

For University researchers

Federal grants provide problems, profits

By KELI OSBORN
Of the Emerald

—As much as one-fourth of the University's \$80 million budget is funded through grants and contracts from federal, state and local governments as well as a variety of non-governmental agencies.

Such financial dependence, combined with a "heavy commitment" to research and scholarship, make grants and contracts especially important for the University, says Paul Olum, University vice president and provost for academic affairs.

The University has already received grants and contracts totaling more than \$11.1 million this year for research, instruction and extension purposes. Last year, grants totalled almost \$20 million.

Most of the money comes from federal sources — the Office of Education, the National Science Foundation, the Public Health Service, and others. The

University's biggest beneficiaries are the biology and psychology departments, the College of Education and the Institute of Molecular Biology.

The University is usually ranked at about 100 in grant power among colleges and universities in the country, according to Paul Civin, associate provost for planning. But making comparisons has its pitfalls, he says, noting that each school's special characteristics attract different kinds of grants.

The upsurge in grant support began in the 1950's with Sputnik and the atomic bomb, says Aaron Novick, dean of the University graduate School. Naturally, a government threatened by the technological advances of its philosophical rival is going to invest in scientific research, he says.

But the government grants money to other areas as well, if not as much. Novick says the humanities should receive

funds to enhance "our intellectual well-being," and the social sciences should get money for "our economic and social well-being."

But as important as grants are for the University they can also be the source of headaches. The federal government's influence over grant research, however benign, and its bureaucratic procedures can be a problem for both researchers and administrators.

"While the federal grant agencies don't control researchers, there's no question that they influence the direction of research," Olum says.

The decision to make money available in certain areas determines the course of future work. "People tend to go where the money is," he adds.

Civin calls it a "question of adaptation" for researchers. And if inflation and the cry for a reduction in federal spending leads to cutbacks in particular

fields, Novick says researchers will point their talents in other directions.

Grant-funding "really depends on unpredictable federal priorities," Novick says. The University is holding a constant fraction of the federal dollars for the areas in which it is competing for grants, he adds.

The red tape of recordkeeping brings its own problems. Two years ago the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, in its periodic audit of the University's records, charged researchers here with misspending between \$3 million and \$4 million dollars in a period of four years.

Every three years, the Region 10 HEW officers from Seattle arrive on campus to survey researchers and examine records, according to Novick. During their last visit, auditors questioned faculty, their secretaries and their assistants and discovered that not all researchers had spent all their

efforts on grant work.

The auditors were unhappy with one faculty member who worked an 80-hour week and spent only 64 of those hours (80 percent) on direct research, says Novick. The other 16 hours were spent in public service but, according to Novick, the federal government expected the researcher to spend all 80 hours on research.

In another case, a faculty researcher did not properly figure the time his secretary spent doing work funded by two grants. They were unsure whether more of the secretary's grant should have been paid from one grant or the other.

The University settled with HEW last year for about \$75,000, and Novick says the government is "backing off" now. "The accountants got a little out-of-hand," he says.

Novick says HEW auditors never charged the University with spending the grant funds on non-federal uses, rather the "hassle" was a matter of stricter budget rules.

"Strict accounting control is wasteful," Novick says. "If you follow the letter-of-the-law too far, you just stop the world." Sharing help and ideas is more efficient, he says, but stricter procedures have outlawed that.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) is beginning to realize the benefits of flexibility, he adds, and has created a trial program allowing chemistry researchers at about 10 institutions to pool their efforts. The University may participate in the program in the future.

Universities and colleges have the additional woe of serving as targets of public figures who ridicule their "silly" and "wasteful" grant-spending. Sen. William Proxmire, D-Wisc., is one notable critic who monthly gives "golden Fleece" awards to foundations for unusual spending.

Olum says Proxmire is misleading the public. "He makes fun of some perfectly good grants because of their titles. Nobody can do the kind of job the NIH (National Institute for the Humanities) and the NSF are doing without making mistakes."

Grants, then, are the source of both questions and answers. Olum hesitates to predict the future of grant activity at the University — many factors help determine how much money is available for what programs.

But he doesn't hesitate to call grants important. "Grants are some testimony to the quality of our people."

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