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Pentagon Research Director Visits Universities in Bid to Re-energize Partnerships

By JOHN MARKOFF

The new director of the Pentagon's research arm has started visiting university campuses around the country in an effort to rebuild bridges that were severed under the Bush administration.

The director, Regina E. Dugan, who was appointed in July to lead the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or Darpa, made visits last week to the University of California, Berkeley; Stanford University; the University of California, Los Angeles; and the California Institute of Technology. She had previously visited Virginia Tech and Texas A&M.

She replaced Anthony J. Tether, a Bush administration appointee who had pushed the agency toward more classified research and who had embarked on several controversial research projects, including the Total Information Awareness system proposed by the former national security adviser, John M. Poindexter.

Under Dr. Tether, the agency's relationship with some of the nation's leading technology universities had become decidedly chilly as basic research financing declined. In 2005, Darpa officials revealed that financing for university researchers fell to $123 million from $214 million, in a relatively steady budget for computer science research that rose from $546 million in 2001 to $583 million in 2005. The agency has not released data on university financing since that time.

During the Bush administration, Darpa's guidelines for financing basic research changed markedly, said Peter Harsha, the director of governmental affairs for the Computing Research Association, a Washington organization that represents academic institutions.

The agency shortened the period of research financing and tied it to one year "go, no-go" decisions, undercutting longer-term projects. It enforced classification of research or prepublication review on scientific papers, and it established strict United States citizenship requirements for some financing, Mr. Harsha said.

"It sounds like a lot of that is changing now," he said. "She is attempting to empower her program managers more than under the previous regime, and that makes it more enticing for members of the academic community to engage with the agency."

In her conversations with researchers, Dr. Dugan noted the criticism of the shortened time horizon for Darpa financing and acknowledged that increasing classification of research had lessened the impact of the agency's technology on both civilian and military infrastructure, according to several people who participated in the discussions.

"University-based research is an important component of Darpa's future activities," Dr. Dugan said in a statement. "It is our goal to strengthen this partnership, enabling some of the best minds to serve with and in the government in the best interests of the nation and the U.S. Department of Defense."

Dr. Tether, who is now a fellow at the Council on Competitiveness, a Washington-based policy group, said that he had focused some Darpa basic research spending on a series of artificial intelligence challenges and that overall Darpa spending had increased significantly in the eight years that he ran the agency.

"There were individuals at these universities that had done great work, and they had been funded handsomely," Dr. Tether said. "Basically what happened is that as we began funding these other ideas, which were different, they kind of expected to continue to be funded. I think that was the problem."

On her visit to California institutions last week, Dr. Dugan, a mechanical engineer who has done fundamental development work in chemical sensing technologies that can be used to detect explosives, spoke to small groups of faculty members from different departments in both the sciences and engineering.

"She came by Berkeley on Wednesday and had a frank chat about the past and the future, and I'm pretty encouraged," said David Patterson, a computer scientist at the University of California, Berkeley. "She seems to genuinely value academic input into the defense research enterprise and really wants to re-engage the research community in the Darpa mission."

One challenge for the new director may be a potential cut in Darpa's budget in an appropriation bill now before Congress. The Obama administration has been trying to raise the agency's budget, but some Congressional opponents have proposed a $500 million cut and there is language in a Senate version of the defense appropriations bill that would prohibit the agency from starting new projects.

"I also want to urge Congress to fully fund the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency because since its creation it has been the source of cutting-edge breakthroughs from that early Internet to stealth technology," said Thomas A. Kalil, the deputy director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.