The high cost of research rules

By Mike McNamee

Social programs like equal opportunity hiring, Social Security, and occupational safety, have a broad-based effect: their federally-mandated costs hit corporations and businesses as well as not-for-profit educational institutions.

But there is another kind of cost imposed by the government on its aid-recipients and contract-seekers that adds a special burden which hurts colleges and private institutions much more than it does Lockheed or GM.

It's a burden measured in increased capital costs, increased staff costs, and increased time and effort spent in every phase of research preparation and review. When the costs of this additional burden are separated from regular research costs, they appear staggering - and, more significantly, it is often almost impossible to recover them.

The burden comes from a growing volume of federal rules and regulations governing sponsored research in any number of fields. While providing less and less money for research, the government is paying more and more attention to how it is spent and what safeguards are being used by researchers who spend it.

This government concern has, in the last five years, expanded the traditional controls governing medical research on human subjects and safeguarding of radioactive substances to encompass new regulations on animal care, protection of human subjects, research, and control of carcinogenic (cancer-causing) substances. New regulations governing control of research in microbiology are under consideration.

The regulations are often necessary, their purpose designed to review proposals. Large and cost-impacting research are essential to our future, and the regulations designed to ensure that they are well-planned and well-organized.

But the whole process is expensive. And as often as not, the only way the institution can recover its costs is through facilities and staff - with some effort going unrecorded. The government on research. The result: less money going to salaries and materials for research, more money going to overhead; less money available for research; and, in the end, less revenue.

There are two kinds of houses that have applied for registration under the law. Others, however, are adopting a "wait and see attitude," hoping to avoid payment until the chance for exemption is assured. The government has mentioned that they will be tested. These houses hope that enforcement will be tough enough that they can escape fees if they delay until the exemption is either put into effect or defeated. The feeling toward the tax was not consistent during the period of escaping or amending the levy.

Fraternity officers contacted by The Tech are not taking the law lightly. A number of their hopes on measures in the legislature to exempt non-profit organizations from the tax and paying the tax on meals that they serve to the fraternity members. If those measures fail, said one treasurer, "We'll just have to pay it. Or else we can get thrown in jail."

Fraternity officers asked not to be identified by specific fraternity, but they are taking the law seriously. They are adopting a "wait and see attitude," hoping to avoid payment until the chance for exemption is assured. The government has mentioned that they will be tested. These houses hope that enforcement will be tough enough that they can escape fees if they delay until the exemption is either put into effect or defeated. The feeling toward the tax was not consistent during the period of escaping or amending the levy.

At least one fraternity is going to pay the tax "under protest," which may or may not help them in the long run. The one method which all fraternity contactors pursued was to support Associate Dean Student Affairs Ken Brown's bid to exempt fraternities, and many more say that they would do so, since no one wanted to be the "test case," and take a possible negative impact on the fraternity budget.