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Federal Intervention in Universities

University presidents and other spokesmen are beginning to state publicly what they have been saying privately*. Congress and the federal bureaucracy are increasing their many modes of interference with universities. No institution is immune, and indeed the more prestigious one is, the more it is an object for attack. A common device is the ultimatum with a short deadline: If you do not do such and such, your grants and contracts will be cut off.

For some schools the confrontation is not dramatic, it is piecemeal. There are at least 12 federally mandated programs that cumulatively impinge on the financial health of all universities. The American Council on Education has stated that one large public university's annual expenses for implementing federal programs increased from \$438,000 to \$1.3 million between 1965 and 1975. During the same period a large private university's expenses increased from \$110,000 to \$3.6 million, and a private college's \$2,000 to \$300,000. The monetary expenditures are only part of the costs. They do not reflect the diversion of effort from scholarship to attention to federal demands.

Until about 1960 government involvement in academia was not great and interference was minimal. But in the late fifties, federal grants for research started to become a substantial factor in university budgets. The government chose to demand detailed accounting for individual grants. Since that time, the fastest growing component at many universities has been the business office. The sixties also brought a weakening of the status of presidents of universities. A contributing factor was the Vietnam war, but the federal grants system also played a major role in diminishing the authority of university leaders. In addition, the sudden termination of large federal fellowship programs which had previously grown rapidly caused substantial financial problems.

Thus, in the seventies the leaders of universities were ill-equipped to deal decisively with Washington and its agents. In consequence, the universities are now forced to cope with laws, proposed laws, regulations, proposed regulations, and authority-grabbing bureaucrats. The laws are proposed and enacted for worthy purposes, such as occupational safety, fair employment, or social security. Each of itself is laudable and defensible. But their total impact on the financial and intellectual life of the universities is severe. Moreover, the laws are subject to interpretation by the Executive Branch. Enforcement of regulations is in the hands of local agents, who often extend federal interference with university affairs. For example, auditors from the San Francisco office of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare have been pushing around the California State University and College System. They demand that anyone paid on a federal project account for his or her total effort and that the schools change their payroll systems, under the threat that noncompliance will result in withholding of letters of credit.

A saddening development in the federal approach to universities in the past decade has been a shift from offering inducements to threatening punishments. This is especially significant in the area of fair employment practices. The universities have been slow in recruiting women and minorities, but bludgeoning and threats are creating a poor climate for change. Competent women appointees are being taunted that they owe their positions not to their own qualifications but to federal pressure. How much better change might have gone with the carrot instead of the stick!

The irony of punitive federal intervention is that a government which is unable to manage its own affairs competently insists on spreading its own brand of inefficiency throughout higher education. It is to be hoped that the university faculties will unite behind their presidents in opposing further federal involvement. A truly unified academic community could halt the federal crippling of higher education.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

*For example, K. Brewster, *Science*, 11 April 1975; S. K. Bailey, keynote address, annual meeting of the National Association of College and University Business Officers, New Orleans, 10 July 1975; D. Aldrich, testimony before the Subcommittee on Education, U.S. Senate, 15 July 1975; J. C. Calhoun, testimony before the Committee on Science and Technology, U.S. House of Representatives, 17 July 1975.