Fewer Salaries Rely on Research Funding

By Brian Rosenberg

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Fewer MIT faculty are having to scrape together part of their academic year salaries because academic year salaries are increasingly being paid out of general Institute funds rather than sponsored research grants.

The process of shifting the source of these salaries — "hardening" as the administrative jargon — is one of the administration's highest budget priorities. As a result, large amounts of leftover grant money from other funds have been and will continue to be devoted to the task.

Faculty salaries are "a core need, a need that isn't being met," said Provost Mark S. Wrighton, who manages the Institute's budget. "Hardening faculty salaries is a top priority with new money, even in the current budget situation," he said, referring to the Institute's tightening efforts to trim $20 million from its annual operating budget.

He said the push to harden faculty salaries has not hindered those efforts. "We're on a certain path to closing the operating gap. We're trying to find areas where we can give up some things in order to achieve the most critical Institute-wide goals. I can't think of anything that matters more than paying faculty salaries," he said.

In a Feb. 23 article describing MIT's budget difficulties, Wrighton said almost $100 million in endowment money has been devoted to hardening faculty salaries over the past six years. Most of this money was collected during MIT's five-year Capital Campaign for the Future, which raised a total of $710 million. The approximately $5 million in annual income generated by this money has lowered the percentage of MIT faculty's academic year salaries supported by research grants from 16.73 percent for fiscal year 1987 to 11.81 percent in FY 1992. Wrighton said an additional $220 million in endowment would provide enough income to support all faculty salaries.

These figures are for academic year salaries only. Most professors must still raise funds for the summer months, when they are not teaching and are therefore not paid by the Institute.

Wrighton said that although he does not have a timetable for hardening salaries, he expects to make steady progress. Wrighton identified the biology department and most departments in the School of Engineering as areas that still rely heavily on research funding.

Dean of Science Robert J. Birgeneau said that hardening the biology department was a "lower priority" because the strength of the field makes raising research grants easier to obtain even if they must support salaries.

Birgeneau said that beginning next year, the Institute would pay all three-year salaries for the departments of chemistry, math, and physics.

Funding changes increase importance of hardening salaries

Wrighton and other administrators gave several reasons for the importance of hardening faculty salaries. "Since World War II ended, federal funding has expanded, and most funding agencies were willing to support academic year salaries," Wrighton said. "In recent years, however, there's been a move away from that.

"The federal government has begun to expect universities to subsidize research," said Thomas H. Jordan, head of the Department of Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences. "Certain parts of the National Science Foundation now refuse to fund the academic salary portion of a proposal," he said.

This change in federal funding policy has led to concerns about the consequences of a total stoppage of federal funding. Though this is unlikely, "it is important that we be prepared," Jordan said.

The approximately $5 million in additional funding changes increase the importance of hardening salaries, said Marc A. Kastner, a professor of physics. "If the federal government is forced to cut funding, as it does not have a timetable for hardening salaries," Wrighton said. "In recent years, however, there's been a move away from that.

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"It used to be that a senior faculty member had to get one-third of his academic year salary and all of his summer salary from grants. Most government agencies would not allow more than one month of salary in a proposal, so you'd have to have at least three grants to pay your salary. That put us on a treadmill of having to keep getting more grants just to get our salaries," Kastner said.

Kastner was recently named the Donner Professor of Physics, an appointment that covers the cost of his salary. Named chairs are one of several ways the administration is furthering the hardening process. "If someone endows a chair for a senior professorship, that typically requires about $2 million, which generates $100,000 income stream to support the salary and other programs," Wrighton said.

Named chairs are only one of several paths to a hardened salary. One is given to the salary of every new faculty member, and the salaries of faculty selected as MacVicar Faculty Fellows are also paid by the Institute.

Funds for some of these processes come from retirement of senior faculty, "If a senior faculty member retires, the money that went to his salary is freed up in some sense," Wrighton said. "Since senior faculty make more than junior faculty, that money can then be used to support an entering faculty member's salary," he added.

Salaries can also be hardened with money saved from other areas of the budget. EAPS has moved money from administrative areas to harden salaries. "Last year we put about $45,000 of the administrative budget into hardening," said Jordan. He said the department found the money through "belt-tightening in general — we got more efficient."

Jordan said the department has made significant progress in hardening salaries over the past three years. "The amount [of salaries supported by research] has approached 30 percent in the last few years, but it now stands at about 12 percent," he said. Jordan said his department will attempt to harden research-supported faculty salaries within the next five years, and possibly sooner.

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