

Venezuelan Science at Risk

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The Venezuelan Academy of Physical, Mathematical, and Natural Sciences would like to share with the international scientific community our fears for the present and future fate of science and higher education in our country. A number of worrisome recent events and our interpretations of their implications motivate our concern:

1. The president of our country has stated what he believes science should be in Venezuela and has created his own initiatives for workable lines of scientific research (1).

2. At all levels of the national scientific establishment, inexperienced professionals with little scientific or technical knowledge or background have been appointed to positions of authority. They have been chosen on the basis of their loyalty to the political party in power. This approach precludes a constructive dialogue with the R&D community and curtails academic freedom of research.

3. The Ministry of State for Science, Technology, and Intermediate Industries controls discretionary use of resources collected from the private sector (2). Some of these resources, which were previously allotted to researchers according to the nature and quality of their research proposals, are now being centralized and distributed according to the "social aim" of the research proposal.

4. The government has decided to create some 40 new universities but has not published a plan to provide them with suitable academic staff.

5. Universities and centers of research have been subjected to drastic budget cuts, which severely affect most current research programs. Restrictions have been imposed on the acquisition of scientific literature and information as well as of access to Internet (3).

6. The loss of intellectual capital to the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, France, Spain, and other countries has accelerated (4). Young scientists, technology experts, physicians, and engineers are leaving the country. The process started in 2003 with the firing of some more than 800 researchers from the Venezuelan Institute of Petroleum Research.

7. We believe that Dr. Raimundo Villegas, an emblematic researcher of Venezuela and founder of the Institute for Advanced Studies (IDEA), a wide-scope research institute, was forced into retirement by the Directory from his post of tenured professor of IDEA. His departure was accompanied by the cessation of IDEA's support of the Latin American Academy of Sciences (ACAL) (www.acal-scientia.org/); this support was stated in ACAL's foundation charter. ACAL has an office in Venezuela that has been headed by Dr. Villegas since its creation 25 years ago.

8. Dr. Jaime Requena, who had applied for retirement, was instead fired from his tenured post at IDEA. This appears to have been a result of a personal decision of the Institute

Director, as it occurred without the expected and due legal procedures.

The above-mentioned observations represent just a fraction of the many actions that clearly reveal an aim of the government to control all of the national scientific activity and the higher education system, putting Venezuela's scientific activities at risk.

References

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