

THE
University
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State:

**WHAT ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT
IN HIGHER EDUCATION?**

edited by
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The Grant, the Scholar and the University Community

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At this conference speakers such as Dr. Finn and Dr. Powell have amply demonstrated the kinds of problems, confusions, and distortions that affect the university when there is a large infusion of federal grant money; their discussion necessarily required the distance of administrative abstraction. But certain related questions are best approached in a personal, introspective way: these are questions of what happens to us as teachers and scholars when we are put within sniffing range of these grants. As a junior faculty member interested in literature and the teaching of writing at a large urban university, I have observed and felt some of the temptations arising from the presence or potential presence of grant money. Although the particulars of the experiences that have given rise to the following comments must remain buried, I suspect the experiences are common enough for everyone to fill in his or her own examples.

The minor bendings of purpose and perception that arise from knowledge of potential grant money, even though they may appear to be only matters of personal conscience, are worth considering for their effect on the university, for the community of any academic institution depends on the day-to-day relations—written and spoken—between and among faculty and students. If anything changes what we talk about and where we go for answers; if our normally confused and obscurely di-

rected discourse is obscured and deflected even more; if our human, and therefore curious, motives and relationships are made even more curious—then we should inquire into the effects lest those fortunate conjunctions of thought that result in new knowledge and learning become attenuated further. “The atmosphere which each member of the university ‘inhales’” is not just a precondition for the production of that knowledge which the government wishes to purchase, as Dr. Shils points out, but it is the mode of existence for the university.

Grants at their best do provide the means for scholars and researchers to pursue projects they would not have been able to pursue otherwise, at least not without the care, thoroughness, and methods that a grant makes available. In my own areas of interest federal money has made possible definitive editions, allowed the collection of extensive data concerning the development of the writing process in students, and given writers the time to realize their designs. We have all seen the direct good that grants make possible.

An indirect, but significant, effect of grant money is that it encourages the creation of many unsuccessful proposals. The lure of a grant has been known to mobilize those who might not otherwise have found a focus for their work and thought. In the hope of some largesse from above, they start to define their problem, plough through the literature, and start to perceive what it is they need to know. Their grant proposals may be lacking in many ways and ultimately may be rejected, but, as I have heard many times, “the process was an education.” Grant writing, as any form of writing, helps to clarify and develop thought.

I am often amazed by the power of the distant possibility of grant money to mobilize some of the most stagnant of colleagues. And this is not even money they can put in their pocket; at best they might gain summer pay or release from teaching. Yet we have all heard the size of a grant request being used as a sign of puissance, a boost to the ego, and a measure of one’s value to the institution. There is security in knowing you bring funds to your school rather than being just a ward of the payroll office. Through the grapevine, usually an indicator of our pettier motives, the size of a grant request is reported with more emphasis and interest than the whys and hows of the project. That human beings are fascinated with money is nothing new; what is new is that large amounts are only a proposal away for people of our profession, people whose complicated responses to money have been complicated further by a long history of relative poverty. Though this effect of grant money to move

souls may be unpleasant to contemplate, if the result is to gain action where there was none, the effect seems benign.

The problem is not that scholars are drawn to activity, but that those who would be doing something are encouraged to work along lines not the most likely to lead to their goal. I have seen this diversion operate in a number of ways.

First, the possibility of a grant fevers the mind with grandiosity. The small, immediate task is left untended, and we move instinctively toward the larger issue or the certitude of large amounts of data. This often goes hand in hand with the ancient way of avoiding action: we do not know enough yet to act. As true as that excuse may be in some circumstances, I have seen reasonable small-scale research projects dropped, narrow and possible essays never written, administrative arrangements put off, and simple tests never drafted while awaiting resolution of some larger issue on the far side of some rainbow. By the simple equation that grant equals money equals answers, the task at hand is not faced, effort goes into a grant proposal that may well not be accepted. Even if the grant is accepted, it may not provide the answers hoped for or needed. Though nobody’s intention was to table anything, an issue is lost in further study.

Even for those issues where further study is advisable we must ask whether the kind of study encouraged by grants is likely to produce the best results. In the fields I know most about, the most fruitful lines of work usually involve little more than time, a library card, some colleagues and students to talk with, blank paper, a typewriter, and lots of coffee. But of course this is not what tends to be rewarded or supported, so there is a multiplication of projects using inappropriate techniques, turning the arts of reading and understanding into gross quantifiable measures of particular tropes with little regard for context, import, nuance, or purpose. In order to become more grantworthy (that, by the way, is a very interesting new term in the English language), research in writing has tended toward the most easily identifiable elements of grammar and style, particularly as practiced by those at the lower end of competence. The traditional methods in both areas involved studying what was most idiosyncratic and original in the most individual of writers; since the products of such writers are such intricate webs of ways of meaning, gross quantifiable features will not tell you what you want to know and will not help your students appreciate what is best.

These two temptations to less fruitful modes of inquiry and action are exacerbated by the usual interest of grant-giving agencies in research

of practical use, which is immediately transferable to other institutions and situations. The local considerations and interests of researchers must be hedged by considerations of exportability. One can understand the agencies' desires to get their money's worth and not to support irresponsibly idiosyncratic private projects; however, stipulations on grant offers ultimately do tend to reshape disciplines. Such shifts, as that in the teaching of writing from that which is most unique and masterful to that which most have already mastered, may be quite salutary, but they should not go unmarked and unexamined.

Other disciplines must meet the criteria of grant research more easily with less distortion of method and interest, but even there a further complication enters in: the perception of how one must write a grant in order to succeed. I have no specific knowledge of how grants actually are awarded, but I do know the way my colleagues talk of grant writing. Since one is selling a pig in a poke, the promise of a project with results still distant, one tries to appeal to the prejudices, as one perceives them, of the grant-giving agency. No matter how high-minded one is, this extraneous factor enters into the original design of research. The formula usually goes like this: One wants to propose something recognizable (that is, it must resemble earlier work in the field to show that the proposal is sound) yet recognizably different (so that the grant givers will not feel the proposal is redundant). The element of fashion has much to do with what is recognizable and recognizably different. One is led not just in theme, but also in acceptable variations. In this way the agency becomes more than just a silent partner from the earliest days of the project. It is difficult enough for innovation to flourish when any academy exists, but the situation is made far worse when the researcher must trim his plant while it is still a seed. Nor is the innovator the only one who suffers; unless one grafts an obviously different idea onto a traditional approach, the value of one's work may be missed. The art of attractive promises is different from the ability to produce interesting and significant results; that these two arts are always compatible is questionable.

Of course, as serious scholars it is our own personal responsibility to wend our way down the path of truth, avoiding digression, temptation, and the designs of power; our self-esteem often hangs on our ability to sort out appropriate lines of inquiry and to disdain lesser considerations. However, we must look at this matter as more than a test of our own virtue, for in certain atmospheres we tarnish more easily. And when the tarnish is covered over with the appearance of national purpose, the

cumulative effects on the institution may be considerable before they are noticed. Let me suggest a few of the places where the effect may become noticeable: First, when we discuss our work with our colleagues, we tend to discuss what is foremost in our minds. What happens to our discourse when grant obtaining becomes a major concern? Second, with our students we share not just the content of our current intellectual concerns, we share our methods and our selves as models. Our concerns, our manner of talk, our ambitions, our dispositions, our reading, and our writing are the means by which students come to know our disciplines and the human meaning of those disciplines. What effect does our grant orientation have here? Finally, insofar as grant obtaining is a sign of instant recognition, based on promise rather than proven accomplishment, and grants, once obtained, become a source of power, how does this affect relations among colleagues, the academic pecking order, and ambitions?

For all these considerations, grants serve many useful functions, and I am not suggesting cloaking ourselves in white robes and abjuring the money. It is for those with more understanding and control of the situation than myself to take such matters into account when they draft new ways of distributing the largesse in a manner that will most benefit learning, knowledge, and their own particular practical purposes. As for myself, I will keep looking to see if something I want to know corresponds to something grant-giving agencies will support. I don't think I am the only one haunted by this vision of funding.