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Are There Signs of Life in the Innovation Budget?



ROBERT E. GROPP

For years, members of the scientific community have sounded alarm bells warning of a decline in the competitiveness of US research, development, and education systems. During the past year, taking note of high-profile innovation initiatives from Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA), the National Academies' report *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, and the president's "American Competitiveness Initiative" (ACI), some in the scientific community have come to feel that the alarms have been heard. Others remain concerned, however, that the scope of emerging policy initiatives is artificially narrow and focused too tightly within specific disciplinary boundaries.

The ACI, in particular, is garnering significant attention within the science policy community. This multiyear, multiagency plan is intended to stimulate economic development by funding innovation-focused physical science, engineering, and technology research at the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Department of Energy, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology. Under ACI, the NSF budget would double over 10 years. The plan would also spur private-sector research by allocating \$86 billion to the federal research and experimentation tax credit.

Members of some research communities worry, however, that without careful planning, a long-term funding plan focused on specific fields could have dire consequences for others, especially if future budget constraints force policymakers to divert funding from existing research fields to maintain the pledges currently being discussed. Illustrative of this concern, 42 professional societies spanning the social, behav-

ioral, and life sciences sent Tennessee Representative Bart Gordon—the senior Democrat on the House Science Committee—comments on legislation he introduced on the basis of *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*. The letter argued that “efforts to boost the national investment in our future competitiveness and innovation capabilities rely *inclusively* on all basic sciences and technologies” [emphasis in original].

Although administration officials have noted that ACI investments will benefit all of science, they have also generally been cryptic in describing the breadth of the planned investments. John Marburger, director of the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy, recently offered some clarification, however. Testifying before a Senate subcommittee in March 2006, Marburger explained that ACI directs funds to agencies with programs that have clear relevance to future economic competitiveness. “It does not attempt to expand support for every area of basic sciences, nor even for every field within the physical sciences,” said Marburger.

Although the budget request for NSF for fiscal year 2007, which would set NSF on a course to double its budget in 10 years, has been met with optimism not felt since Congress reauthorized the agency in 2002, the elation has been muted. Some in the policy community muse that focusing more of NSF's budget on marketable lines of research might affect the agency's fundamental research mission. And still others—those working under the rubric of natural sciences and natural resources, for instance—have concerns beyond potential priority shifts at NSF. For some of them, the worry is about the future health of mission-driven agencies such

as the Department of the Interior, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the US Forest Service. For constituents of these agencies, portions of the fiscal year 2007 budget are less than desirable.

Those constituents are not the only ones with reservations. In February, the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative (JOCI), a collaborative effort of the US Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission, issued a statement expressing concern about the administration's lack of commitment to funding research on oceans and the Great Lakes. According to the JOCI, which also commended President Bush for his plan to double funding for NSF, “the benefits of this initiative [ACI] do not extend to the natural resource agencies...all of which have physical science and education programs and expertise.” The JOCI argues that ACI “should be expanded to include the natural sciences.” In support of this point, the JOCI noted the “economic opportunities associated with marine biotechnology, bioremediation, [and] the human health implications of contaminated coastal waters,” among others.

As members of Congress jockey to put their mark on the nation's innovation policy, the question remains: How much money is actually available to fund the breadth of federal research and resource management programs? As Marburger told the Senate subcommittee, “The challenge now is to...avoid diffusing the impact of the resources at our disposal and to resist the impulse to act on every good idea.”

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