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Troubled Times for Academic Science

Conversation with academic scientists these days is often a depressing experience. Almost all of them have been affected by one or more of four major adverse developments—student riots, financial problems, job insecurity, and loss of prestige.

Student disorders and faculty dissension have shaken the Ivory Tower. Some professors have begun to question whether real scholarship will ever again be possible at their universities. They speak of the time wasted in numerous and endless faculty meetings and the divisive effects of controversy on professional relations among faculty.

Student disorders have had sequelae in the form of smaller alumni contributions or unfavorable action by state legislatures. Universities have also incurred added expenses for enlarged security forces. Costs of fire insurance on campus have jumped. These financial burdens have come at a time when many universities were straining their resources, even incurring deficits, to support disadvantaged minorities. In consequence, the financial blows that have been coming from Washington have been keenly felt. Worst hit are those institutions that asked tenured staff to obtain part of their salaries from grants and contracts. However, almost all universities find themselves in a tight financial bind. Few are in a position to give substantial help to the professor who has lost his support from Washington.

The financial problems of universities have adversely affected job opportunities and job security. Some institutions have found it necessary to curtail sharply the filling of vacancies and have not been able to create new positions. Those looking for situations find keen competition for jobs in industry and in community colleges.

To many engaged in research the worst blow has been a decline in the prestige of science. For nearly two decades after World War II scientists enjoyed especially high public esteem. In part this was related to the Cold War and to competition with the U.S.S.R. In part it arose from the belief that science and technology were bringing an increasingly affluent society. Now the public has turned its attention away from the Russians and it is bored with, even critical of, affluence.

The scientists who earned high prestige through their efforts in World War II were initially surprised and mildly pleased. Later they and others came to accept their status as some kind of vested right. Many young people questing for personal significance were attracted to the glamor of science. They did not always bring with them an equal hunger for insight or enthusiasm for the humble search for truth. Thus, the loss of prestige is keenly felt by most scientists but especially by the young, whose current experiences conform so poorly with expectations.

Academic scientists will somehow manage to find ways of dealing with most of the problems currently troubling them. University administrations will implement reforms, and students and faculty will grow weary of disruptions. Ultimately the day must come when industry and government will recognize that in self-interest they must support academic science financially and politically. That day will be hastened if scientists do their part. Regaining prestige is another matter. Those whose value system places glamor first probably will find it desirable to leave science. With time, however, there will be new dramatic manifestations of the nation's long-term dependence on the scientific enterprise, and society will acknowledge that it needs science to survive.—PHILIP H. ABELSON