

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF ENGINEERING

# Governing Body Clamps Down On Its New Chief Executive

When Harold Liebowitz was running for president of the National Academy of Engineering (NAE), he promised to shake up the 31-year-old organization by raising its profile and giving members a greater voice in its activities. Eight months after Liebowitz won election over a candidate endorsed by senior NAE officials, the organization has indeed been shaken up—but in a way Liebowitz may not have anticipated. In an unprecedented series of directives, the NAE governing council reined in the power of its new chief executive after he had been on the job less than 3 months.

The conflict between the president and the council has thrown the leadership of the 1800-member organization into turmoil. "There is a total breakdown between the governing body and the chief executive officer," says one NAE member. What's more, the drama is being played out without input from the general membership, which gave Liebowitz 53% of the vote but has not been told of the council's resolutions.

The council's actions on the eve of Liebowitz's formal installation in September curtail his power to hire and fire staff. In response to concerns about NAE's fiscal health—both its \$30 million endowment and its \$5-million-a-year budget—the council also ordered Liebowitz to come up with a clear financial plan to run the organization. For good measure, the 12-member council also criticized the 71-year-old Liebowitz, a former professor of aeronautical engineering at George Washington University, for being tardy in submitting travel vouchers and in filing his conflict-of-interest form.

The power struggle between the part-time council, whose 12 members are elected to act as a board of directors, and the \$250,000-a-year CEO is a quiet, private tug of wills. But it also threatens the academy's civic role, in conjunction with the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the Institute of Medicine, to advise the government on scientific and technical issues. "I'd hoped that NAE would be able to help me with some of the issues we're dealing with," says Mary Good, a former member of the NAE governing council and Undersecretary of Commerce for technology. "But for the past 3 to 4 months they haven't been able to focus

on anything but administrative matters." That feeling is shared by those in the profession who look to the NAE for leadership. "The NAE is in a weakened and weakening position," says Donald Frey, an active member and engineering professor at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. "The issue is how long the academy can drift."

Liebowitz says that the council's actions are simply suggestions, not directives, about minor disagreements that won't impede his efforts to reinvigorate the NAE. "I'm the new kid on the block," he told *Science* last week. "Of course there's going to be a little controversy."

Norm Augustine, chair of the NAE Council and of Lockheed-Martin aerospace company, also downplays the dispute. "With the NAE, as with most large organizations, operating issues arise from time to time on which there is a spectrum of viewpoints," Augustine said in a written statement after a query from *Science*. "The president and the council are each seeking to carry out their responsibility to the memberships as elected representatives of that membership. Further public comments by the council about internal academy matters would be inappropriate."

Although Liebowitz's supporters may disagree with the council on the need for reform at NAE, both sides worry that members may see the council's actions toward Liebowitz as an attempt to turn back the clock. Such a view would be incorrect, they say. "It's absolutely not true" that the council wants to undermine the membership's choice, says NAE Home Secretary Simon Ostrach. "There was a lot of unhappiness in the ranks over the old guard's manage-

ment of the place," adds one academic familiar with the controversy, "but I don't believe this can be seen as the old guard seeking to overturn the election results and rejecting the people's choice." What the council was

really responding to, say NAE members, was a series of early fiscal and personnel moves on Liebowitz's part that angered staff and could have threatened the NAE's balance sheet. Says Erich Bloch, a council member and former director of the National Science Foundation, "You can't walk into an existing organization and just throw everything overboard."

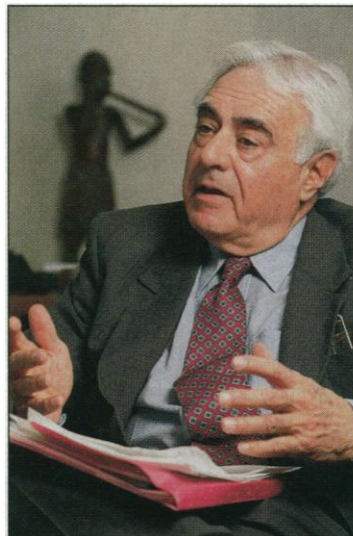
**Inside out.** During the campaign, Liebowitz and his supporters portrayed NAE's senior management as a Washington elite indifferent to the concerns of the general members. "We weren't elected to the academy to be able to put a plaque on our wall or a line in our bios," says a Liebowitz supporter, William Harris, an NAE member and engineering professor at Texas A & M University in College Station. "Officers and councilors have felt no need to go to members of the academy and draw on their extensive backgrounds. They didn't attempt to encourage participation."

One common complaint, say Harris and other Liebowitz backers, is that the power to select the academy's priorities rests largely with the officers and council. The NAE nominating committee stoked that resentment by backing Cornelius Pings, president of the Association of American Universities and someone regarded as having close ties to the powers-that-be. "There was a strong backlash against a Washington insider," says Frey. Liebowitz's campaign, which was aggressive by decorous NAE standards, tapped into that mood and marked the first time that the membership had rejected a candidate proposed by NAE officials.

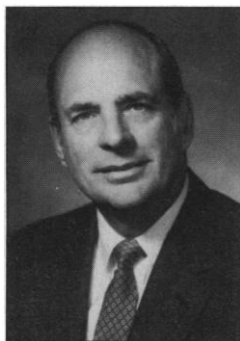
Despite his reputation as an outsider, Liebowitz is no stranger to the NAE and its ways. He actually served on the governing council for 6 years in the 1980s, although he did not have a reputation as a reformer. In 1989 he made an unsuccessful run against incumbent Robert White, who retired in July after 12 years as president.

Liebowitz says his main objectives now are to create a strategic plan for U.S. engineering, boost the participation of NAE members in academy activities, and beef up continuing education programs. This fall he began a survey of the membership on its priorities and on how to broaden participation. He also set out to raise the profile of the NAE to match that of NAS, its older sibling.

"We need more of an identity for the



**Rough neighborhood.** NAE's Liebowitz says he's "new kid on the block."



**Augustine rules.** Council's chair says it's "an internal academy matter."

NAE," he says. "Engineering in this country has not been getting the recognition that some people, including myself, think it should." As part of that effort, Liebowitz lobbied for a Watergate apartment to entertain distinguished guests. NAS President Bruce Alberts has the use of such an apartment, and Liebowitz says NAE should be on equal footing.

However, the council shot down Liebowitz's plea for the Watergate apartment, and it has shown little enthusiasm for his other ideas. "They would cost a great deal of money, and they haven't been fleshed out very well," complains one former NAE officer. For example, Liebowitz himself says the continuing education program he has in mind could cost \$6 million, although he declined to provide details on how the program would be set up. Such figures, and what they see as the slow pace of fund-raising, worry other officers and councilors. "The council is well aware that the president was elected by a majority, but it also has to make sure that the academy remains financially responsible," says Ostrach.

In his bid to raise the NAE's profile, Liebowitz also upset senior managers at the NAS and the National Research Council (NRC), the operating arm for the three institutions, by proposing that NAE conduct more of its own reviews and studies. That idea, say other academy sources, was viewed as a direct threat to the NRC, which relies on the three organizations for assignments and to raise the necessary money.

But the new president's approach to personnel matters was what really moved the council to act, according to academy sources. In particular, the council felt that Liebowitz was moving too slowly to fill several vacant fund-raising positions and objected to his plans to reshuffle senior NAE staff.

**Lowering the boom.** The council's concern came to a head on 26 September, when it approved six resolutions sharply limiting Liebowitz's authority, according to informed NAE sources. Liebowitz was told to obtain the approval of NAE Vice President Morris Tannenbaum—designated as the council's representative—for all hiring and firing of senior staff, to avoid undertaking programs in competition with the NRC, and to draw up a clear fund-raising plan. The other resolutions chided him for handing out citations without consulting the academy's award committee and requested him to be more prompt in submitting travel vouchers that documented how he had spent NAE's money. He also was directed to complete a conflict-of-interest form ensuring that his outside income did not conflict with his new position.

Less than a week after the council passed the resolutions, Liebowitz apparently sidestepped the directive on staffing in demoting NAE Executive Officer William Salmon,

NAE sources say. Salmon, who declined to comment, was later reinstated. The incident further strained relations between the council and the president, the sources say.

Both the president and some councilors insist that the resolutions, which they decline to disclose, are merely advice. But other sources say they are worded as directives. Either way, it's clear that the council felt it needed to send Liebowitz a message. As Bloch puts it: "Major institutions must undergo change, [but] the council wants to do this with consideration." The new power-sharing approach, he adds, will allow the council and president "to get used to each other."

Liebowitz says he welcomes advice and that the limitations are not unusual for a large organization. But he doesn't think the resolutions reflect great dissatisfaction with his conduct. He cites recent contracts with the Navy and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, totaling \$3 million, as evidence of his fiscal prowess. And he says he has "done everything possible to alleviate the fears of the staff" about his administrative policies. He admits that his ideas will cost money but says that "I think we can be imaginative and creative enough to offset that." And he has now signed the conflict-of-interest form and submitted his travel vouchers. Supporters like what they've seen so far. "There has been very positive change" since

Liebowitz took over, says Harris.

The NAE president acknowledges that he may have done a bad job describing his plans. In a 9 November letter to members that doesn't mention the council resolutions, he apologized for giving what struck many members as a rambling speech at the NAE annual meeting in September. "I pledge to concentrate on being a more effective communicator," he states. And in a move welcomed by the council, he has assembled a team to advise him on his presidency. NAE sources say the team's formation is an acknowledgment of his difficulty in managing the organization, but Liebowitz disagrees, saying that it is normal for a new president to seek help.

The big question, of course, is whether the two sides will patch up their differences. "There is not much doubt that if the president and council are at loggerheads, the council will win," says Frey. If the dispute continues, NAE members could be asked to vote on whether to oust Liebowitz, according to one academy source, but neither side seems eager to go public with their arguments.

In the meantime, Liebowitz says he's settling into a job he fought hard to win, and hasn't even had time to hang any pictures on his office walls. Asked if he plans to stay for a full, 6-year term, he smiles and answers coyly, "If you can guarantee my health."

—Andrew Lawler

## INFECTIOUS DISEASE

### Planning for the Next Flu Pandemic

Everyone is familiar with the annual flu epidemic and the misery it brings. But every so often—four times this century, most recently in 1977—a particularly virulent new strain of flu virus will emerge that spreads quickly, erupting into a global epidemic with far more disease and deaths than usual. Last week, flu experts from around the world gathered in Bethesda, Maryland, to try to work out a game plan for coping with the next such pandemic. The last one was nearly 20 years ago, and warns virologist Robert Webster of St. Jude Children's Hospital in Memphis, "as time passes, the probability [of another] increases."

To counter that threat, the U.S. Federal Working Group on Influenza Pandemic Preparedness, with representatives from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health, and the military, is preparing a plan, a draft of which was re-



**Coming soon?** Occasionally, new flu strains arise that are even worse than usual.

leased at the meeting. As with similar plans being developed by other countries, its goal is to detect dangerous new strains of influenza A, the virus that causes the pandemics, as soon as they emerge, and put in place preventive measures, such as vaccination programs.

While the experts don't know exactly when the next flu pandemic will strike, planning is essential, they say, because when it does come, only very quick action will stem its spread. "You don't have 2 weeks time [to make decisions]," says Daniel Lavanchy of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva.

And failure to make them can be costly. The most notorious of the pandemics, the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, killed 20 mil-

\* "Pandemic Influenza: Confronting a Re-Emergent Threat," National Institutes of Health, 11 to 13 December.