Opinion

feedback

ProvoSt and opponents debate SDI policy

(Continued from page 4)

research projects whose funding sources have been or will be shifted to SDI. Publication will greatly facilitate an open and educational discussion of the effects of "Star Wars." Our goal is to bring this information to MIT and the larger community. We hope the Administration will grant our request.

In any case, MIT should formulate a policy to deal with the potential implications of great reliance on SDI funds on university research and educational programs. For instance, Low agreed with our original argument that mission-oriented programs, such as MIT, may result in opposition to the defense research at the expense of "irrelevant" disciplines (such as the life sciences). However, he did not indicate how MIT will respond if money is reduced for research in these "irrelevant" fields on campus. Does MIT plan to make a special effort to secure funds for these fields? These and other problematic issues should be dealt with in a formal university policy statement.

We do not wish MIT to stand alone among major research universities in objecting to SDI research funding tactics. Consequently, we resent the provost's comment that President Paul E. Gray '54 mistakenly initiated a meeting with these universities to discuss how they feel about their research and educational programs. A goal of the meeting should be to produce a public document which outlines areas of concern and cooperation. We urge MIT to take its active role in such a venture. Because we feel an open exploration of these issues is so important, we will be writing to the president of potentially affected research universities to urge them to initiate or participate in such a conference.

In doing so, we again wish to thank Low for replying to our letter. It is gratifying to learn that senior members of the administration share our concern over the SDI program. We hope that the increased support for research by Science John M. Deutch '61, the incoming provost, Dean David Holloway, and possibly other participants in the three-quarters of the 700 signatures we collected were the re- vived petition. We regret any misunderstanding our statements may have created.

Nevertheless, our fundamental concern remains. To create an atmosphere of open discussion, we feel the Administration must go beyond reaffirming the right of faculty and staff members to express their personal views about their institutional affiliation. The administration should actively promote public discussion of controversial issues, including SDI funding at MIT, which may have great bearing on the future of the Institute.

We understand the reluctance of some high MIT officials to make statements on this subject because of the constraints that MIT's name should not be used for partisan political purposes. We share this conviction. It forms the basis of our position that MIT has the right and the duty to try to prevent DOD officials from using the Institute's prestige to further their political agenda: to increase federal funding of SDI by 16 percent over next fiscal year.

How can MIT avoid being politically manipulated? In the short-run, MIT should immediately raise any concerns over SDI funding tactics in an official policy statement. To incorporate diverse views into this statement, the Institute should solicit comments from all interested members of MIT in an appropriate university forum.

While we believe the Technology and Culture Seminars on various aspects of SDI planned for next fall will make an important and valuable contribution to the discussion at MIT, we do not feel that these seminars can take the place of an official MIT policy position. Furthermore, the fall will be too late; DOD officials and Congress are acting now.

The provost did not comment on our earlier request that MIT publish infonnation on the SDI program at Lincoln Laboratory and the potential impacts of greater reliance on SDI funds on campus and Lincoln Laboratory.

Whether the net result would be a chilling effort on academic freedom is a question we are asked in a letter. We are pleased to answer that we have clarified the Institute's position — both at the May faculty meeting and in this letter. Accordingly, we modified our petition. Over three-quarters of the 700 signatures we collected were the revived petition. We regret any misunderstanding our statements may have created.

I concur completely with the response of Wagner, Hillel, and Well to Provost Francis E. Low's letter. I feel there is one point, however, which was not squarely addressed in that letter. This point concerns the problems of maintaining academic freedom in a world of heavily vested political interests. In order to keep the issues of academic freedom we have to face up to the fact that MIT is a political entity in a political world.

Low asserts — correctly, I believe — that "the same tradition of academic freedom that permits professors to take public positions on public issues also permits them to work on research projects of their choice." He does not seem to acknowledge, however, that academic freedom is established or maintained by simply proclaiming it. An educational institution acknowledges its responsibility to academic freedom if it merely responds passively to external funding pressures. It must also act vigorously to make diverse funding available. It is possible, of course, for MIT to do nothing, and accept uncritically the research priorities defined by those in power. But we must recognize that by doing so MIT is making a political judgment which places externally imposed priorities above internal principles. We cannot be so naive as to fail to recognize it as such.

If, however, we are sincerely concerned about preserving academic freedom, then we — as an educational institution committed to certain principles — are obligated to take political stands as a matter of policy. In fact, MIT does this constantly. The Institute's opposition to the Nuclear-Free Cambridge Act, its non-discrimination and affirmative action policies, and its lobbying position on behalf of student financial aid are all examples of MIT taking political stands to uphold certain principles. I am not saying such decisions will necessarily be easy — only that they are unavoidable ones for an educational institution. My personal view is that in the instance of the SDI program, the obligation to speak out is particularly strong. As Wagner et al. have pointed out, MIT is being publicly manipulated to further the goals of the DOD — goals which in this case will place constraints on research funds and thereby threaten academic freedom at MIT.

Let us give these difficult questions the serious consideration they deserve. Further, let us not be apprehensive about making political decisions because we still believe the fantasy that scientific research is somehow an apolitical pursuit which takes place off in some value-free Platonic heaven where any scientist can do whatever he or she wishes. We are all sufficiently capable, I believe, of dealing with the political realities of the real world without hiding behind such naive illusions.

CONGRATULATIONS!

to the Graduates of the M.I.T.
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