

MIT-Industry Links Draw Congressional Attention

Hearings scheduled for next week will focus on possible export of technology through a program designed to give companies a window on MIT research; regulation is threatened

FOR 41 YEARS, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Industrial Liaison Program has been operating in relative obscurity. But next week a congressional subcommittee is planning to give it a blast of unwanted public attention.

Subcommittee chairman Ted Weiss (D-NY) is concerned that the program, which assures paying corporate members access to MIT's faculty, may be giving foreign companies an unfair, advance look at key technologies developed with federal funds. One reason for Weiss' worry is that as of last fall 139 of the 292 industry members were foreign corporations. He has scheduled a hearing on 13 June by the subcommittee on human resources and intergovernmental relations to look into the matter.

"The federal grants that are given to schools like MIT are justified to help make American industry more competitive, but it makes it more difficult for U.S. companies to compete when the research work product goes to the foreign companies," says Weiss.

The members of MIT's program include American giants such as General Motors, International Business Machines, and TRW. Some of the foreign member companies are Italy's Fiat SpA, Ciba-Giegy of Switzerland, and Siemens of West Germany. Japan boasts the largest number of member companies: 57 Japanese corporations—including all the giant firms that send scientists to MIT and other top-flight U.S. research universities.

In return for no more than \$50,000 a year per company, MIT provides members with an array of services. Each firm is assigned an individual liaison officer who knows that particular industry. The officer arranges visits with researchers and faculty members travel overseas to a foreign member's headquarters when necessary.

Furthermore, MIT holds some 70 specialized symposia on emerging technologies and related issues for members each year. Additionally, they are kept abreast of potential patent licensing opportunities and they can peruse the institute's massive file of current research publications. "Many of these papers are preprints and reports which give a preview of research results before they

appear in the general press," says an MIT brochure.

The fact that foreign members of the MIT club have access to such results ahead of U.S. corporations that do not participate in the program strikes Weiss as unfair, especially since most of MIT's research budget comes from the government. Private companies, in fact, fund comparatively little of the institution's research.

Weiss has warned that the sharing of federally funded research with both foreign



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and domestic companies through programs such as MIT's industrial liaison program may have to be regulated to protect the interests of taxpayers and U.S. industry. "MIT is taking a share [its administrative charge] of each of the federal grants that researchers get and it then charges companies to access information that the government paid for," claims Weiss.

MIT's liaison program also provides the institute with a modest source of added income. Last year, the institute netted about \$4 million in profit on revenues of \$8 million. In addition, according to a statement about the program, the aim is to increase overall corporate financial support for MIT and to bolster linkages between industry and the institute.

Walter Milne, assistant to MIT President Paul Gray, insists that the institute is not selling the United States short. He argues that science is a two-way street and that in an age of multinational corporations technology transfer is inevitable. "The flow of knowledge cannot be bottled up," he says, observing that many of the institute's students come from all parts of the world. It would be a mistake, he says, to try to regulate the flow of this knowledge.

Likely to agree with Milne are several big players in the science policy arena. Slated to testify at next week's hearing are directors of two federal agencies that provide large chunks of research grant money to MIT each year—Erich Bloch of the National Science Foundation and James Wyngaarden, director of the National Institutes of Health. NSF's Bloch was not prepared to talk with *Science* about the matter, but his general counsel, Charles Herz, says the agency generally supports the principle of sharing of data. Indeed, there has been a big push in recent years for universities to work more closely with the private sector in order to move technology more quickly into the marketplace.

Leonard Minsky of the National Coalition for Universities in the Public Interest, an organization that is concerned about industry ties in university research, agrees that science cannot advance without sharing. But Minsky argues that MIT, Stanford University, and others have "a special responsibility to the United States" to look out for the interests of public and U.S. industry. Although MIT claims to be a private institution, Minsky claims that it really is public because about 80% of its research funding comes from the government. In 1987, federal agencies supplied \$206 million of the institute's \$264-million nondefense R&D budget.

Nicholas Negroponte, chairman of an MIT faculty committee that oversees the operation of the liaison, does not see U.S. or foreign participants getting any great edge on other companies. He says the flow of information is not just one way. "We gain far more information from our foreign contacts than we give them."

Weiss, however, is not convinced. "Whose information is it anyway?" he asks. ■ **MARK CRAWFORD**