

Letters

Government-Sponsored Research

I read one of your recent editorials [*Science* **136**, 291 (27 Apr. 1962)] with great interest, and I am somewhat troubled by the final question, "Why should the hard-pressed universities subsidize the federal government's research?"

Although I may be accused of rebelling against accepted academic procedure and, perhaps, nibbling at the hand that offers me sustenance, I still would like to counter with the question, "Why should the federal government pay any indirect cost of certain research grants?"

If a contract is made with the federal government to execute a particular project, then the total cost of the endeavor should be allowed the university. Unfortunately, there already is too much of this type of activity, and the universities accomplish little more than reducing themselves to the level of a profit-making business organization. As in any business venture, however, the total cost of the job, and perhaps even a profit, should be involved.

No one can deny that many colleges and universities are in dire financial straits. Federal aid to education is an acceptable concept, since the public interest is involved. But such aid must be strictly for education and not for auxiliary university functions.

Individual grants to investigators and certain training and construction grants are subjects for separate consideration. If one accepts the fact that the individuals who receive grants of this type are merely conducting government research projects, then any argument can stop here. The only question I would raise is whether it might be more economical to house these people in federal installations either on or off the campus.

A common attitude among university administrators, especially the new-breed, business-executive type, is that their institutions and members are doing the federal government a great favor by ac-

cepting its money. Thus, "we will accept your ultracentrifuge or electron microscope if you really insist—but you must give us the money to install and operate it, too." It strikes me that this sort of scrutiny of the equine molars is a bit out of place.

It has been my impression that the purpose of research grants to individual investigators is to supplement the facilities and support being supplied by the universities. I realize, of course, that the situation has already degenerated so far in some institutions that investigators are employed to do research, but obtaining the funds for such work becomes their own responsibility. In some cases, in fact, not only their research support but their personal income as well is solicited from the federal government.

The implications of this growing academic social security seems to escape most administrators. One obvious factor is that, in searching out funds, the investigator must give strong consideration to those things that might be of interest to the committees and councils that review the requests. The myriad details required in making such applications totally rule out the possibility of searching out problems that are nothing more than a flicker of an idea or concept and without basis in previous work. Thus, popularity and convention are requirements for the satisfactory research grant application.

Justus F. Mueller charged a graduating class at a 1961 commencement, "Don't run after the mob; work in neglected fields," and "Don't be afraid to take an unpopular stand—the truth will make you free." It doesn't say anything about popularity, and truth is seldom popular." Mueller is a member of a small, lonely, disappearing race of man—the scholars. This advice was given with wisdom, it was not given with the objective of obtaining federal "research" funds.

Perhaps I've grown old enough to

overdo the nostalgia bit. But I still find myself somewhat attracted to ivy-covered walls and dusty old professors. These men seem to have done quite well in teaching basic truths and concepts without the aid of elaborate gadgetry (frequently used once or twice or not at all), and without many very active technicians turning out reams of stereotyped data. It is, admittedly, frustrating to attempt a research project with insufficient financial support. But it is many times more frustrating to spend a large proportion of time trying to compound attractive grant requests simply because the employing institution isn't in a position to support the work but, at the same time, demands that some research work be done.

Now I'm not averse to progress, whether it be in educational institutions or in any other area of modern life. I do say, let us take a realistic look at the situation. The universities have one primary function—to teach students. A certain amount of research in the various disciplines is a necessary adjunct to high-quality teaching programs. But the concept that a good teacher must be a researcher is as archaic as oil lamps. In fact, a teacher who is an active researcher usually doesn't have time to explore the literature that tells of developments throughout his field so that he can introduce new facts and concepts into his teaching program. In this regard, federal aid to education is justifiably solicited by the universities. To increase and maintain teaching facilities is clearly in the public interest, but to continue the mad rush for establishing giant research and development empires may be of doubtful value to education.

If, however, progress demands that the universities be transformed into giant research corporations, largely sponsored by the federal government, let's recognize and admit this fact. Since the economic security demanded in such a system must inevitably result in federal control of university research programs, the requests for coverage of increasing indirect costs are quite justifiable.

In fact, I would like to suggest a slogan for this campaign, to be sung to the tune of our alma mater: "We'll all go down, down, down as the overhead goes up, up, up."

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