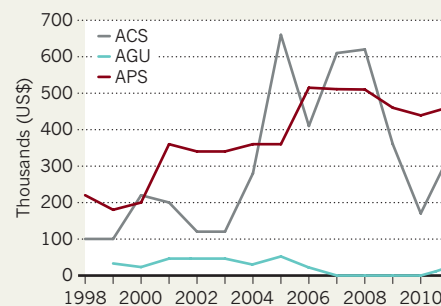
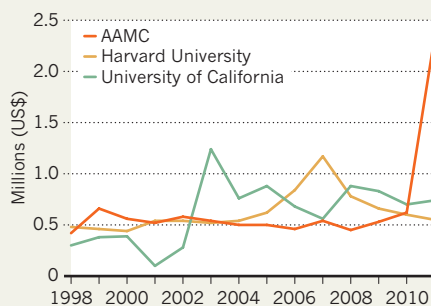
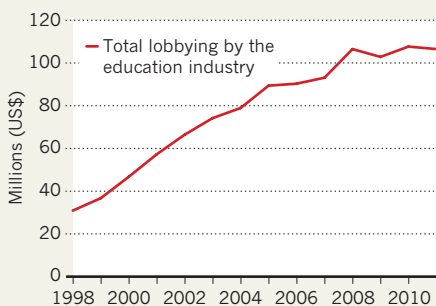


LOBBYING IN FLUX

After several years of growth, the total spent on advocacy by the US education industry, including research universities, has levelled off (left). Figures for selected institutions and scientific societies reveal a more complex picture (centre, right).



AAMC, Association of American Medical Colleges; ACS, American Chemical Society; AGU, American Geophysical Union; APS, American Physical Society.

FUNDING

Lobbyists confront US budget crunch

Money for advocacy is tight as federal cuts loom.

BY EUGENIE SAMUEL REICH

The business of lobbying the US government on behalf of research has rarely been more challenging, according to an informal survey. A polarized Congress focused on reducing government spending, coupled with anti-science sentiment among some lawmakers, has created a chilly atmosphere for those arguing for robust and long-term investment in basic research.

"The environment is toxic. It's dysfunctional. It's like it's always been, but worse," says Mike Lubell, who oversees government relations at the American Physical Society in Washington DC. And it is leading lobbyists to adopt new tactics.

Lobbyists have conventionally advocated for their own specific programmes and agency budgets. But in recent weeks they have been aiming their appeals higher, spurred by fears of an across-the-board cut to discretionary spending — the portion of the federal budget that includes science. Such a cut could happen if the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, set up by Congress in August to identify ways to trim the US federal deficit, fails to find a formula that satisfies both parties. The committee has until 23 November to arrive at a plan, but with Republicans opposing tax increases and Democrats unwilling to cut entitlement programmes such as Medicare and Social Security, its efforts could prove fruitless. In that case, legislation stipulates that cuts will be imposed on all federal agencies for the 2013 budget (see *Nature* 476, 133–134; 2011).

On 21 September, a letter signed by more than 130 university presidents was sent to the joint select committee asking it to reach a "big agreement" so as to spare discretionary spending from drastic cuts. This kind of high-level lobbying would not be necessary in a normal year, says Jennifer Poulakidas, vice-president for congressional and governmental affairs at the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, a signatory of the letter. "It goes further than dealing with our own interests," she says.

Anti-science rhetoric on the political right — for example, an attack in May by Senator Tom Coburn (Republican, Oklahoma) on research grants given by the US National Science Foundation — has prompted many lobbyists to seek new ways to reach lawmakers away from the partisan atmosphere of Washington DC. Jennifer Zeitzer, director of legislative affairs at the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology in Washington DC, says that lobbyists are making a major effort to persuade scientists to approach their representatives in their home districts. "It's the first time we're trying to get members of Congress at home," she says, pointing to a 19 September event in Birmingham, Alabama, at which National Institutes of Health staff and researchers funded by the agency stressed the agency's crucial role in advancing medical science to congressional staff working for Democratic and Republican members of the House of Representatives.

The assumption is that legislators will feel more sympathetic to science once they realize that federal research dollars flow back to major employers in their districts. "We argue federal

funding will be conducive to job creation," says Gene Irisari, director of government affairs at the Dallas-based company Texas Instruments, which is a member of the Task Force on American Innovation, a coalition of universities and companies that advocate for physical-sciences research. On 21 September, the group organized an event on Capitol Hill on the science that went into Apple's iPad computer tablet; the room was packed out. Rather than approaching representatives at home, the idea was to draw on the frenetic energy of Capitol Hill with a topic that crossed political boundaries.

While the challenges multiply, money for science lobbying is tight. Spending by the US education industry, which devoted \$100 million to lobbying in 2010, has hit a plateau after nearly a decade of growth (see chart). David Moore of the Association of American Medical Colleges, which has spent nearly \$1.2 million on lobbying so far this year, says that although the association itself remains flush he has heard that other advocacy coalitions are scaling back because their members cannot afford to keep up membership fees.

That plateau is underscored by declines in lobbying expenditure for some key institutions. For example, following a peak in 2007, spending at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is falling, as is that at the University of California system, which peaked in 2008. Data for scientific societies tend to oscillate as their approaches change from year to year. Michael McPhaden, president of the American Geophysical Union, says the society made a conscious decision in 2010 to become more actively engaged after several years of little activity.

All are haunted by the possibility that the lean times for science are more than a temporary blip resulting from the bad economy. They fear that the steady budgetary growth that the entire US scientific enterprise has come to rely on is in jeopardy, says David Korn, a pathologist at Harvard University who has followed science budgets as an administrator and research-funding advocate for four decades. If it is, says Korn, "how do you downsize with minimal damage? That's the question all of us are worried about." ■ SEE EDITORIAL P.285