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A shutdown's effect on higher ed

Dr. Aldemaro
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Letters from Academia

When we read or hear about the federal shutdown in the media, we learn that it is due to the inability of our politicians to compromise, that all federal employees who are not considered essential are subject to a furlough, and that national parks and museums usually close. Yet, one may ask, how such shutdowns affect higher education. After all, most of higher education – including student aid – is supported directly or indirectly by the federal government.

To begin with, we need to remember that although no new federal dollars can be spent during a shutdown, money that has already been approved, such as for student-aid programs or research grants, is still available. The same can be said about spending mandated by law, such as the Pell Grant Program, money for federal direct student loans, and benefits paid through the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Still, that does not mean that all would be well. The military service academies, such as West Point, would shut down because civilian faculty and staff, who constitute a significant portion of their personnel, would be sent home, affecting the quality of education of our future military leaders. Even things that do not seem to have a personal touch can be significantly disrupted, such as services that aid students applying for federal financial aid through the U.S. Department of Education Web site.

The same can be said about researchers applying for grants to federal institutions such as the National Science Foundation, or regarding major research projects that are time sensitive, such as launching space missions. Astronomers would lose invaluable hours of observation time at feder-

ally funded observatories, researchers at the National Institutes of Health would be unable to enroll patients in clinical trials, and federally-funded scientific expeditions would be cancelled. Government employees would be barred from attending conferences in their disciplines.

On the other hand, services such as the U.S. Geological Survey's on-duty seismologists in Golden, Colorado, who monitor earthquakes worldwide to produce real-time analysis and damage estimates, would remain open. Drug reviews by the Federal Drug Administration would continue because these undertakings are funded by fees from the pharmaceutical industry.

Some may think that committed researchers could continue to operate from home thanks to the Internet. Yet, by law, they are forbidden to work whatsoever, so they cannot even have work-related communications via email.

The net result of all this political mess would be the continuing loss of ground for the nation's leadership position in areas that are critical to our national security, such as science and technology. Meanwhile, adversaries like China would see this as an opportunity to take over the relative supremacy that the U.S. has held in this area since the Sputnik era.

If you believe that this is an overstatement, look at the numbers. Since 2000, China has grown its spending on

research and development by about 18 percent on average while ours grew only by four percent. Between 2010 and 2015 the share of investment by the U.S. government in that area has declined from 30 percent to 25 percent of the total country's expenditures in research and development. And the gap will be growing in critical areas. China plans to invest 100 times more in artificial intelligence than the U.S. did in 2016 and now they have 200 of the fastest 500 world's supercomputers, while the U.S. has fewer than 150. Those computers are essential in areas such as defense and homeland security.

Some will think that because of the furloughs and freezing in spending, the federal government would save money in a shutdown. Think again. After the 2013 government shutdown, Congress approved about \$2 billion in retroactive compensation for the employees who were furloughed, erasing any payroll savings. After all, why should people pay for Congress' inability to do its most basic job? Further, many expenditures for projects resumed at a higher pace in order to make up for the lost time.

On the other hand, that does not mean that there are not financial effects of a federal shutdown. According to a report issued by the White House, the 2013 crisis led to a loss of \$2 billion in productivity.

Why we are risking the U.S. position as the only superpower left due to government shutdowns? The politics of ideology.

Since 1977 there have been 19 federal shutdowns. The six that took place during the Carter Administration were over federal funding for abortion. The longest one, a 21-day closure, took place during the Clinton

Administration when the Republican-controlled Congress shut down the government over expenditures on funding for Medicare, education, public health, and the environment. The 2013 shutdown was over funding of the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare"). The most recent was over immigration policy.

There was a time when the Congress, composed of elected officials paid by taxpayers, always tried to reach compromises in order to keep the country going. That is not true anymore. Further, they seem to enjoy the increasing polarization of the American society, their ability to ignore facts, and being able to get away with lying to our citizens. Now what we have is a system of government that is not only increasingly dysfunctional, but also underfunded and lacking of visionary leadership.

No wonder Congress has an approval rating of only 20 percent. But we should also see this state of affairs as a reflection on ourselves. How does a body that we elect and fund through our taxes misbehave at such levels? In a country in which less than 50 percent of the people eligible to vote exercise that right every two years, and where most people who vote do not look in depth for whom and what they are voting for, that is not surprising.

At the end of the day it is upon us to call into account the people who are supposed to run the country. That is what democracy is all about.

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