

# To the Editor

## UCB is a follower, not a leader, on academic earmarking

What separates a good university from a great university? According to Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University, "The great universities are in charge of their own destinies and they know it. And they advance their ideas to everyone who will listen to them to acquire the resources necessary to implement their ideas."

Here at the University of Colorado at Boulder, we have many opportunities to serve as a national leader in creating the 21st century university. One such opportunity lies in how we handle academic earmarks. However, on academic earmarks, CU-Boulder is a follower rather than a leader, which has the effects of wasting limited campus resources and contributing to bad policies at the campus and national levels.

Academic earmarks refer to federal funding obtained outside the normal process of proposal and peer review that most researchers are familiar with. The late Congressman George Brown, D-Calif., who was a tireless champion of scientific research, described them as follows: "Earmarks are the result of an academic institution using its special access to an influential member of Congress (with access often facilitated by a high-paid lobbyist) using this advantage to gain a cash award without having to compete for the money or bear public scrutiny. The public and the taxpayer are the real losers as a result of this practice."

Why do universities seek federal earmarks? Well, for one, there is big money available. In 2006 almost \$2.5 billion in earmarks were distributed to universities. With budgets tight everywhere, and overall federal research funding peaking after years of increases, it is understandable that universities around the country might try for the easy payoff of a congressional earmark. CU-Boulder is no different.

Last week I resigned from the campus's Federal Relations Advisory Committee (FRAC), chaired by Susan Avery, vice chancellor for research and dean of the Graduate School, over the campus policy — or lack thereof — on academic

earmarking. For much of the past year I, along with the support of several colleagues, have pressed the FRAC to develop and seek adoption of a formal policy on academic earmarking, in order to clarify what is a murky, behind-the-scenes process that operates in far-too-ad-hoc of a manner for a university seeking excellence. The draft policy that we developed does not forbid earmarking, but it does state that "it is the general practice of the University not to seek and/or accept Congressionally directed or 'earmarked' funds, except under specific, well-defined circumstances." The "well-defined circumstances" are clearly described in the draft policy. In effect, the policy would change earmarking from a proactive to a reactive process, which would occur only in rare instances when exemptions to the general practice are met.

But when I learned last week that the campus was going to ignore this draft policy in hot pursuit of federal earmarks again this year, I decided that it was in the best interests of all involved for me to simply resign and make my case to the university community outside of the FRAC. There are three reasons why I think that the current CU-Boulder approach to academic earmarks is deeply flawed.

First, the obsessive focus on earmarks is a waste of our collective time and resources. Over the past three years, earmark funding represents about 0.2 percent of externally-supported research on the Boulder campus. This is trivial. From a cost-benefit perspective alone, the focus on earmarks is inefficient. Consider that the campus would receive more additional research funding simply by winning one to two additional competitive grants each year. Given the admirable success rates of CU faculty in securing external funding, this would only mean submitting a total of five to 10 more grants on an annual basis among its 1,000 faculty members (and 1,500 additional members of its research staff). Our federal relations efforts would be far better spent on activities like ensuring that each member of the Colorado congressional delegation is invited to campus each year and warmly received, on providing grant-writing support and training for faculty who prepare the grant proposals that provide 99.8 percent of campus sponsored research, and by facilitating the interaction of campus researchers with agency officials in Washington, among many other worthwhile activities.

A second issue is that the focus on earmarks contributes to pathological national science policies. In my short time spent in George Brown's office in 1991, I became convinced of the merit of his views that academic earmarking does far more for members of Congress than for the scientific enterprise. For more than 20 years the American Association of Universities has — with little success — sought to stem the tide of academic earmarking. Former Congressman David Minge, D-Minn., wrote in 2001 that academic earmarks are "vicious substitutions of the political process that are practiced on a bipartisan basis," a view widely shared among scholars and observers of science and technology policy. To the extent that CU-Boulder contributes to pathological academic earmarking, we are contributing to federal science policies that eat away at academia-cherished principles of peer review and accountability. By taking a leadership role, CU-Boulder could perhaps help in some small way to correct this policy failure. In any case, the economic benefits of taking a leadership role would far exceed any financial loss resulting from an earmarking policy that limited the ability of CU-Boulder to pursue earmarks. Consider that in 2006, 99.98 percent of academic earmarks went to institutions other than CU-Boulder.

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Third, even for the minority who might reject the argument that earmarking is bad science policy, our current on-campus approach is still left wanting.

Who among us gets to pursue an earmark? By what criteria are earmark opportunities selected and scarce university resources and political capital devoted to pursuing them? How much time and money is spent on campus to pursue earmarks? If you don't know the answers to these questions, then you are not alone. I have spent the past two years on the FRAC and the answers to these questions still remain unclear to me. Absent transparent policy and procedures for earmarking, CU leadership leaves itself open to perceptions of cronyism and favoritism, irrespective of the reality. At a minimum, the lack of a formal campus policy governing earmarking works against equity, accountability and openness.

CU-Boulder strives for excellence. But excellence is unlikely to result if we are following rather than leading. Achieving greatness demands that we clearly define our values and what those values mean for our actions. On the issue of academic earmarking, CU-Boulder has an opportunity to lead the nation. Or we could follow the crowd simply because it is the easy thing to do. We are in charge of our own destiny, and we know it. But are we a good university or a great university?

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