Mars plan could boost CU's space programs

Universities are key sites for space, science research

By Mary Butler
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Overhauling NASA - a move called for in the President's Commission on Moon, Mars and Beyond report released Wednesday - might spell good news for the University of Colorado.

The 60-page report praises the administrative model set by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at the California Institute for Technology in Pasadena.

The message prompted Mike Shull, chair of CU's Astrophysical and Planetary Sciences department, to ask whether the government might seek other universities to follow in JPL's footsteps.

"We are the top public university that works for NASA," Shull said. "We're very well-poised to do all that.... We've been doing it already and have a huge amount of student labor we're training."

Last year, NASA provided $50 million in research dollars for CU programs including the Laboratory for Atmospheric and Space Physics; Astrophysical and Planetary Sciences; the Center for Astrophysics and Space Astronomy; and Aerospace Engineering.

However, the overarching message of the commission's report is that it's time for private industry to take a larger role in funding space research.

This recommendation was positively received by many space researchers working in the public sector who fear that President Bush's plan to put men and women on Mars and the moon might divert money from other important research.

"I think some people will bristle at the thought of privatizing space," Shull said. "But I think it's inevitable, excluding the astronaut program. It's about time private enterprise starting picking up some of the cost."

Shull pointed to aerospace work now almost exclusively in the hands of companies such as Boeing.

Outside of looking to private industry as a funding source for future exploration efforts to Mars and beyond, the commission's report fails to address the dollars behind President Bush's vision. He outlined the Mars plan in a January speech at NASA that prompted the commission's formation.

Shull said sending men and women to Mars is estimated to cost close to $1 trillion over 30 years or more than $30 billion a year. That's twice NASA's current $15 billion annual budget.

"If they steal from one area to fund this, there could be some downsides," Shull said. "There's so much more out there besides Mars."

LASP director Daniel Baker agrees.

"We're very concerned about anything that would cut back on bread-and-butter missions that have been crucial in training engineers and scientists," Baker said.

The laboratory currently is building five space projects and recently received $20 million to build and operate a sixth.

Baker, however, said he's not convinced Congress will make funding a Mars project a top priority any time soon, particularly in light of other pressing economic issues as well as the fact that it's a presidential election year.

"If Bush isn't re-elected, it could change outcomes," he said. "Congress has a lot of things on its mind."

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