

a  
commitment  
to  
excellence

### from the editor's desk

The Federal Government spends some \$2 billion a year in support of university-based research. For its money, the Government should get quality research. It should also get a solid, critical mass of quality science departments in universities and colleges. The education of future scientists is, after all, a principal function of university science departments and a key justification for their support by the Government.

Currently, much of the Federal science money is going to support individual researchers and to buy the research they produce. These funds, and the administrative money that accompanies them, have had the effect of strengthening universities over the years. But as these funds decline or fail to grow adequately, as is the case today, the need for a flywheel to maintain momentum becomes apparent.

The institutional grant, money provided to colleges and universities for their own purposes, rather than to individual researchers for the Government's purposes, is an obvious answer. It would provide institutional stability as well as support for younger scientists now at a competitive disadvantage when pitted against experienced grantsmen.

A national commitment to institutional grants—even if the money has to come out of the pockets of those individual scientists now being supported—has been evolving for several years. It now has the support of the prestigious National Science Board, as well as of Presidential Science Adviser Donald F. Hornig, members of the President's Science Advisory Committee and the Bureau of the Budget.

They are all represented on a high-level committee now preparing a strategy for higher education promised by President Johnson early this year. A major pronouncement should be forthcoming by fall.

What is likely to emerge from consultations now going on will be a composite. Certainly there will continue to be individual project grants, but they are likely to be more rigidly circumscribed by the specific program needs of the Federal agencies providing the funds. There will also be broad, formula-based support geared to numbers of students.

But the major effort will have to be a vastly expanded institutional centers of excellence program.

The bellwether for this has been the pilot Science Development Program of the National Science Foundation under which Case Western Reserve University solidified its merger and the University of Maryland's physics department moved toward the first rank, to name just two.

These efforts to make the good better have been criticized as making the rich richer, and have suffered in the current budget squeeze.

But unless they emerge as a keystone of future university science support programs, money will be spent indiscriminately, with serious implications for the future.

As an official of the Federal Bureau of the Budget puts it, "There are some university science departments that just aren't worth supporting." There are others that must be.

The institutional grant bill proposed this year by Chairman George P. Miller of the House Committee on Science and Astronautics fails to make the necessary distinctions.

But as Congressman Miller said in his letter to us last week, his purpose was to get the issues out into the open.

He has succeeded in focusing attention on the subject and, to a significant extent, preparing the ground for the Administration's recommendations, when they come up in the fall.

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