

Letters to the editor

How researchers get federal money

On May 9, science writer Henry Pierce wrote a column criticizing scientists for failing to inform the public about how they spend federal funds on research. He suggested cutting off all money until scientists could describe their work in ways sufficiently clear to inform even the least-interested segments of the public. As a psychologist whose research has been supported by the federal government, I think

Mr. Pierce's column deserves a serious response.

I would like to clear up some common misconceptions about how researchers get federal money. These misconceptions are so widespread that even a few people in close contact with the research community, such as Mr. Pierce, seem to have them.

Federal funds are *not* easy to get. The grant-getting process is a long and difficult one, with a low probability of payoff. Before getting federal money, a scientist must prepare a 30-page technical document describing the proposed work, arguing for its relevance to both the particular scientific issue and the mission of the federal agency and justifying the proposed budget. Then the proposal is sent off to Washington where its chances of getting funded are not high.

It is a common misconception that research money is channeled to a special elite and never gets back to the people who pay taxes. In most universities, at least 70 percent of the money in a federal grant is used to pay the salaries of people other than the scientist who "gets" the grant. Most of the funds are used to purchase equipment and pay salaries of secretaries, technicians, administrators, custodians, and so on. Scientists at Carnegie-Mellon and Pitt bring in nearly \$100 million per year to the Pittsburgh job market. Of course, beyond this direct redistribution of federal funds, advances in basic science ultimately benefit the public.

Scientists try very hard to

keep the public informed about their work. It is not easy to communicate complex technical material briefly, clearly and correctly. Nevertheless, with the able assistance of our own public relations department, we at CMU have been able to present a clear picture of our scientific accomplishments in such diverse places as The Ladies Home Journal, Esquire, Vogue, The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, Chicago Sun-Times and dozens of other places (including the Post-Gazette).

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