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UC Should Quit Los Alamos

After 61 years, the University of California still can't get a handle on what's going on at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Case in point: Employees at the nuclear weapons lab in New Mexico, which UC has managed for the government since 1943, stored top-secret research in an unguarded safe next to a soft-drink machine. A few of those floppy disks and CDs — it is still unknown exactly what classified research is on them — disappeared, and as in so many other security lapses at the lab, UC has had to turn its focus from making scientific discoveries to cleaning up an avoidable mess.

UC has been under the government's security microscope since at least 1999, when Los Alamos scientist Wen Ho Lee was investigated for downloading weapons research onto his personal computer. That and a later series of embarrassing security flaps prompted the federal government in 2003 to open UC's lab management contract to competitive bidding for the first time.

Whether UC will compete for Los Alamos is up in the air, but the decision should be a no-brainer: By bowing out, UC would save itself the millions needed to make a bid, and perhaps lessen national security threats.

If it does compete, UC's bid may look less like a resume than a rap sheet. Over the last four years, two lab employees who blew the whistle on alleged financial fraud were fired by UC, only to be rehired when the media raised a stink; vials of plutonium have gone missing; injuries have stemmed from such causes as lasers carelessly left on and radiation exposure; and classified e-mails have found their way to the Internet.

UC is already battling to keep two other national labs, one of which is the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory above the UC Berkeley campus. Lab scientists and professors there conduct no classified research, have brought UC nine Nobel prizes and have discovered at least 11 atomic elements. It's safe to say that UC's fiercely guarded academic reputation won't take much of a hit if it leaves the Los Alamos competition.

UC's swift response to the latest Los Alamos blunder is commendable, but such action is several years late. Estimates place the cost of competing for the lab at from \$10 million to \$25 million. That money would be better put toward competing for the Lawrence Berkeley laboratory or, at least until UC's contract is up in 2005, beefing up security at Los Alamos.