

NEW WORLD

Dim Light at the end of the Tunnel

by our Washington Correspondent

UNIVERSITY administrators and college presidents have a right to feel annoyed at the shoddy treatment they have received from some members of Congress. Although faced with a financial crisis that is forcing many institutions of higher education to restrict student enrolment, abandon courses and even close their doors, the academic community has had to wait for several months while a complex bill designed to provide financial assistance to higher education has been delayed by a fight over the merits of desegregating schools by bus-ing children from one district to another. The Higher Education Bill was, however, finally passed by Congress last week, and although it represents a radical departure from established traditions in the relationship between the federal government and the colleges, it has by no means won the hearts of the entire academic community.

The version of the bill which came out of a conference committee last month and which was passed by Congress last week was much closer to the bill passed by the Senate in August last year (see *Nature*, 232, 518; 1971) than to the measure which was passed by the House of Representatives a month or so later (see *Nature*, 234, 65; 1971). Instead of providing federal grants to each college solely on the basis of the number of students enrolled, as the House of Representatives and the higher education lobby had originally wanted, it provides the grants chiefly on the basis of the number of federally-supported students from low income groups who attend each college. The bill also establishes the right of every student to receive up to \$1,400 a year from the federal government in the form of a Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BOG). The actual amount of the grant would be based on parental income, in much the same way as university students in Britain are financed by grants from local education authorities.

Both measures represent landmarks in the history of higher education in the United States, for the federal government has previously steered clear of providing direct, across-the-board grants to colleges to do with as they wish, and there is at present no scheme such as the opportunity grants to ensure that no qualified student is barred from attending university solely because of financial hardship.

In spite of the historic nature of the bill, and the fact that it could channel \$18,500 million into the universities and colleges over the next three years, however, the academic community is strongly divided about its merits. The higher education lobby in Washington in fact strongly supported the idea of institutional grants based solely on the number of students enrolled in each establishment, but it has remained lukewarm towards the suggestion that institutional grants should be tied to the number of federally aided students at each institution.

A measure of the division in the academic community is the fact that higher education lobby groups, such as the American Council on Education, were slow in announcing their opinion of the conference report and, once formed, their support of the measure was barely tepid. A letter from Mr

Roger W. Heynes, president of the American Council on Education to presidents of member colleges, for example, expressed "disappointment that the conference has rejected the broad principle that the federal government should provide general support to all institutions on the basis of the number of students educated. Nevertheless, the bill does provide general support on the basis of federally assisted students, and this (the members of the board of ACE) view as at least an initial step towards what we believe should be a federal responsibility".

Proposed by Senator Clairborne Pell of Rhode Island, the idea of tying institutional support to the numbers of needy students at each institution will probably cost about \$1,000 million a year. Its design, apart from providing much needed finances to colleges and universities, is to make institutions of

EDUCATION FINANCES

More Trouble Ahead

ANY doubts that there may be about the gravity of the funding crisis in American higher education should be dispelled by the latest report from the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. The report suggests that if the growth in annual expenditure of institutions of higher education continues in the 1970s at the same rate as in the 1960s, an extra \$26,000 million will have to be found by 1980 just to keep all the institutions running.

The commission's report, to be made public this week, sets out a programme for meeting this shortfall that would make academic administrators in Britain throw up their hands in horror. (Indeed, the vice-chancellors did just that when Mrs Shirley Williams, then the minister responsible for higher education in the Labour Government, put forward some of the same suggestions three years ago.) What the commission suggests is that 60 per cent of the funding gap should be made up from new funds from state and federal government, but that the institutions themselves should be prepared to reduce their expenditures to close the gap.

Higher education costs can be cut, the commission suggests, in two ways. First, the total number of years of student instruction should be reduced by streamlining courses and by reducing the number of "reluctant attenders"—although the latter reduction is outside the control of the institutions themselves—and, second, more effective use should be made of existing resources.

Among the commission's prescriptions for using resources more effectively is a halt to the creation of any new PhD courses, except in very special circumstances, and even more concentration of PhD training and federally supported research in fewer institutions. Indeed, New York State has already put this suggestion into practice by declaring a moratorium on new PhD courses last year. The commission also believes that campuses and departments should reach a minimum effective size, and that the student-faculty ratio can be cautiously raised, in spite of the fact that there has been considerable erosion of the ratio during the past few years. More educational experiments off campus, such as the open university experiment and credit by examination, should be tried out, and institutions should set up consortia or even mergers.

The commission also notes that the tight job market for faculty members will tend to keep salaries down, and that the trend towards enrolment in two-year colleges will result in some saving.