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One-Sided Criticism of University Research

The conduct of scientific research in universities is facing increased tensions. Congress seems disposed to emphasize geographical factors in the distribution of support, while holding down the growth of overall budgets. More serious is a widespread chorus whose theme is that federal support of research has drastically weakened the teaching function of the universities. This viewpoint has been advanced for some years, but the criticism has become more intense. Recently major news media have repeatedly carried items on the subject. Indicative of the tone of some of the material is a front-page article in the *Wall Street Journal* of 28 December 1964, which begins:

Professor B, a noted biologist, spends only three hours a week teaching a graduate-level course at a major Eastern university. The big majority of his working hours is devoted to three separate research projects supported by Government grants that together total more than \$300,000. . . . He "rarely" sees an undergraduate student.

"Personally, I'm not averse to teaching," he explains. "But the university thinks it's getting a better bargain—more prestige and publicity—by keeping me in the laboratory. . . ."

In a speech given 9 May, Senator Ribicoff added his influential voice to the chorus. He stated that government support of research had undermined the prestige of the teacher and contributed to a decay in the quality of education. He implied that student unrest was chargeable to emphasis on research.

One-sided criticism of research is potentially destructive at any time, but facets of the present circumstances make the situation even more dangerous. The universities have experienced a tremendous increase in student population. Enrollments of 20,000 to 40,000 are now common. At the same time, the public has become much concerned with developments in education. Two recent opinion polls have found that education is considered to be our most important problem. Conversation with parents who have children in secondary school or in college leaves one with the feeling that quality of teaching is something about which people feel strongly. Parents want the best for their children and are reluctant to settle for less.

Under these circumstances some of Senator Ribicoff's remarks take on added significance. He attributes the disappearance of professors from the classroom to federal support of research. He asks:

And where has this left the student? In many cases, the student is left in the middle of hundreds of his fellows listening to an aloof figure on the lecture platform—distinguished for his works, but unknown to his students. So the student of today has become more and more anonymous—a seat in a lecture hall, a number on a card in the administration office, a statistic in the university records.

Many factors contribute to the situation Senator Ribicoff outlines, including the explosive growth in student population. However, when humans look for a sacrificial goat, they are not very analytical or fair. This, then, is a hazard that science faces. The menace is not yet fully developed, but prudence dictates moves to meet the problem before it develops further. Scientists must cheerfully meet their responsibilities as teachers. University administrators must make it clear that their institutions value good instruction. Federal agencies must align their policies so that support of research in universities contributes to, and does not compete with, the educational function.—PHILIP H. ABELSON