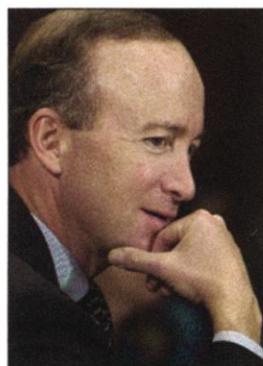


RESEARCH FUNDING

White House Asks Community To Oppose Earmark Projects

Twenty years ago, Congress slipped into a budget bill a small sum of money for research buildings at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and Columbia University in New York City. The funds hadn't been requested by the Administration, and the projects hadn't gone through peer review. The move, which at the time sparked

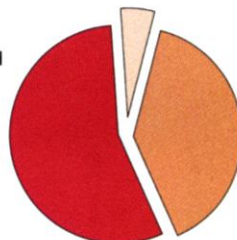
enue budgets. But most legislators support academic earmarks as a way to help smaller institutions—especially those in their districts—compete against wealthier research universities. Academic leaders, meanwhile, are torn between upholding the process of choosing the best science and pressure to raise money from every possible source.



**From Earmarks to Peer Review:
How 2001 Research Funds Were Awarded**

Congressional earmark
 Limited competition and review
 Full merit review

Total = \$43.8 billion

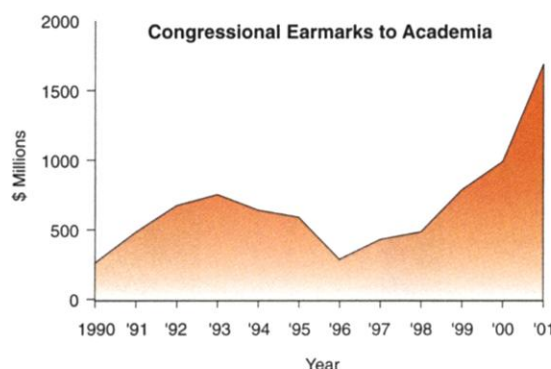


Looking for a trim. White House budget chief Mitch Daniels is worried about rising academic earmarks (below), a small but growing slice of how the government chooses what science to fund (above).

an uproar, has become de rigueur: Last year, Congress steered a record \$1.7 billion into specific university projects that hadn't been requested, up 60% over 2000, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (see graph at right). Now, the Bush Administration is trying to stick its finger in the dike.

Last week, senior White House budget officials called a meeting with a select group of academic and science-policy heavyweights to enlist their support in opposing the practice, known as earmarking. "It would be very helpful for the community to make its views known, since Congress responds more to constituents" than to White House complaints, said an official of the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) who was present. The Administration didn't get a blanket denunciation of a practice that has long divided the academic research community, but it made it clear that this is an issue it intends to pursue.

Presidents traditionally oppose earmarks because they drain money from Administration priorities. Critics also argue that the practice undermines peer review, promotes poor-quality science, and erodes government sci-



White House officials say they are targeting earmarks as part of a three-pronged effort aimed at strengthening federally funded research. (The other two thrusts are tightening up overall management practices and spelling out each agency's scientific priorities.) And although many of those who attended the 19 September meeting welcome the White House initiative, some doubt that it will succeed. "We know from past experience that having the science community rail against earmarks probably isn't enough to stop university presidents and members of

Congress from seeking them," says physicist Michael Lubell of the American Physical Society, one of 12 invited groups.*

At the meeting, OMB director Mitch Daniels and his staff noted that earmarks are putting increasing pressure on some government science budgets. NASA officials this year had to trim many life science research grants by 5% or more to pay for earmarks, and up to 10% of the Environmental Protection Agency's \$550 million R&D budget has been consumed by pork in recent years.

Some groups, however, are reluctant to join forces with the White House before hashing out a clearer definition of the practice. "It's a very complex issue," says Nils Hasselmo, president of the Association of American Universities (AAU), which represents 61 top research schools—including those that decay and those that benefit from earmarks. A shortage of federal funds for research building construction, he says, has forced many campuses into the earmarking game. And some researchers have sought Congress's help after the White House failed to request funds for projects that an agency has already approved (*Science*, 14 September, p. 1972).

To decide whether such end runs should be banished, the AAU and other groups have invited OMB to a 3 October public forum on earmarking at the Carnegie Institution in Washington, D.C. Hasselmo, for one, hopes the meeting will "move us toward some reasonable agreement" on whether any research earmarks are acceptable.

Even if such an agreement can be hammered out, however, some observers wonder if it could ever be made to stick. The AAU itself was unable to enforce a 1980s decree against earmarks among its own members, they note. But Bush Administration officials are hoping that pressure from the community, combined with a threatened presidential veto of pork-laden spending bills, will put the pig back in the barn.

—DAVID MALAKOFF

* Association of American Medical Colleges; Association of American Universities; National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges; American Mathematical, Astronomical, Physical, and Chemical societies; American Association for the Advancement of Science (publisher of *Science*); American Society for Microbiology; The Science Coalition, and the National Academies.