that universities play in certifying their students. Universities are uniquely suited to perform this task, although their nonprofit status does not eliminate the conflict between raising revenues from students and providing critical evaluation of the same. The massive amount of tangible capital that universities have acquired, largely as a consequence of fulfilling their research mission, makes credible the universities' long-term commitment as honest evaluator. In contrast, commercial vendors of on-line instruction would have a strong motive to peddle certification when student performance does not warrant it.

Because universities and on-line vendors will recognize this credibility problem, a more likely scenario is that some type of partnership will form between the commercial vendors and the universities—the universities will supply honest evaluation and certification and the on-line vendors will supply low-cost, high-quality instruction. However, such partnerships would create tension within universities between those who want to preserve the integrity of the institution at all cost and those who, as agents of the commercial vendors, want to "cash in" on the reputation of their institution.

The threat to academia posed by on-line instruction is more likely to come from within the university than from without.

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