

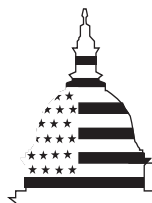
GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee
on Finance and Hazardous Materials;
and the Ranking Member, Committee
on Commerce, House of
Representatives

June 2000

MUTUAL FUND FEES

Additional Disclosure Could Encourage Price Competition



G A O

Accountability * Integrity * Reliability



GAO

Accountability * Integrity * Reliability

United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

B-281444

June 5, 2000

The Honorable John D. Dingell
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Commerce
House of Representatives

The Honorable Michael G. Oxley
Chairman, Subcommittee on
Finance and Hazardous Materials
Committee on Commerce
House of Representatives

This report presents the results of our review of issues relating to mutual fund fees. Assets in mutual funds have grown significantly during the 1990s. However, conflicting views existed as to whether the fees that funds charge investors had declined as would have been expected given the operational efficiencies that mutual fund advisers likely experience as their fund assets grow. As you requested, we reviewed (1) the trend in mutual fund advisers' costs and profitability, (2) the trend in mutual fund fees, (3) how mutual funds compete, (4) how their fees are disclosed to investors, and (5) the responsibilities that mutual fund directors have regarding fees.

This report recommends that the Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) require that the quarterly account statements that mutual fund investors receive include information on the specific dollar amount of each investors' share of the operating expenses that were deducted from the value of the shares they own. Because these calculations could be made various ways, SEC should also consider the costs and burdens that various alternative means of making such disclosures would place on either (1) the industry or (2) investors as part of evaluating the most effective way of implementing this recommendation. In addition, where the form of these statements is governed by rules of the National Association of Securities Dealers, SEC should ensure that this organization requires mutual funds to make such disclosures.

As agreed with you, unless you publicly release its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from its issue date. At that time, we will provide copies to interested Members of Congress, appropriate congressional committees, SEC, the National Association of Securities Dealers, the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System.

Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix IV. If you have any questions, please call me at (202) 512-8678.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Thomas J. McCool". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Thomas" and last name "McCool" clearly legible.

Thomas J. McCool
Director, Financial Institutions
and Market Issues

Executive Summary

Purpose

The U.S. mutual fund industry, which offers investors an easy way to invest in diversified portfolios of stocks, bonds, or other securities, has grown dramatically, with assets rising from \$371 billion in 1984 to \$5.5 trillion in 1998. As of 1998, the proportion of U.S. households owning mutual funds had risen to 44 percent; and the returns on mutual funds, particularly those invested in stocks, had also generally exceeded those that could have been earned on savings accounts or certificates of deposit. Because mutual funds are expected to operate more efficiently as their assets grow, the significant asset growth in recent years has prompted concerns about fund fee levels. Academics, industry researchers, and others have also raised questions about whether competition, fund disclosures, and mutual fund directors are sufficiently affecting the level of fees

In response to requests by the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Finance and Hazardous Materials, House Committee on Commerce, and the Ranking Minority Member of the Committee on Commerce, GAO conducted a review of the mutual fund industry to determine (1) the trend in mutual fund advisers' costs and profitability, (2) the trend in mutual fund fees, (3) how mutual funds compete, (4) how fees are disclosed to fund investors and how industry participants view these disclosures, and (5) what mutual fund directors' responsibilities are regarding fees and how industry participants view directors' activities.

Background

Mutual funds can be grouped into three basic types by the securities in which they invest. These include stock, (also called equity) funds, which invest in the common and preferred stock issued by public corporations; bond funds, which invest in debt securities; and money market funds, which generally invest in interest-bearing securities maturing in a year or less. Funds that invest in a combination of stocks, bonds, and other securities, known as hybrid funds, are included in this report under the category of stock funds.

Mutual funds are distinct legal entities owned by the shareholders of the fund. Each fund contracts separately with an investment adviser, who provides portfolio selection and administrative services to the fund. The fund's directors,¹ who are responsible for reviewing fund operations,

¹ Although the Investment Company Act of 1940, which governs mutual fund operations, does not dictate a specific form of organization for mutual funds, most funds are organized either as corporations governed by a board of directors or as business trusts governed by trustees. When establishing requirements relating to the officials governing a fund, the act uses the term "directors" to refer to such persons, and this report will also follow that convention.

oversee the interests of the shareholders and the services provided by the adviser.

Mutual fund fees that investors pay include operating expenses, which cover the day-to-day costs of running a fund. These expenses are accrued daily, and generally paid monthly, from overall fund assets rather than from individual investor accounts. The difference between the value of the securities in a fund's portfolio and its accrued liabilities represents the daily net asset value, or NAV, of fund shares. Generally shown as a percentage of the fund's average net assets, the annual total operating fee amount is referred to as the fund's operating expense ratio. The largest portion of a fund's expense ratio is generally the fund adviser's compensation, which is used to cover its operating costs and earn profits for its owners.

Mutual fund investors may also incur other charges in addition to those included in the operating expense ratio, depending on how they purchase their funds. Mutual funds are sold through a variety of distribution channels. For instance, investors can buy them directly by telephone or mail; or they can be sold by dedicated sales forces or by third-party sales forces, such as broker-dealer account representatives. To compensate such sales personnel, some mutual funds charge investors sales charges (called loads), which can be paid at the time of purchase, over a specified period, or at time of redemption.

Although a mutual fund's expense ratio appears to represent just a small percentage of its total assets, the impact of these fees can be significant. For example, increasing an expense ratio from 1 percent to 2 percent on a \$10,000 investment earning 8 percent annually can reduce an investor's total return by about \$7,000 over a 20-year period.

Neither federal statute nor Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) regulations, which govern the mutual fund industry, expressly limit the fees that mutual funds charge as part of their expense ratios. Instead, mutual fund regulations focus on ensuring that investors are provided adequate disclosure of the risks and costs of investing in mutual funds. The National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc. (NASD), whose rules govern the distribution of fund shares by broker-dealers, has placed certain limits on the sales charges and fees used to compensate sales personnel.

Results in Brief

GAO was unable to determine the extent to which the growth in mutual fund assets during the 1990s provided the opportunity for mutual fund

advisers to reduce fees on the funds they operated. According to research conducted by academics and others, as well as the industry participants GAO interviewed, mutual fund advisers experience operational efficiencies—or economies of scale—as their assets grow that could allow them to reduce their funds' expense ratios.² Such efficiencies arise when the fund assets increase at a faster rate than do the costs of managing those additional assets. Because information on most fund advisers' costs is not collected by regulators or otherwise publicly disclosed, GAO was unable to determine if advisers' costs had increased more, or less, rapidly than fund assets. Industry officials reported that some costs of operating mutual funds have been increasing, in part, because funds have been expanding the level of services they provide investors. Using data provided by the mutual fund industry association, GAO determined that the 480 percent growth in total fee revenues for advisers and other service providers for stock and bond funds³ was commensurate with the total 490 percent asset growth in those funds during the period 1990 to 1998. Because of the unavailability of comprehensive financial and cost information, however, GAO was unable to determine overall industry profitability.

Although unable to measure the extent to which mutual fund advisers experienced economies of scale, GAO's analysis indicated that mutual fund expense ratios for stock funds had generally declined between 1990 and 1998. However, this decline did not occur consistently over this period, and not all funds had reduced their expense ratios. Because concerns had been raised over methodologies for existing mutual fund fee studies, GAO conducted its own analysis. GAO's analysis of data on the 77 largest mutual funds indicated that the expense ratios of these funds were generally lower in 1998 than they were in 1990, although average expense ratios for stock funds rose in the early 1990s before declining. The extent to which expense ratios declined also varied across types of funds as the ratios for the largest stock funds declined while those for bond funds generally remained the same. Furthermore, GAO found that not all of the largest funds with the greatest asset growth had reduced their fees. Among the 77 large funds analyzed, 51 of these funds had experienced asset

² As discussed in chapter 1 of this report, the operating expense ratio for a mutual fund is the cumulative total of various fees and expenses charged to the fund during a particular period shown as a percentage of the fund's average net assets. The expense ratio includes a management fee that compensates the adviser for selecting and managing the fund's portfolio, distribution fees, and any other expenses associated with administering the fund that have been deducted from the fund's assets.

³ Data on stock funds presented in this report also include information on hybrid funds. The report focuses primarily on stock and bond funds because money market funds generally have not been the subject of the recent concerns over fees.

growth of at least 500 percent from 1990 to 1998. Of these 51 funds, 38 (or 74 percent) reduced their operating expense ratios by at least 10 percent over the 9-year period from 1990 to 1998. However, the remainder had not reduced their expense ratios as much, including six funds that either had not changed, or had increased, their ratios.

As is customary for U.S. financial markets, regulators rely on competition to be a primary means of influencing the fees that mutual fund advisers charge. In general, industries where many firms compete for business generally have lower prices than industries where fewer firms compete. However, although thousands of mutual funds compete actively for investor dollars, competition in the mutual fund industry may not be strongly influencing fee levels because fund advisers generally compete on the basis of performance (measured by returns net of fees) or services provided rather than on the basis of the fees they charge.

Requiring that investors be provided information about the fees they pay on their mutual funds is another way regulators seek to help investors evaluate fees charged by mutual funds. Mutual funds currently disclose information on fund operating expense ratios and other charges when investors make their initial purchases. However, unlike other financial products, the periodic disclosures to investors who continue to hold their shares do not show, in dollars, each investor's share of the operating expenses that were deducted from the fund.⁴ Although most industry officials GAO interviewed considered mutual fund disclosures to be extensive, others, including some private money managers and academic researchers, indicated that the information currently provided does not sufficiently make investors aware of the level of fees they pay. These critics have called for mutual funds to disclose to each investor the actual dollar amount of fees paid on their fund shares. Providing such information could reinforce to investors the fact that they pay fees on their mutual funds and provide them information with which to evaluate the services their funds provide. In addition, having mutual funds regularly disclose the dollar amounts of fees that investors pay may encourage additional fee-based competition that could result in further reductions in fund expense ratios. GAO is recommending that this information be provided to investors. Because producing such information would entail systems changes and additional costs, GAO is also recommending that cost-effectiveness and investor burden be considered when alternative means for disclosing the dollar amount of fees are evaluated.

⁴ Mutual fund shareholder account statements do include the specific dollar amounts of certain fees or charges, such as for wire transfers, maintenance fees, or sales loads.

Regulators also look to a mutual fund's directors to oversee the operating expense fees their funds charge. The organizational structure of the typical mutual fund embodies a conflict of interest between the fund shareholders and the fund's adviser that can influence the fees charged. This conflict arises primarily because the adviser has the incentive to maximize its own revenues, but such action could come at the expense of the fund's shareholders. Because of this inherent conflict, mutual fund directors are tasked under federal law with reviewing and approving the fees charged by the fund adviser. Under current law, mutual fund directors are expected to review various data to ensure that the fees are not excessive and that the fees are similar to those of comparable funds. Mutual fund adviser officials told GAO that the directors of the funds they operate have been vigorous in reviewing fees and seeking reductions. However, others, including research organizations, academics, and private money managers, commented that the directors' activities may be keeping fees at higher levels because of this focus on maintaining fees within the range of other funds.

GAO received comments on a draft of this report from SEC; NASD Regulation (NASDR), which is the regulatory arm of NASD; and the mutual fund industry association, the Investment Company Institute. Overall, each of the commenting organizations agreed that GAO's report raised important issues and contributed to the public dialogue on mutual fund fees. However, these organizations also commented, among other things, that mutual funds already make extensive disclosures about fees and that competition on the basis of performance does represent price competition among mutual funds. GAO agrees that mutual fund disclosures are extensive but also believes that additional information on the specific dollar amounts of fees for operating expenses could be useful to investors and encourage additional price competition among fund advisers on the basis of fees directly.

Principal Findings

Although Advisers Expected to Experience Cost Efficiencies, Comprehensive Data on Their Costs Were Not Available

Academic studies and other research find that as mutual fund assets grow, mutual fund advisers experience operational efficiencies or economies of scale that would allow them to reduce their funds' expense ratios. As shown in table 1 below, data compiled by ICI indicate that mutual fund assets have grown considerably during the 1990s, with stock funds alone growing 1,081 percent as of year-end 1998.

Table 1: Total Assets for Stock and Bond Mutual Fund as of 1998

Dollars in billions			
	1990	1998	Percentage change
Stock funds	\$283	\$3,343	1,081%
Bond funds	284	831	193
Total	567	4,174	636

Source: GAO analysis of ICI data.

As the assets in a mutual fund grow, economies of scale in a fund adviser's operations would result in the adviser's costs increasing more slowly than the rate at which its fund assets and revenues are increasing. For example, if the adviser of a fund employing 10 customer service representatives experiences 100-percent growth in its fund assets, this adviser may find that only 5, or 50 percent, more representatives would be needed to address the workload arising from the additional assets. In addition, GAO's analysis of data from ICI also indicated that although additional purchases by existing and new investors account for some of the increase in the industry's assets, as much as 64 percent of the mutual fund asset growth has come from appreciation in the value of the securities in these funds' portfolios. Fund growth resulting from portfolio appreciation would also provide additional economies of scale because such growth is not accompanied by many of the administrative costs associated with inflows of money to new and existing fund accounts.

However, GAO was unable to determine the extent to which mutual fund advisers experienced such economies of scale because comprehensive data on the total costs incurred by mutual fund advisers are not publicly available. Currently, mutual funds disclose to regulators and to their investors only those operating costs that have been deducted from the assets of the fund, but not the costs that the advisers incur to operate these

funds. Although total cost data were not available, industry officials reported that fund advisers' costs have been increasing. Industry officials explained that these increased costs are the result of new services for mutual fund investors, increased distribution expenses, and higher personnel compensation expenses.

GAO estimated the total revenue that fund advisers and other service providers receive from the funds they operate.⁵ Largely as a result of growth in mutual fund assets, mutual fund advisers and service providers were collecting significantly more revenues from fund operations in 1998 than they did in 1990. As shown in table 2 below, the revenues stock funds produced for their advisers and other providers had increased over 800 percent from 1990 to 1998.

Table 2: Estimated Mutual Fund Adviser and Service Provider Revenues From Operating Expense Fees 1990-1998

Dollars in millions			
Fund type	Estimated fee revenues		Percentage change
	1990	1998	
Stock	\$2,544	\$22,931	801%
Bond	2,408	5,933	146
Totals	4,952	28,864	483

Source: GAO analysis of data from ICI.

Fee revenues for the largest funds have similarly increased. Using data on 77 of the largest stock and bond funds,⁶ GAO found that the advisers and service providers operating these funds collected \$7.4 billion in fee revenues in 1998. This was over \$6 billion, or almost 560 percent, more than they collected in 1990. Over this same period, the assets of these funds increased by over 600 percent. Mutual fund advisers and service providers were also collecting more in fees on a per account basis. For example, the total dollars collected annually in fee revenues from stock funds rose 59 percent from an average of \$103 per account in 1990 to \$164 per account in 1997.

Although comprehensive cost data for most fund advisers were not available, analyses of information for 18 publicly traded mutual fund

⁵ Fund adviser and service provider revenues were estimated by multiplying fund assets by operating expense ratios.

⁶ These 77 funds included all of the largest stock and bond funds in existence from 1990 to 1998. These 77 funds comprised 46 stock funds, including all stock funds with assets over \$8 billion; and 31 bond funds, including all those with assets over \$3 billion. The data for the stock funds include five hybrid funds that also invest in bonds or other debt securities.

advisers indicated that these firms' operating profits as a percentage of their revenues have been increasing for at least 5 years.

Average Mutual Fund Expense Ratios Have Generally Declined, But Not All Funds Reduced Their Ratios

GAO identified various studies and analyses of the trends in mutual fund fees. Some of these analyses found that mutual fund expense ratios and other charges had been declining, but other analyses found that expense ratios had increased. However, some industry participants criticized the methodologies used by these studies. For example, many of these studies failed to adjust for the increase in newer funds, which generally charge higher expense ratios than older funds.

Therefore, GAO conducted its own analysis of the trend in expense ratios. Data on the 77 largest mutual funds indicated that that these funds had grown faster since 1990 than the average fund in the industry.⁷ Therefore, their advisers were more likely to have experienced economies of scale in their operations that would have allowed them to reduce their expense ratios. Because the sample consisted primarily of the largest and fastest growing funds in the industry, it may not reflect the characteristics and the trend in fees charged by other funds.

To calculate the average expense ratios for these funds, GAO weighted each fund's expense ratio by its total assets. The resulting average expense ratios represent the fees charged on the average dollar invested in these funds during this period. As shown in table 3, the average expense ratio declined by 12 percent for the largest stock funds and by 6 percent for the largest bond funds from 1990 to 1998, although this decline did not occur steadily over the period.

Table 3: Average Expense Ratio for 77 Largest Stock and Bond Funds From 1990 to 1998 in Dollars Per \$100 of Fund Assets

Type of fund	Number of funds	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	Percentage change
Stock	46	\$.74	\$.78	\$.78	\$.80	\$.81	\$.79	\$.75	\$.68	\$.65	-12%
Bond	31	.62	.61	.61	.60	.61	.63	.61	.60	.58	-6

Source: GAO analysis of data from Morningstar, Inc. and Barron's Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly.

Although the average expense ratio for these funds generally declined during the 1990s, not all of them reduced their fees. Overall, 23 of the 77 funds reported higher expense ratios in 1998 than in 1990. Table 4 shows the changes in expense ratios for the 51 funds among the 77 largest funds that experienced asset growth of at least 500 percent from 1990 to 1998. Of

⁷ The sample focused on the time period since 1990 because it represented the most current and consistent period of mutual fund industry history and market conditions.

these funds, 38 (74 percent) had reduced their expense ratios by at least 10 percent during this 9-year period. Of the remaining 13 funds, 7 (14 percent) reduced their expense ratios by less than 10 percent, and 6 (12 percent) had either not changed their fees or had increased them.

Table 4: Fee Reductions by Large Funds Whose Asset Growth Exceeded 500 Percent From 1990 to 1998

Total change in fee from 1990 to 1998	Number of funds	Percentage
Reduction over 30 percent	17	33%
Reduction of 10 to 30 percent	21	41
Subtotal^a	38	74
Reduction under 10 percent	7	14
No change	3	6
Increase under 10 percent	2	4
Increase of 10 to 30 percent	0	0
Increase over 30 percent	1	2
Subtotal	13	26
Total	51	100

^aMay not total due to rounding.

Source: GAO analysis of Morningstar and Barrons Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly data.

Competition Does Not Focus on Price of Service

Active competition among firms within a given industry is generally expected to result in lower prices than in those industries in which few firms compete. Although hundreds of fund advisers offering thousands of mutual funds compete actively for investor dollars, their competition is not primarily focused on the fees funds charge. Instead, mutual fund advisers generally seek to differentiate themselves by promoting their funds' performance returns⁸ and services provided.⁹ Marketing their performance and service as different from those offered by others allows fund advisers to avoid competing primarily on the basis of price, as represented by the expense ratios they charge mutual funds investors. This applies particularly to actively managed funds investing in stocks. Advisers for money market funds; index funds;¹⁰ and to some degree, bond funds are generally less able to differentiate their funds from others because these types of funds invest in a more limited range of securities than stock funds do. As a result, the returns and fees of such funds generally tend to be

⁸ SEC requires funds to report their performance returns net of the fees deducted from fund assets.

⁹ As discussed in chapter 4 of this report, the type of competition prevailing in the mutual industry appears to resemble "monopolistic competition," which is one of the primary competitive market types described by economists. Markets with monopolistic competition characteristically include large numbers of competing firms, ease of entry, and products differentiated on the basis of quality, features, or services included.

¹⁰ Index funds invest in the securities represented in a broad-based index, such as the Standard & Poor's 500 Index.

more similar, and the fees are generally lower than the fees charged on most stock funds.

Fee Disclosures Do Not Provide Investors With Specific Dollar Amounts

The disclosures mutual funds are legally required to make are, among other things, intended to assist investors with evaluating the fees charged by the funds they are considering for investment. As required by SEC rules, mutual funds are required to provide potential investors with disclosures that present operating expense fees as a percentage of a fund's average net assets. In addition, these disclosures provide a hypothetical example of the amount of fees likely to be charged on an investment over various holding periods. However, after they have invested, fund shareholders are not provided the specific dollar cost of the mutual fund investments they have made. For example, mutual fund investors generally receive quarterly statements detailing their mutual fund accounts.¹¹ These statements usually indicate the beginning and ending number of shares and the total dollar value of shares in each mutual fund owned. They do not show the dollar amount of operating expense fees that were deducted from the value of these shares during the previous quarter.¹² This contrasts with most other financial products or services, such as bank accounts or brokerage services, for which customer fees are generally disclosed in specific dollar amounts.

Surveys conducted by industry research organizations, fund advisers, and regulators indicate that investors generally focus on funds' performance (net of fees), service levels, and other factors before separately considering fee levels. In contrast, investors appeared more concerned over the level of mutual fund sales charges, and industry participants acknowledged that as a result, the loads charged on funds have been reduced since the 1980s.

The mutual fund and regulatory officials GAO contacted generally considered mutual fund disclosures to be extensive and adequate for informing prospective investors of the fees they would likely incur on their mutual fund investments. However, some private money managers, industry researchers, and legal experts indicated that the current fee disclosures are not making investors sufficiently aware of the fees they pay. One suggestion for increasing investor awareness was that mutual funds should disclose to each investor the actual dollar amount of the

¹¹ A requirement for quarterly statements arises under NASD rules, which govern the actions of the securities broker-dealers that act as the distributors of most mutual fund shares.

¹² Sales charges, redemption fees, and other transactional fees are disclosed in dollar amounts in either account statements or confirmation statements.

portion of the funds' fees they paid. Some of the officials GAO contacted indicated that having the specific dollar amount of fees disclosed to investors would spur additional fee-based competition among fund advisers. For example, a legal expert GAO contacted noted that having such information appear in investors' mutual fund account statements might also encourage some fund advisers to reduce their fees in order to be more competitive. Requiring that such information be provided to mutual fund investors would also make such disclosures more comparable to fee disclosures for other financial services, such as stock brokerage or checking accounts. Compared to mutual funds, the markets for these services appear to exhibit greater direct price competition.

Fund adviser officials GAO interviewed indicated that calculating such amounts exactly would entail systems changes and additional costs, but they also acknowledged that less costly means of calculating such amounts may exist. For example, instead of calculating the exact amount of fees charged to each account daily, a fund adviser could provide an estimate of the fees an investor paid by multiplying the average number of shares the investor held during the quarter by the fund's expense ratio for the quarter. Another alternative would be to provide the dollar amount of fees paid for preset investment amounts, such as \$1,000, which investors could use to estimate the amount they paid on their own accounts. In determining how such disclosures could be implemented, regulators will have to weigh the costs that the industry may incur to calculate fees for each investor against the burden and effectiveness of providing investors with the requisite information and having them be responsible for making such calculations on their own.

Mutual Fund Directors Tasked With Reviewing Fees, But Opinions on Their Effectiveness Were Mixed

The structure of most mutual funds embodies a potential conflict of interest between the fund shareholders and the adviser. This conflict arises because the fees the fund charges the shareholders represent revenue to the adviser. For this reason, mutual funds have directors who are tasked with overseeing the adviser's activities. Under the Investment Company Act of 1940, fund directors are required to review and approve the compensation paid to the fund's adviser.

In 1970, this act was amended after concerns were raised over the level of fees being charged by mutual funds. The amendments imposed a fiduciary duty on fund advisers and tasked fund directors with additional responsibilities regarding fees. These amendments to the act also granted investors the right to bring claims against the adviser for breaching this duty by charging excessive fees. Various court cases subsequently have interpreted this duty, and the decisions rendered have shaped the specific

expectations currently placed on fund directors regarding fees. As a result, directors are expected to review, among other things, the adviser's costs, whether fees have been reduced as fund assets grow, and the fees charged by other advisers for similar services to similar funds.

The officials at the 15 mutual fund advisers¹³ GAO contacted said that their boards have been vigorous in reviewing fees and have frequently sought reductions in the fees received by the adviser. However, some private money managers, industry researchers, and others have stated that the activities undertaken by directors may be serving, instead, to keep fees at higher levels than necessary, because the directors are just expected to keep their funds' fees within a range of similar funds instead of actively attempting to lower them.

Recommendations

To heighten investors' awareness and understanding of the fees they pay on mutual funds, GAO recommends that the Chairman, SEC, require that the periodic account statements already provided to mutual fund investors include the dollar amount of each investor's share of the operating expense fees deducted from their funds. This disclosure would be in addition to presently required fee disclosures. Because these calculations could be made in various ways, SEC should also consider the cost and burden that various alternative means of making such disclosures would impose on (1) the industry and (2) investors as part of evaluating the most effective way of implementing this requirement. Where the form of these statements is governed by NASD rules, SEC should require NASD to require the firms it oversees to provide such disclosures.

Agency Comments and GAO's Evaluation

GAO obtained comments on a draft of this report from the heads, or their designees, of SEC, NASDR, and ICI. These comments are summarized and evaluated in chapter 7, with specific comments made by each organization addressed in appendixes I through III.

Overall, each of the commenting organizations agreed that GAO's report raised important issues and contributed to the public dialogue on mutual fund fees. In his letter, the director of SEC's Division of Investment Management indicated that SEC staff agreed that investors need to be aware of and understand the fees that mutual funds charge. The letter also indicated that the SEC staff welcomed the report's recommendation and intended to consider it carefully. The vice president of NASDR's Investment Companies/Corporate Financing Department agreed in his

¹³ These firms included the advisers for 13 of the 77 largest funds and 2 smaller fund advisers.

letter that investors should consider fees, expenses, and other issues in addition to performance in making investment decisions.

However, the letters from the SEC, NASDR and ICI officials also raised several issues about GAO's report. All three organizations commented that mutual funds currently make extensive disclosures about their fees to investors at the time of purchase and in semiannual reports thereafter. For example, ICI's letter noted that promoting investor awareness of the importance of fund fees is a priority for ICI and its members. However, ICI expressed reservations about GAO's recommendation that investors periodically receive information on the specific dollar amounts of the operating expense fees deducted from their mutual fund accounts. Their concern is that this requirement could erode the value of the fee information currently provided in the prospectus and thus impede informed assessments of fee levels at competing funds, which could paradoxically diminish rather than enhance investors' overall understanding of fund fees.

GAO agrees with ICI and the other commenters that the current disclosures made by mutual funds, which provide fund expense ratios expressed as a percentage of fund assets and include an example of the likely amount of expenses to be incurred over various holding periods for a hypothetical \$10,000 account, are useful for investors in comparing among funds prior to investing. The additional disclosure GAO recommends is intended to supplement, not replace, the existing disclosures. It should also serve to reinforce to investors that they do pay for the services they receive from their mutual funds as well as indicate to them specifically how much they pay for these services.

SEC, NASDR, and ICI also commented on GAO's observation that other financial products and services disclose specific dollar amounts for the fees charged to their users, but mutual funds do not. In their comments, these organizations generally indicated that not all charges are disclosed for other financial products and services and; thus, the disclosures for mutual funds are not that dissimilar. For example, SEC noted that funds disclose to investors specific dollar charges subtracted from their accounts, such as for sales loads or account fees, but do not disclose the specific charges that are levied outside the account. SEC stated that this is similar to banks not disclosing the spread between the gross amount earned by the financial service provider on customer monies and the net amount paid to the customer.

GAO does not agree with the commenting organizations that mutual funds' lack of disclosure of the specific operating expenses to individual investor accounts is comparable to the practices of banks or other businesses that do not disclose the difference between their investment or operating earnings and the amounts they pay to the individuals who provided those operating or investment funds. Investors in mutual funds have in essence hired the adviser to perform the service of managing their investment dollars for them. The fees that the adviser and the other service providers deduct from the fund's assets represent the price of the services they perform. Although such fees are deducted from the fund overall, each individual investor's account is ultimately reduced in value by their individual share of these deductions. However, the specific amount of these deductions is not disclosed in dollar terms to each investor. In contrast, customers and users of other financial services, such as private money managers, banks, and brokerage firms, are told of the specific dollar amounts subtracted from their individual assets or accounts.

All three commenting organizations also generally questioned this report's finding that mutual funds do not compete primarily on the price of their services. SEC noted that although an argument could be made that more price competition should occur in the mutual fund industry, it is not completely absent. ICI emphasized that because funds report performance on an after fees and expenses basis, mutual funds do compete on the basis of their fees. NASDR stated that the draft report did not address the fact that mutual funds present performance net of expenses.

GAO's report notes that mutual funds' performance returns, which are the primary basis upon which funds compete, are required to be disclosed net of fees and expenses. However, competition on the basis of net returns may or may not be the same as competition on the basis of price. Separating the fee from the return would remind investors that a fee is embedded in their net returns. In addition, GAO also notes that when customers are told the specific dollar amounts of the fees or charges, such as they are for stock brokerage transactions or bank checking accounts, firms in those industries appear to more frequently choose to compete directly on that basis and, in some cases, the charges for such services have been greatly reduced. Implementing GAO's recommendation to have such information provided to mutual fund investors could provide similar incentive for them to evaluate the services they receive in exchange for the fees they pay. Disclosing such information regularly could also encourage more firms to compete directly on the basis of the price at which they are willing to provide mutual fund investment services.

SEC and ICI also questioned the legal accuracy of some of the statements made by individuals GAO interviewed regarding the role of mutual fund directors in overseeing fees. Although the individuals quoted in this report were critical of mutual fund directors setting their funds' fees only in relation to the fees charged by other funds, both SEC and ICI indicated that fund directors, by law, are required to review a wide range of information when assessing the fees charged by their fund advisor and other service providers.

In response to these comments, text has been added to the report to indicate that comparing one fund's fees to those charged by other funds is not the only factor that directors are required to consider when evaluating fees. However, in the opinion of the individuals whose comments are presented in the report, directors are primarily emphasizing such comparisons over the other factors they are also required to consider as part of their fee reviews. As a result, these individuals see directors as maintaining fee levels, or at least allowing fees to be lowered only to the extent that other funds are taking similar actions.

Contents

Executive Summary		4
<hr/>		
Chapter 1		24
Introduction	Background	24
	Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	30
<hr/>		
Chapter 2		33
Data Inadequate For	Fund Asset Growth Expected to Produce Economies of Scale	33
Determining How	Cost Data Not Generally Available for Mutual Fund Advisers' Overall Operations	36
Asset Growth Affected	Fund and Other Industry Officials Report that Mutual Fund Operating Costs Have Risen	37
Adviser Costs	Asset Growth Has Varying Effects on Fund Advisers' Costs	41
	Fee Revenues Have Increased Significantly	42
	Data for Some Mutual Fund Advisers Indicates Profitability Has Been Increasing	44
<hr/>		
Chapter 3		46
Mutual Fund Operating	Studies Also Find Mixed Trend in Fees Across Industry	46
Expense Ratios	Largest Mutual Funds Generally Grew Faster Than Industry Average	48
Generally Declined	Among Largest Funds, Average Expense Ratios Declined for Stock Funds but Less so for Bond Funds	48
	Asset Growth Usually Resulted in Lower Expense Ratios but Not All Funds Made Reductions	50
<hr/>		
Chapter 4		56
Competition in Mutual	Mutual Fund Industry Exhibits Characteristics of Monopolistic Competition	56
Fund Industry Does	Mutual Fund Industry Generally Does Not Attempt to Compete On Basis of Fees	62
Not Focus on Fees		

Chapter 5		66
Mutual Funds Are Not Required to Disclose Actual Amounts Charged to Individual Investors	Required Fee Disclosures Do Not Provide Amounts Paid by Individual Investors in Dollars	66
	Charges for Other Financial Services Typically Disclosed in Dollars	70
	Mutual Fund Fees Are Not a Primary Consideration for Investors	72
	Opinions Varied on Adequacy of Current Fee Disclosures	76
Chapter 6		82
Mutual Fund Directors Required to Review Fees	Mutual Funds' Organizational Structure Embodies Conflict of Interest Over Fees	82
	Mutual Fund Directors Have Specific Responsibilities Regarding Fees	87
	Opinions on Boards' Effectiveness in Overseeing Fees Vary	92
Chapter 7		96
Conclusions and Recommendations	Conclusions	96
	Recommendations	97
	Agency and Industry Comments and Our Evaluation	98
Appendixes	Appendix I: Comments From the Securities and Exchange Commission	102
	Appendix II: Comments From the National Association of Securities Dealers Regulation, Inc.	111
	Appendix III: Comments From the Investment Company Institute	117
	Appendix IV: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments	125
Tables	Table 1: Total Assets for Stock and Bond Mutual Fund as of 1998	9
	Table 2: Estimated Mutual Fund Adviser and Service Provider Revenues From Operating Expense Fees 1990-1998	10
	Table 3: Average Expense Ratio for 77 Largest Stock and Bond Funds From 1990 to 1998 in Dollars Per \$100 of Fund Assets	11
	Table 4: Fee Reductions by Large Funds Whose Asset Growth Exceeded 500 Percent From 1990 to 1998	12
	Table 1.1: Growth in Mutual Fund Assets, 1990-1998	25

Table 2.1: Source of Asset Growth for All Stock and Bond Funds From 1990 to 1998	35
Table 2.2: Growth in Mutual Fund Assets and Estimated Fund Adviser and Other Service Provider Fee Revenues 1990-1998	42
Table 2.3: Assets and Fee Revenues for 77 Largest Mutual Funds for 1990-1998	43
Table 2.4: Average Fees Collected For Stock and Bond Funds In Dollars Per Account from 1990 to 1997	44
Table 2.5: Change in Revenue and Expenses From Prior Year and Resulting Operating Margin for Public Asset Management Companies	45
Table 3.1: Average Size of Stock and Bond Mutual Funds from 1990 to 1998	48
Table 3.2: Asset-Weighted Average Operating Expense Ratios for 77 Largest Stock and Bond Funds From 1990 to 1998 in Dollars Per \$100 of Fund Assets	50
Table 3.3: Change in Operating Expense Ratios Charged by 77 Largest Stock and Bond Funds 1990-1998	50
Table 3.4: Relationship of Asset Growth and Change in Operating Expense Ratios for Largest Stock Funds 1990-1998	52
Table 3.5: Relationship of Asset Growth and Change in Operating Expense Fees for Largest Bond Funds 1990-1998	52
Table 3.6: Change in Average Size in Assets and Operating Expense Ratios from 1990 to 1998 for Largest Funds by Relative Fee in 1990	55
Table 5.1: Fee Disclosure Practices for Selected Financial Services or Products	71
Table 5.2: Sales of Mutual Funds for Select Years 1984 to 1998 by Type of Distribution Method	75

Figures

Figure 3.1: Average Expense Ratios for 77 Largest Stock and Bond Mutual Funds From 1990 to 1998	49
Figure 3.2: Average Operating Expense Ratio From 1990 to 1998 for Funds With Above and Below Average Fees in 1990	54
Figure 4.1: Number of Mutual Funds from 1984 to 1998	58
Figure 4.2: Number of Mutual Fund Families for Selected Years From 1984 Through 1998	59
Figure 5.1: Example of a Fee Table Required as Part of Mutual Fund Fee Disclosures	68

Contents

Figure 6.1: Comparison of Organizational Structure of Typical Corporation and Typical Mutual Fund	84
Figure 6.1: Continued	85

Abbreviations

ICI	Investment Company Institute
NASD	National Association of Securities Dealers
NASDR	NASD Regulation
NAV	net asset value
SEC	Securities and Exchange Commission
CDSL	contingent deferred sales load

Introduction

Mutual funds offer investors a means of investing in a diversified pool of stocks, bonds, and other securities. As of 1998, 44 percent of U.S. households owned mutual funds, and the returns, particularly for stock funds, had generally exceeded returns that could have been earned on savings accounts or certificates of deposit. Since 1984, assets in U.S. mutual funds increased about 14-fold, growing from \$371 billion in 1984 to \$5.5 trillion in 1998. Because costs of providing mutual fund services are generally expected to rise less rapidly as fund assets increase, the significant growth in recent years has prompted some concerns by some industry participants and the news media over the level of fees funds charge.

This report responds to requests by the Chairman, Subcommittee on Finance and Hazardous Materials; and the Ranking Minority Member of the House Committee on Commerce.

Background

A mutual fund is an investment company that pools the money of many investors—individuals or institutions—that it invests in a diversified portfolio of securities. Mutual funds provide investors the opportunity to own diversified securities portfolios and to access professional money managers, whose services they might otherwise be unable to obtain or afford.

A mutual fund is owned by its investors, or shareholders. Fund share prices are based on the market value of the assets in the fund's portfolio, after subtracting the fund's expenses and liabilities, and then dividing by the number of shares outstanding. This is the fund's net asset value (NAV). Per share values change as the value of assets in the fund's portfolio changes. Investors can sell their shares back to the fund at the current NAV,¹ and funds must calculate the shareholders' share prices on the day a purchase or redemption request is made. Many newspapers publish daily purchase and redemption prices for mutual funds.

Various types of funds are offered to investors. Three basic types of mutual funds include stock (also called equity), bond, and money market funds. Some funds that invest in a combination of stocks, bonds, and other securities are known as hybrid funds and are discussed in this report as part of the information presented for stock funds. Money market funds are referred to as short-term funds because they invest in securities that

¹ Shareholders of open-end mutual funds, which continuously issue and redeem shares, have a right to redeem shares at the current NAV. Closed-end funds, in which the number of shares is fixed, trade at market prices that are frequently above, or below, the actual NAV of the assets held by the fund.

generally mature in about 1 year or less; stock, bond, and hybrid funds are known as long-term funds. The firms that operate mutual funds frequently offer investors a family of funds that includes at least one each of the three basic fund types, although some firms may offer only one fund while others specialize in funds of a particular type, such as stock or bond funds. Of the total \$5.5 trillion invested in mutual funds at the end of 1998, \$2.98 trillion was invested in stock funds, \$1.35 trillion was in money market funds, \$831 billion was in bond funds, and \$365 billion was in hybrid funds. This report will focus primarily on stock and bond funds because money market funds generally have not been the focus of recent concerns regarding fees.

Mutual Fund Assets Increased Dramatically in the 1990s

As shown in table 1.1, mutual fund assets grew dramatically in the 1990s, with stock funds growing 1,082 percent in the 1990-1998 period.

Table 1.1: Growth in Mutual Fund Assets, 1990-1998

Fund type	Total assets (dollars in millions)		Percentage growth
	1990	1998	
Stock funds ^a	\$ 282,800	\$ 3,342,900	1,082%
Bond funds	284,300	830,600	192
Money Market funds	498,300	1,351,700	171
Total	1,065,500	5,525,200	419

^a This category combines equity and hybrid fund data.

Source: GAO analysis of Investment Company Institute data.

Mutual Funds Contract with Investment Advisers to Conduct Their Operations

Although it is typically organized as a corporation, a mutual fund's structure and operation differ from that of a traditional corporation. In a typical corporation, the firm's employees operate and manage the firm; and the corporation's board of directors, elected by the corporation's stockholders, oversees its operations. Mutual funds also have a board of directors that is responsible for overseeing the activities of the fund and negotiating and approving contracts with an adviser and other service providers for necessary services.²

However, mutual funds differ from other corporations in several ways. A typical mutual fund has no employees; it is created and operated by

² Although the Investment Company Act of 1940 does not dictate a specific form of organization for mutual funds, most funds are organized either as corporations governed by a board of directors or as business trusts governed by trustees. When establishing requirements relating to the officials governing a fund, the act uses the term "directors" to refer to such persons, and this report also follows that convention.

another party, the adviser, which contracts with the fund, for a fee, to administer fund operations. The adviser is an investment adviser/management company that manages the fund's portfolio according to the objectives and policies described in the fund's prospectus.³ Advisers may also perform various administrative services for the funds they operate, although they also frequently subcontract with other firms to provide these services. Functions that a fund adviser or other firms may perform for a fund include the following:

- **Custodian:** A custodian holds the fund assets, maintaining them separately to protect shareholder interests.
- **Transfer agent:** A transfer agent processes orders to buy and redeem fund shares.
- **Distributor:** A distributor sells fund shares through a variety of distribution channels, such as directly through advertising or telephone or mail solicitations handled by dedicated sale forces, or by third-party sales forces. Funds that are marketed primarily through third parties are usually available through a variety of channels, including brokers, financial planners, banks, and insurance agents.

Distinct from the fund itself, the fund's adviser is generally owned by another entity with its own group of directors. (Ch. 6 of this report discusses in more detail the relationship between funds and their advisers and the specific legal duties placed on mutual fund directors.)

Mutual Fund Fees Include Operating Expenses and Sales Charges

Various fees are associated with mutual fund ownership. All mutual funds incur ongoing operating expenses for which they pay the adviser and other providers who operate and service the funds. An annual total of these operating expenses, commonly known as the fund's operating expense ratio, is expressed as a percentage of the fund's average net assets in a fund's prospectus and other reports. Fund operating expenses can vary in accordance with the work required by fund managers; the complexity of the fund's investments; or the extent of shareholder services provided, such as toll-free telephone numbers, Internet access, check writing, and automatic investment plans. The largest component of a fund's total expense ratio usually is the management fee, which is the ongoing charge paid to the investment adviser for managing the fund's assets and selecting

³ In some cases, the adviser may contract with other firms to provide investment advice, becoming a subadviser to those funds.

its portfolio of securities. The management fee is customarily calculated as a percentage of the fund's average net assets.⁴

Included as part of the operating expenses that are directly deducted from some funds' assets are fees that go to compensate sales professionals and others for selling the fund's shares as well as for advertising and promoting them. These fees, known as "12b-1 fees," are named after the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) rules authorizing mutual funds to pay for marketing and distribution expenses directly from fund assets. The National Association of Securities Dealer, Inc. (NASD), whose rules govern the distribution of fund shares by broker dealers, limits 12b-1 fees used for these purposes to no more than 0.75 percent of a fund's average net assets per year. Funds are allowed to include an additional service fee of up to 0.25 percent of average net assets each year to compensate sales professionals for providing ongoing services to investors or for maintaining their accounts. Therefore, any 12b-1 fees included in a fund's total expense ratio are limited to a maximum of 1 percent per year.

In addition to the fees in the expense ratio, some mutual funds include a sales charge known as a "load." Loads usually compensate a sales representative or investment professional for advice they provide investors in selecting a fund. Loads can be applied at the time of purchase (a "front-end load") or at redemption (a "back-end load").⁵ NASD rules limit the load that can be charged as part of purchasing fund shares to no more than 8.5 percent⁶ of the initial investment. Some mutual funds, known as "no-load" funds, do not have sales charges⁷. Other fees that may be charged directly to investors for specific transactions include exchange fees (for transferring money from one fund to another within the same fund family) and account maintenance fees.

⁴ The fees investors pay to the fund adviser constitute some of the adviser's revenue from operating the fund. For this reason, there is a potential conflict between the interests of the fund shareholders who pay the fund expenses and those of the adviser, which seeks to maximize its own revenues and profits. Chapter 6 of this report discusses how the laws that govern mutual funds have attempted to address this conflict of interest.

⁵ A common type of back-end load, called a contingent deferred sales charge, typically is calculated as a percentage of the net asset value or offering price at the time of purchase and is payable upon redemption. However, such charges generally decrease incrementally on an annual basis and would not be applied to redemptions after a certain number of years.

⁶ The maximum permissible front-end and deferred sales load varies depending on factors, such as whether the fund offers certain rights or imposes an asset-based sales charge or service fee.

⁷ NASD rules prohibit members from describing a mutual fund as "no load" if the fund has a front-end or deferred sales charge, or if the fund's total asset-based sales charges and service fees exceed .25 percent of average net assets per year.

**Mutual Fund Investors’
Total Costs Vary Depending
on How Shares are
Purchased**

The total charges for investing in a mutual fund can vary according to how the investor purchases shares. In some cases, investors may purchase mutual fund shares on the advice of an investment professional, including sales representatives employed by securities broker-dealers or banks or independent financial planners. When recommending mutual funds, these individuals may also be entitled to receive the sales loads charged by the funds as well as to charge the investors for providing investment services.

Many mutual funds can be purchased without professional assistance. To purchase the shares of these funds, investors contact the mutual fund companies directly, by visiting fund offices, or by telephone, mail, or Internet. Funds sold directly to investors in this way are known as “direct market” funds. In addition, investors can purchase direct market mutual funds through accounts they hold with broker-dealers. Investors may also use retirement benefit plans, such as 401(k) plans, to invest in any mutual funds.

**Long-Term Impact of
Annual Fees on Mutual
Fund Investment Returns
Can Be Significant**

The annual fees that investors pay can significantly affect investment returns over the long term. For example, over a 20-year period a \$10,000 investment in a fund earning 8 percent annually, and with a 1-percent expense ratio, would be worth \$38,122; but with a 2-percent expense ratio it would be worth \$31,117.

Various studies have also documented the impact of fees on investors’ returns by finding that funds with lower fees tended to be among the better performing funds. A March 1998 analysis by an industry research organization examined stock funds across six different investment objectives over a 5-year period and found that lower fee funds outperformed higher fee funds over 1-, 3-, and 5-year periods through November 1997.⁸ For example, of the large funds that invest in undervalued securities, the funds in the quartile with the lowest fees, which averaged 78 cents per \$100 of assets, had the highest average performance—returning 138 percent over 5 years. Conversely, the funds in the quartile with the highest fees—averaging \$2.26 per \$100 of assets—had the lowest performance return over the period, averaging 112 percent.

**Various Federal Statutes
Apply to Mutual Fund
Activities**

SEC oversees the regulation of mutual funds under the Investment Company Act of 1940. Among the act’s objectives is to ensure that investors receive adequate, accurate information about the mutual funds in which they invest. Other securities laws also apply to mutual funds. Under

⁸ Correlating Total Expenses to the Performance of Four and Five Star Equity Funds, Financial Research Corporation and Wechsler Ross & Partners (Mar. 2, 1998).

the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, persons distributing mutual fund shares or executing purchase or sale transactions in mutual fund shares are to be registered with SEC as securities broker-dealers. Broker-dealers who sell mutual funds are regulated and examined by both SEC and by the regulatory arm of NASD, called NASD Regulation, Inc. (NASDR). NASD, which is subject to SEC's oversight, acts a self-regulatory organization for brokerage firms, including those firms that engage in mutual fund distribution.

Neither federal statute nor SEC regulations, which govern the mutual fund industry, expressly limit the fees that mutual funds charge as part of their expense ratios. Instead, mutual fund regulations focus on ensuring that investors are provided adequate disclosure of the risks and costs of investing in mutual funds. As noted previously, NASD rules have placed certain limits on the sales charges and fees used to compensate sales personnel.

Although most mutual fund activities are subject to SEC and NASD requirements, the mutual fund activities conducted by some banks are overseen by the various bank regulatory agencies.⁹ Because banks are exempt from the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, they are allowed to offer mutual funds and other securities to their customers without registering with SEC as broker-dealers. However, most banks have chosen to conduct their securities activities, including mutual funds, in subsidiaries or affiliates that are subject to SEC oversight. A small number of banks conduct securities activities either from within the bank or in other affiliates that are not subject to SEC oversight.¹⁰ Depending on how such a bank is chartered, its mutual fund activities would be overseen by the Federal Reserve System, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, or the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency.¹¹

⁹ Additional information on the mutual fund activities of banks is contained in Bank Mutual Funds: Sales Practices and Regulatory Issues (GAO/GGD-95-210, Sep. 27, 1995).

¹⁰ However, the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act passed in 1999 will require any banks conducting more than 500 securities transactions per year to move such activities into a securities broker-dealer after May 12, 2001.

¹¹ The Office of the Comptroller of the Currency oversees banks with national charters. The Federal Reserve System oversees bank holding companies and, in conjunction with state banking authorities, also oversees any state-chartered banks that are Federal Reserve members. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation oversees state-chartered banks that are federally insured but not members of the Federal Reserve. Any mutual fund activities conducted by thrifts would be subject to SEC's oversight because thrifts are not exempted from the definition of "broker" and "dealer" under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The objectives of this report were to review the mutual fund industry to determine (1) the trend in mutual fund advisers' costs and profitability, (2) the trend in fees, (3) how mutual funds compete, (4) the requirements for fee disclosures to fund investors and how industry participants view these disclosures, and (5) the responsibilities of mutual fund directors regarding fees and how industry participants view directors' activities.

As part of analyzing the trend in mutual fund advisers' costs and profitability, we interviewed various industry officials. These officials included representatives of 15 mutual fund advisers, including 13 large firms and 2 smaller firms. These firms included some of the largest mutual fund families, one firm affiliated with a bank, and several firms known for charging lower fees. We also interviewed officials from 10 industry research organizations that compile information, conduct analyses, or perform consulting services relating to the mutual fund industry. These firms included the major providers of data and analysis on the mutual fund industry. We also interviewed three officials from money management or financial planning firms and two former senior regulatory officials. In addition, we interviewed officials from two financial industry associations, including the Investment Company Institute (ICI), which is the national association of the U.S. mutual fund industry; and the American Association of Individual Investors. We also interviewed, and obtained information from, SEC and NASDR officials who oversee mutual fund activities.

We also obtained and analyzed data from ICI on the number of funds and total assets invested in mutual funds. ICI officials indicated that these data included information representing over 90 percent of the funds and the assets invested in mutual funds in the United States. We reviewed studies and analyses of the trend in mutual fund fees by academic organizations, industry associations, and regulators.

To identify what costs funds are required to disclose, we reviewed SEC regulations. We also reviewed the annual reports for a random selection of 35 funds, including at least 1 of the funds whose officials we interviewed, to identify the types of cost information these funds disclosed. We also discussed the trends in costs associated with operating mutual funds with industry officials at the organizations identified above. We also reviewed various academic research papers and analyses by industry research organizations and others. To identify the trends in average account size, we obtained and analyzed data from ICI. We also analyzed cost, revenue, and profitability data compiled by an industry research organization on 18 public mutual fund advisers, which represent all of the public companies

whose primary business activity involves operating mutual funds as an adviser.

To determine the trend in mutual fund fees, we interviewed industry participants and reviewed studies, analyses, and academic research regarding mutual fund fees. To conduct our own analysis of the trend in fees, we collected and analyzed data on the largest mutual funds. These included the 77 largest mutual funds in existence for the entire 1990-1998 period based on asset size as of February, 28, 1999, as reported in the Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly section in the April 5, 1999, issue of Barron's. We focused on the time period since 1990 because it represented the most current and consistent period of mutual fund industry history and market conditions. The 77 largest funds consisted of 41 stock funds and 5 hybrid funds, each with assets over \$8 billion; and 31 bond funds, each with assets over \$3 billion. We excluded 10 other stock, hybrid, and bond funds that were above the asset minimums but came into existence after 1990. We obtained annual expense, sales load, and asset data for each of the 77 funds for each year from 1990 to 1998 from Morningstar, Forbes Magazine, and Standard & Poor's; and from annual reports, prospectuses, and registration statements filed by the mutual funds with SEC or available at mutual fund internet sites.

To determine the nature and structure of competition in the mutual fund industry, we reviewed academic research papers, economic literature, speeches, testimonies, and other documents discussing mutual fund competition. We collected data on numbers of funds, fund complexes, and advisers. We also discussed the extent of competition with the funds with industry officials at the organizations identified above. To identify what factors funds emphasized in their advertisements, we collected and analyzed the content of selected business, news, and personal finance magazines.

To determine how mutual funds disclose their fees, we reviewed the relevant laws, rules, and regulations governing mutual fund fee disclosure and interviewed officials from SEC, NASDR, the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. To compare mutual fund disclosures to those for other financial products and services, we reviewed the relevant regulations for those products and consulted with regulatory and industry association officials. To determine how investors use the information on fees, we reviewed studies and surveys done by industry research organizations. We also interviewed industry participants to obtain their opinions regarding the effectiveness of existing fee disclosures and

suggestions for additional disclosures. A broker dealer also provided us summary information from a customer survey that included questions about the utility and desirability of current and proposed fee disclosures.

To determine the responsibilities of mutual fund directors regarding fees, we reviewed the relevant laws, rules, and regulations governing mutual fund organizational structure and directors' responsibilities. We also interviewed officials from SEC and NASDR. In addition, we discussed the effectiveness of fund directors with industry participants. From legal databases, we also obtained and reviewed decisions and other documents pertaining to various court cases involving mutual fund fees.

We conducted our work in Washington, DC; Chicago, IL; New York, NY; Boston, MA; San Francisco, CA; and Los Angeles, CA, between November 1998 and April 2000, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We requested comments on a draft of this report from the heads, or their designees, of SEC and NASDR. In addition, we requested comments from the mutual fund industry association, ICI. Each of these organizations provided us with written comments, which appear along with our responses to individual comments in appendixes I through III. Additional technical comments received from SEC were incorporated into this report as appropriate.

Data Inadequate For Determining How Asset Growth Affected Adviser Costs

Academic studies and other research suggest that as mutual fund assets grow, mutual fund advisers should experience operational efficiencies—or economies of scale—that could allow them to reduce their funds’ operating expense ratios.¹ However, we were unable to determine the extent to which mutual fund advisers experienced these economies of scale because information on the costs and profitability of most fund advisers was not generally publicly available. Industry officials reported that the costs of operating and providing mutual fund services have been increasing. Although comprehensive cost data were not available, we were able to determine that mutual fund advisers and other mutual fund service providers were earning significantly more in fee revenues in 1998 from the funds they operated than they had in 1990. In addition, analyses by industry research organizations of 17 public mutual fund management firms indicated that such firms were generally profitable and that their profitability had been increasing.

Fund Asset Growth Expected to Produce Economies of Scale

As fund assets grow, advisers usually experience increases in both their revenues and their costs. However, the research we reviewed and the officials we interviewed agreed that fund advisers experience operational efficiencies that result in their costs growing less rapidly than the assets of the funds they manage. Academic researchers and industry officials acknowledged that mutual fund advisers’ operations likely experienced economies of scale as fund assets grew. Fund advisers also likely experienced economies of scale in their operations because the majority of fund asset growth has come from increases in the value of the securities in funds’ portfolios, which is a less costly source of growth than additional share purchases by new or existing investors.

Many Agree that Mutual Fund Advisers Experience Economies of Scale

As fund assets grow, the adviser earns additional revenue because its fee is a percentage of the fund’s average net assets. However, in performing the various services necessary to operate the fund, the adviser incurs various costs for services, such as researching selections for the portfolio and managing the investments to maximize returns. Fund advisers also incur costs to administer accounts, process account transactions, and promote their funds to attract new shareholders and additional investor inflows. The difference between the adviser’s costs and the amount of revenue it collects is its operating profit from the fund. If the adviser’s revenues are

¹ As discussed in chapter 1 of this report, the operating expense ratio for a mutual fund is the total of various fees and expenses charged to the fund during a particular period shown as a percentage of the fund’s total assets. The expense ratio includes a management fee that compensates the adviser for selecting and managing the fund’s portfolio, 12b-1 fees used for expenses associated with distributing fund shares, and any other expenses associated with administering the fund that have been deducted from its assets.

increasing faster than its costs, then the adviser is experiencing operational efficiencies, or economies of scale.

Academics, industry research organizations, regulators, and fund advisers we consulted generally agreed that mutual fund operations are subject to economies of scale as their assets grow. Most studies we reviewed found that as fund size increased, average operating expense fees decreased. A December 1999 ICI study reported that stock funds with assets of \$250 million or less had an average expense ratio of \$1.39 per \$100 of assets, and funds with assets of over \$5 billion had an average expense ratio of 70 cents per \$100 of assets.² The ICI study also reported that funds with significant asset growth tended to reduce their expense ratios as they grew, suggesting the presence of economies of scale.

In this study, ICI states that the operating efficiencies that mutual fund advisers experience arise, not from spreading fixed costs across a growing asset base, but from needing proportionally fewer additional resources as assets grew. The study found that fund advisers typically expend additional resources for portfolio management, investment research, and fund administration as fund assets grow. For example, an adviser of a fund experiencing 100-percent growth in fund assets may need to add only 5 new hires to a staff of 10 customer service representatives, rather than doubling the staff to address the workload arising from the additional assets. Therefore, customer service personnel costs would be proportionally less for twice the assets.

Industry officials we interviewed also generally agreed that mutual fund operations experience economies of scale. An official at a money management firm whose customers invest in mutual funds told us that mutual fund advisers' operations are subject to large economies of scale, and additional investor inflows result in little additional cost. Officials of the fund advisers we interviewed also agreed that their operations experienced economies of scale.

Some of the studies and industry officials noted that economies of scale should not be assumed to exist on an industrywide level. For example, a study by one industry research organization, Lipper Analytical Services, Inc., stated that the mutual fund industry as a whole does not experience

² Investment Company Institute Perspective: Operating Expense Ratios, Assets, and Economies of Scale in Equity Mutual Funds, John D. Rea, Brian K. Reid, and Kimberlee W. Millar, (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 1999).

economies of scale, but individual funds do.³ In his testimony before Congress, the ICI president offered various explanations as to why asset growth for the industry has not translated into economies of scale for all funds. For example, asset growth arising from the creation of new funds would not likely result in economies of scale because new funds usually incur high costs in their initial periods of operation. In addition, asset growth by certain funds could produce operating efficiencies for those funds but not for others that had not grown.

Substantial Asset Growth From Portfolio Appreciation Should Also Result in Economies of Scale

An additional factor that should contribute to economies of scale among mutual fund advisers was the extent to which their assets grew due to portfolio appreciation. Such growth results as the securities that have been selected and purchased for the fund's portfolio increase in value. As the value of the fund assets increase, the adviser's revenues also increase because it deducts its fee as a percentage of all of the assets in the fund. However, these additional assets would not be accompanied by the additional account processing costs that result from asset growth arising from additional share purchases by new or existing shareholders.

Mutual fund advisers likely experienced such economies of scale because most of the industry's growth in the 1990s resulted from portfolio appreciation. We analyzed industrywide data from ICI on the growth in mutual funds to determine the extent to which funds' asset growth resulted from either additional share purchases by existing and new investors or from appreciation of the securities within fund portfolios. As shown in table 2.1, portfolio appreciation accounted for about 56 percent of the mutual fund asset growth for all stock and bond funds. In contrast, growth resulting from additional investor share purchases accounted for about 44 percent these funds' growth.

Table 2.1: Source of Asset Growth for All Stock and Bond Funds From 1990 to 1998

Fund type	Investor share		Totals
	Portfolio appreciation	purchases	
Stock funds	56.5%	43.5%	100%
Bond funds	54.2%	45.8%	100%
Totals	56.1%	43.9%	100%

Source: GAO analysis of ICI data.

³ *The Third White Paper: Are Mutual Fund Fees Reasonable? (September 1998 Update)*, Lipper Analytical Services, Inc. (Sep. 1998).

Cost Data Not Generally Available for Mutual Fund Advisers' Overall Operations

Determining the extent to which mutual fund advisers experienced economies of scale was not possible because comprehensive data on advisers' costs are not publicly available. Mutual funds are required to disclose certain fees and costs paid by investors that are deducted from fund assets, but these disclosures do not specify the costs that the adviser incurs in providing services to the fund.

Under the requirements of the securities laws, a fund is required to periodically disclose to fund shareholders the costs attributable to individual funds. Among these costs is the fee that the adviser to the fund charges for managing the fund and selecting the investments to be included in its portfolio. In addition, these costs include those resulting from various administrative functions performed as part of operating a fund, such as those for legal services or the printing of required reports.

Under the laws governing mutual fund activities, mutual funds must make publicly available certain financial information applicable to the fund when initially offering shares to the public and on a semiannual basis thereafter. This information includes a balance sheet, which lists the fund's assets and liabilities; and a statement of operations. The statement of operations presents the income and expenses incurred by the fund. A fund's income is generally the dividends and interest earned on the securities in its portfolio. For expenses, the disclosure requirements for the statement of operations are relatively brief and require separate reporting of

- investment advisory, management, and service fees in connection with expenses associated with the research, selection, supervision, and custody of investments;
- amounts paid as part of a 12b-1 plan; and
- any other expense items that exceed 5 percent of the total expenses.

In addition, funds are required to disclose in footnotes to this statement how the management and service fees were calculated. Funds are also required to provide information on the net change in the assets of the fund resulting from operations, which includes any realized and unrealized gains or losses.

Review of the financial statements issued for 35 funds⁴ indicated the information disclosed for these funds was generally similar. The total amounts expended for the management or advisory fee and for expenses

⁴ Included among these 35 funds were at least 1 of the funds offered by the 15 advisers that we contacted and a random selection of others that we obtained from public filings made to SEC.

relating to the directors were disclosed for every one of the funds we reviewed. The amounts expended for audit services and shareholder reporting were also shown in the reports of a majority of the 35 funds.

Although funds provide some information on the operating costs of individual mutual funds, the trend in the costs and profitability of advisers that manage mutual funds cannot be identified from the required reporting for individual funds. The information disclosed by funds pertains to the funds' associated income and expenses, but the advisers that operate these funds are separate legal entities with their own revenues and costs. Some of the revenue earned by fund advisers can be determined from the amount of management/advisory fees shown in fund disclosures. However, the reporting does not include disclosure of the specific costs that advisers incur to operate a fund. Nor does the material that mutual fund advisers file with SEC include such information. For example, the salaries of portfolio managers or other executives an adviser employs or the research expenses it incurs are not required to be disclosed. Without knowing the specific costs the adviser incurred to operate the funds it offers, the profitability of most mutual fund advisers cannot be determined. Some of the advisers that manage mutual funds are publicly owned companies and thus are required under other SEC regulations to periodically disclose the financial results of their operations. However, the majority of advisers are privately held and thus not subject to these requirements.

Fund and Other Industry Officials Report that Mutual Fund Operating Costs Have Risen

Only limited public data existed on the individual costs incurred by mutual fund advisers, but this information and industry officials' statements indicated that costs have been rising. Some of the increase in overall operating costs stemmed from the costs of the new services that advisers have added to those they already perform for investors or for the firms that market mutual funds. In addition, overall operating costs have risen due to increases in other areas, including the costs of distribution, advertising, and personnel.

New Services Increase Operating Costs

Mutual fund officials cited new services as an important reason for the increasing costs of operating mutual funds. Testifying before Congress, the president of ICI stated that mutual fund advisers are under substantial competitive pressure to provide enhanced and sometimes costly services. Officials at the industry research organizations and at the mutual fund advisers we contacted also indicated that new and expanded services have raised costs. Among the new services that these firms are adding were new telecommunication services. These included such services as 24-hour telephone centers and voice-recognition systems to provide investors with information and more convenient access to their accounts. Mutual fund

advisers are also increasingly providing information and account access services over the Internet.

Distribution Costs Also Increasing

Mutual fund advisers have also apparently experienced increased costs incurred as part of having their funds distributed. Some broker-dealers whose sales representatives market mutual funds have narrowed their offerings of funds or have created preferred lists of funds, which then become the funds that receive the most emphasis in the marketing efforts made by broker-dealer sales representatives. When a fund is selected as one of the preferred fund families on these lists, the mutual fund adviser is required to compensate the broker-dealer firms. According to one research organization official, there are significantly fewer distributing firms than there are mutual fund advisers. As a result, the mutual fund distributors have the clout to require the advisers to pay more to have their funds sold by the distributing firms' staff. For example, distributors sometimes require fund advisers to share their profits and pay for expenses incurred by the distributing firms, such as requiring an adviser to pay for advertising or for marketing materials that are used by the distributing firms.⁵

Mutual fund advisers' distribution costs are also increased when they offer their funds through mutual fund supermarkets. Various broker-dealers, including those affiliated with a mutual fund adviser, allow their customers to purchase through their brokerage accounts the shares of funds operated by a wide range of fund advisers. Although these fund supermarkets provide the advisers of participating funds with an additional means of acquiring investor dollars, the firms that provide such supermarkets generally require fund advisers to pay a certain percentage on the dollars attracted from purchases by customers of the firm's supermarket. For example, advisers for the funds participating in the Charles Schwab One Source supermarket pay that broker-dealer firm up to 0.35 percent of the amount invested by that firm's customers.

Fund Advertising Costs Also Increasing

Another area in which mutual fund advisers were reportedly experiencing higher costs was in advertising expenditures. According to data compiled by one industry research organization,⁶ consumer investment advertising by financial services companies has grown at an annual rate of 33 percent from 1995 to 1998, with nearly \$1 billion spent in 1998.

⁵ Amounts paid to fund distributors deducted from fund assets must be paid pursuant to a 12b-1 plan. Other amounts paid to distributors would come out of adviser profits.

⁶ "Fund Advertising: Evolving Trends Among Television, Internet, and Print Media," Mutual Fund Café: Blue Plate Special, Financial Research Corporation (Jan. 18, 1999).

Industry officials offered various reasons for increased advertising expenditures. As discussed in chapter 4 of this report, mutual fund advisers attempt to compete primarily by differentiating their firms' fund offerings from those of other firms. For example, one industry research organization official indicated that competition among so many funds requires advisers to increasingly promote their particular funds. Mutual fund supermarkets may also increase fund advisers' advertising expenses. Advisers selling through fund supermarkets may find that they avoid the costs associated with a salesforce or certain other expenses. However, increasing the likelihood that investors will select their funds out of all those offered through such supermarkets usually requires that advisers must spend on advertising to increase investor awareness of their funds.

Personnel Costs Also Increasing

Although already paying among the highest levels of compensation, mutual fund advisers apparently have to pay increasing amounts to attract and retain personnel. Mutual fund personnel are among the best-compensated staff among various financial organizations. In 1999, an association for the investment management profession and an executive recruiting firm sponsored a study of compensation for 19 different positions among 7 types of financial industries.⁷ Along with mutual funds, the other industries were (1) banking; (2) insurance; (3) investment counseling; (4) pension consulting; (5) plan sponsors, endowments, and foundations; and (6) securities broker-dealers. The study obtained data by survey for staff employed in these industries in various positions; including chief executives, chief investment officers, research directors, securities analysts, and portfolio managers for four different investment types. According to our analysis of the information presented in this study, the industry median compensation for mutual fund industry overall was the highest among the seven industries. Across the various positions, the compensation for mutual fund industry personnel was ranked as the highest or second highest in 13 of the 19 positions surveyed. Specifically, mutual fund industry personnel had the highest compensation in six of the positions, including having the highest median compensation for chief executive officers and for each of the four portfolio manager positions.

Personnel costs are also reportedly rising for mutual fund advisers. Officials with three of the industry research organizations we contacted cited expenses for personnel as an area in which fund advisers have experienced increased costs. An official at one such organization told us that with the low unemployment rate, fund advisers must pay personnel

⁷ 1999 Investment Management Compensation Survey, Association for Investment Management and Research and Russell Reynolds Associates (Jul. 20, 1999).

more to avoid losing them and having to replace them with new and untrained personnel.

Officials at the mutual fund advisers we contacted also cited personnel as an area in which their costs were increasing. Many officials noted that mutual fund industry personnel costs are being driven higher due to competition for quality personnel from hedge funds.⁸ An official with one large fund adviser told us that increasing the size of compensation packages for portfolio managers was necessary to keep them from leaving to join hedge funds. He likened the market for such staff to that for sports stars.

Information Technology Expenditures Also Increase But May Eventually Reduce Adviser Costs

Fund adviser and other officials also cited the need to make continued investments in their overall information technology resources as a source of increased costs to their operations. For example, officials at one mutual fund adviser told us the staffing of their information technology department has risen from 1 person to over 700 over a 26-year period. Mutual fund adviser and industry research officials also described other information technology expenditures that firms are making; including implementing automated telephone voice processing systems and creating Internet Web sites.

Although mutual fund advisers are reportedly experiencing increased costs resulting from the increased investments they are making in technology and service enhancements, some of these investments may result in reduced operating costs in the future. According to officials at two industry research organizations, the investments that fund advisers make in technologies such as the Internet and voice-processing systems will eventually allow them to reduce service costs. According to an article prepared by one of these research organizations,⁹ companies that deploy Web-based customer services can cut their costs by close to half, if not more. For example, the article cites research by one organization that indicated that typical customer service transactions cost \$5 if responded to by a live agent, 50 cents if by a voice response system, and a few cents if done on the Web.

⁸ Hedge funds are private investment partnerships or offshore investment corporations that include a general partner, which manages the fund, and a limited number of other investors that usually must meet high minimum investment requirements.

⁹ "How Fund Companies Are Using the Internet to Strengthen Customer Relationships and Cut Costs," Mutual Fund Café: Inside Scoop, DeRemer & Associates and Wechsler Ross & Partners (Aug. 1998)

Asset Growth Has Varying Effects on Fund Advisers' Costs

Fund asset growth can affect advisers' costs in varying ways. Although mutual fund advisers' costs were reportedly rising, industry officials explained that these costs do not generally rise smoothly as assets increase. Officials also indicated that advisers' costs rise more when their asset growth comes from new accounts rather than from existing shareholders.

Adviser Costs Do Not Rise Smoothly

According to industry officials, the costs of providing mutual fund services may not rise in a smooth, continuous way. Officials at the mutual fund advisers we contacted told us that some of their operating costs increase in a staggered fashion as their assets grow. For example, officials at one adviser said that as their assets grow, they find that the number of staff performing certain functions, such as answering customer inquiries, can stay the same for some time. However, when assets reach a certain level, they find that they must add additional staff to address the additional workload. Therefore, although assets may be growing steadily, many of their costs remain temporarily fixed until certain asset levels are reached; then their costs rise to a new, higher fixed level. Officials at another fund adviser explained that other costs are more fixed; thus, as assets grow, these costs go down on a per-share basis. Such costs would include the cost of maintaining custody¹⁰ over the securities invested in by their funds.

New Accounts Also Increase Adviser Costs

Fund adviser officials also explained that if their asset growth comes from new accounts, then their costs correspondingly increase more than if the additional dollars came instead from existing shareholders. Officials at one mutual fund adviser told us much of the industry's asset growth has come from new, smaller accounts. They said that such accounts are more expensive to service than larger accounts on a per dollar basis, because each account requires a minimum level of service regardless of size.

However, we analyzed data on shareholder accounts compiled by ICI. Although the number of shareholder accounts for stock funds has grown by over 430 percent, from 22 million in 1990 to about 120 million in 1998, this was less than the growth in the assets of these funds, which grew by over 1,100 percent during that same time frame.

Changes in the average account size at individual mutual fund advisers can affect these firms' costs. For example, officials at one mutual fund adviser reported to us that their average account size had fallen from \$12,000 to

¹⁰ Mutual funds pay such costs to entities known as custodians, which provide for the safekeeping of stock certificates and other assets owned by the funds.

\$9,000, with its median size being \$1,500. According to this firm's officials, having more, smaller accounts increases their overall servicing costs.

Although some firms may experience a decline in their average account size that results in an increased cost per account, industrywide data indicated that this is not affecting all firms. According to our analysis of ICI data, the average account size for all stock funds in the industry has risen by 127 percent, from just under \$11,000 in 1990 to almost \$25,000 in 1998. The average account size in 1998 for bond funds has increased similarly since 1990 as well.

Fee Revenues Have Increased Significantly

Although comprehensive data on the costs fund advisers incurred was not available, the revenue fund advisers and other service providers collect as fees from the mutual funds they operate appears to have increased significantly. The fee revenues earned by the advisers and service providers of the largest mutual funds have also risen significantly during the 1990s.¹¹ The amount of fees collected on a per account basis has also risen.

As mutual fund assets have grown, the revenues that fund advisers and other service providers collect through the fees they deduct from these funds have also risen. ICI provided us with data on the assets and operating expense fee revenues for 4,868 stock and bond funds, which their officials indicated represented over 90 percent of the total industry assets for these fund types.¹² As shown in table 2.2, our analysis of this data indicated that asset growth has led to comparable growth in the fee revenues earned by mutual fund advisers and other service providers.

Table 2.2: Growth in Mutual Fund Assets and Estimated Fund Adviser and Other Service Provider Fee Revenues 1990-1998

Dollars in millions						
Fund type	Total assets			Estimated fund adviser and provider fee revenues ^a		
	1990	1998	Percentage change	1990	1998	Percentage change
Stock	\$256,766	\$2,396,410	833%	\$2,544	\$22,931	801%
Bond	268,529	698,365	160	2,408	5,933	146
Totals	525,295	3,094,775	489	4,952	28,864	483

Source: GAO analysis of data from ICI.

¹¹ Fund adviser and service provider revenues were estimated by multiplying fund assets by operating expense ratios.

¹² The total asset amounts differ from those presented elsewhere in this report because the data ICI provided for this revenue analysis did not include any funds sold as part of variable annuity products.

The largest funds have also produced more revenue for their advisers and other service providers during the 1990s. Using 1998 data, we identified the 77 largest stock and bond funds that had been in existence since 1990.¹³ For these funds, we found that the advisers and service providers operating these funds collected \$7.4 billion in revenues from the fees deducted from these funds' assets in 1998. As shown in table 2.3, this was over \$6 billion, or almost 560 percent more than they earned in 1990.

Table 2.3: Assets and Fee Revenues for 77 Largest Mutual Funds for 1990-1998

Dollars in millions

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	Percentage change 1990-1998
Total assets	\$164,425	\$232,985	\$303,339	\$409,755	\$432,241	\$595,857	\$745,889	\$954,725	\$1,157,219	604%
Total fee revenue	\$1,128	\$1,640	\$2,157	\$2,986	\$3,255	\$4,488	\$5,387	\$6,347	\$7,428	559

Source: GAO analysis of data from Morningstar, Inc., and Barron's Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly.

Some of the largest funds experienced significant increases in their fee revenues from 1990 to 1998. For example, the assets of the largest stock fund grew 580 percent from \$12.3 billion in 1990 to \$83.6 billion in 1998. The revenues of the adviser and other service providers for this fund grew 308 percent, increasing from about \$127 million to over \$518 million during the same period. As the assets of another stock fund grew 825 percent from \$5.6 billion in 1990 to \$51.8 billion in 1998, its adviser's adviser and other service providers' revenue increased 729 percent, growing from \$38.7 million to \$321 million during the same period.

On an industrywide basis, the average amount of total revenues fund advisers and other service providers earned per investor account has also risen. According to data compiled by ICI, the increase in fee revenues on a per account basis has been less dramatic than the increases in total fee revenues shown above. As shown in table 2.4, the average fees collected by fund advisers and other service providers per account rose 61 percent for stock funds and 37 percent for bond funds from 1990 to 1997.¹⁴

¹³ Using data as of February 24, 1998, we identified these funds as being the largest funds that had been in existence since at least 1990. These 77 funds included 46 stock funds (including 5 hybrid funds that invested in both stocks and bonds), each with assets over \$8 billion; each of the 31 bond funds had assets of \$3 billion. Collectively, these 77 funds had combined assets of \$1,157 billion in 1998 and represented nearly 28 percent of the \$4,174 billion in total industry assets invested in these types of funds. As of that date, 10 other funds had similar levels of assets as the funds in our analysis; we did not include them in our analysis because they had been created after 1990.

¹⁴ ICI did not provide data on the number of accounts for 1998.

Table 2.4: Average Fees Collected For Stock and Bond Funds In Dollars Per Account from 1990 to 1997

Type of fund	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	Percentage change
Stock	\$102	\$106	\$122	\$136	\$138	\$135	\$150	\$164	61%
Bond	184	180	210	230	237	223	235	251	37

Source: GAO analysis of data from ICI.

Data for Some Mutual Fund Advisers Indicates Profitability Has Been Increasing

Recent data on the profitability of mutual fund advisers were generally limited to a few studies done by industry research organizations.¹⁵ As noted previously, financial statements are not available for most mutual fund adviser firms. Although hundreds of mutual fund advisers exist, information was available for only a small subset of firms that have issued securities to the public, which requires them to file publicly available financial statements with SEC. The financial results of these public mutual fund adviser firms may not be representative of the industry as a whole because the public firms tend to be among the largest firms. However, analysis of information for some of these firms indicated that they were generally profitable and that their profitability had been increasing.

An analysis by 1 industry research organization of 18 mutual fund advisers indicated that these firms' revenues were generally growing faster than their expenses. This organization, Strategic Insight, LLC., annually reports on trends in mutual fund adviser costs and profits by using data for those advisers that have issued securities to the public and thus are required to make their financial statements publicly available. For its analysis, Strategic Insight reviewed the financial results from 1994 to 1998 for 18 public companies¹⁶ that manage mutual funds and other private account assets. According to its report, these 18 firms managed about \$1.1 trillion in mutual fund assets and accounted for about 20 percent of total industry assets in 1998. As shown in table 2.5, the operating expenses for the 18 companies have been rising since 1995, but their data indicated that the rate of increase has been slowing each year.

¹⁵ The studies we identified that addressed mutual fund adviser costs or profitability included *Money Management Financial Comparisons 1998*, Strategic Insight, LLC. (New York, NY: Apr. 1999); *The Third White Paper: Are Mutual Fund Fees Reasonable? (September 1998 Update)*, Lipper Analytical Services, Inc. (Sep. 1998); and *Price Valuation and Performance Analytics*, Putnam Lovell Thornton & LaGuardia (Apr. 1999).

¹⁶ The companies include AMVESCAP PLC, Affiliated Managers Group, Alliance Capital L.P., Eaton Vance, Franklin Resources, Federated Investment, Gabelli Asset Management, Kansas City Southern (financial group only), Liberty Financial, PIMCO Advisors L.P., Phoenix Investment Partners, Pioneer Group, Pilgrim America, The John Nuveen Company, Nvest L.P., T. Rowe Price, United Asset Management, and Waddell & Reed.

Table 2.5: Change in Revenue and Expenses From Prior Year and Resulting Operating Margin for Public Asset Management Companies

	1995	1996	1997	1998
Fee revenue growth	43%	36%	34%	28%
Operating expense growth	48	34	31	27
Operating profit margin ^a	33	34	35	36

^aOperating margin is the percentage that operating profit (revenue minus expenses) represents of total revenue before taxes.

Source: Strategic Insight, LLC., analysis of 18 public companies

Although the Strategic Insight data shows that expenses have been increasing for these companies, it also showed that their revenues were, on average, increasing at a higher rate than their expenses between 1996 to 1998.

As table 2.5 also shows, Strategic Insight found that as measured by profit margins, the profitability of these mutual fund management companies has been increasing. In 1998, Strategic Insight's calculations indicated that these 18 companies' pretax operating profits, calculated by subtracting total expenses from total revenues before subtracting taxes, averaged about 36 percent of their revenues.

These mutual fund advisers also appear generally profitable compared to firms in other industries. A commonly used measure of profitability is return on equity, which is the ratio of profits to the amount of equity invested in the business by the firm's owners, which is derived by subtracting the firm's liabilities from its assets.

The Strategic Insight data lacked complete information on all 18 publicly traded mutual fund advisers, but we were able to assess the rates of return on equity of 9 of the advisers as far back as 1995. From 1995 to 1998, the returns on equity for these nine firms were generally consistent and ranged, on average, between 23 and 26 percent during these years, with the 26 percent occurring in 1998. This was comparable to the 500 U.S. companies in the Standard & Poor's 500 index, whose return on equity had averaged 22 percent from 1995 to 1999.

Mutual Fund Operating Expense Ratios Generally Declined

Previously completed studies of trends in the operating expense ratios charged by mutual funds produced varying conclusions as to whether such fees were declining or increasing and faced criticism over the methodologies they used. Our own analysis indicated that the expense ratios charged by the largest funds were generally lower in 1998 than their 1990 levels, but this decline did not occur consistently over this period. The expense ratios for the largest stock funds, which experienced the greatest asset growth during the 1990s, declined more than had the largest bond funds, whose expense ratios had generally remained flat. Finally, not all funds have reduced their fees despite experiencing growth in their assets. Our analysis of the largest funds indicated that 25 percent of the funds whose assets grew by 500 percent or more since 1990 had not reduced their expense ratios by at least 10 percent by 1998, including some funds that raised their fees.

Studies Also Find Mixed Trend in Fees Across Industry

Studies and analyses that looked at the trend in operating expense ratios and other charges to mutual fund investors had generally mixed findings, with some finding fees have risen and others finding them to have declined. Questions were raised about the conclusions of some of these studies because of the methodologies they used.

Some Studies Find Declines in Mutual Fund Fee Charges

Some of the studies we reviewed that had looked at the overall trend in mutual fund fees since 1990 found that the operating expense ratios and other charges were declining. Among these were a series of studies conducted by ICI, which looked at the trend in mutual fund fees charged by stock and bond funds.¹ In these studies, ICI combined funds' annual operating expense ratios with an amortized portion of any sales loads charged.² To calculate the average total annual costs for all funds, ICI multiplied each fund's total cost by the proportion that its sales represented of all fund sales that year. ICI stated that this methodology was intended to incorporate all of the costs that an investor would expect to incur in purchasing and holding mutual fund shares. Weighting these costs by fund sales was intended to reflect the costs of funds actually being chosen by investors each year.

¹ The three ICI studies were: Trends in the Ownership Cost of Equity Mutual Funds, November 1998; Total Shareholder Cost of Bond and Money Market Mutual Funds, (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1999); and Mutual Funds Costs, 1980-1998, (Washington, D.C.: Sep. 1999). ICI also issued a related study of economies of scale that also included fee trend information: Investment Company Institute Perspective: Operating Expense Ratios, Assets, and Economies of Scale in Equity Mutual Funds, John D. Rea, Brian K. Reid, and Kimberlee W. Millar, (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 1999).

² To account for any sales loads charged, the ICI researchers spread (or amortized) the load charges over numerous years according to estimates of the average period over which investors hold their funds. Thus, the total costs to fund shareholders each year was calculated as the annual operating expenses plus that year's proportionate share of any applicable sales load.

Using this methodology, ICI found that the total costs investors incurred as part of purchasing mutual funds declined 40 percent between 1980 and 1998 for stock funds and 25 percent between 1980 and 1997 for bond funds. The studies also reported that a significant factor in the declining investor costs was the shifting by investors to lower cost funds. This shift by investors was also reflected in data showing faster growth in no-load funds than load funds. The ICI studies reported that a general decline in distribution costs (sales loads and 12b-1 fees) also contributed to the overall decline in investor costs.

Other Studies Found Fees Rising

In contrast, some studies or analyses that looked at the trend in mutual fund fees found that fees had been rising. These included analyses by academic researchers, industry research organizations, and regulators. For example, an analysis by an academic researcher indicated that the median asset-weighted average operating expense ratio of funds in the industry had increased by 7 percent from 1987 to 1998. An internal study by SEC staff found that median expense ratios had increased by 11 basis points from 1979 to 1992.

Criticisms Raised Regarding the Methodologies Used by Some Fee Studies

The conclusions reached by some of the mutual fund fee studies have been criticized because of the methodologies used. Some industry participants were critical of the conclusions reached in the ICI studies because it calculated average annual shareholders' costs by weighting them by each fund's sales volume. For example, analysts at one industry research organization acknowledged that the ICI data may indicate that the total cost of investing in mutual funds has declined. However, they said that because ICI weighted the fund fees and other charges by sale volumes, the decline ICI reports results mostly from actions taken by investors rather than advisers of mutual funds.³ These research organization officials noted that ICI acknowledged in its study that about half of the decline in fund costs resulted from investors increasingly purchasing shares in no-load funds.

Criticisms were also made of some studies or data that reported that the mutual funds fees had been rising. Such studies usually did not focus on a fixed number of funds over time but instead averaged the fees of all funds in existence each year. Critics noted that the averages calculated by these studies would be biased upwards by the increasing number of new funds, which tend to have high initial expenses until certain asset levels are reached. Such averages would also be influenced upwards by the

³ Morningstar.Net Commentary: *Revisiting Fund Costs: Up or Down?*, Scott Cooley, Morningstar, Inc. (Feb. 19, 1999).

increasing prevalence of funds with more specialized investment objectives, such as international funds, which usually have higher research costs and thus tend to have higher expense ratios overall than other funds.

Largest Mutual Funds Generally Grew Faster Than Industry Average

Our analysis indicated that the largest funds grew more than other funds in the industry. As shown in table 3.1, the average size of the 46 largest stock funds increased by about 1,100 percent from 1990 to 1998; the average size of all other stock funds increased by about 300 percent. Combined, the average size of the largest stock and bond funds grew by about 600 percent during this period as compared to the approximately 200-percent increase in the size of all other stock and bond funds.

Table 3.1: Average Size of Stock and Bond Mutual Funds from 1990 to 1998

Dollars in millions	Average size of fund		Percentage change
	1990	1998	
Largest Funds			
46 stock funds	\$1,828	\$21,459	1,074%
31 bond funds	2,551	5,828	128
Total for largest funds	2,135	15,029	604
All other funds in industry			
Stock funds	159	602	279
Bond funds	206	291	41
Total for all other funds	178	484	172

Source: GAO analysis of data from ICI; Morningstar, Inc.; and Barron's Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly.

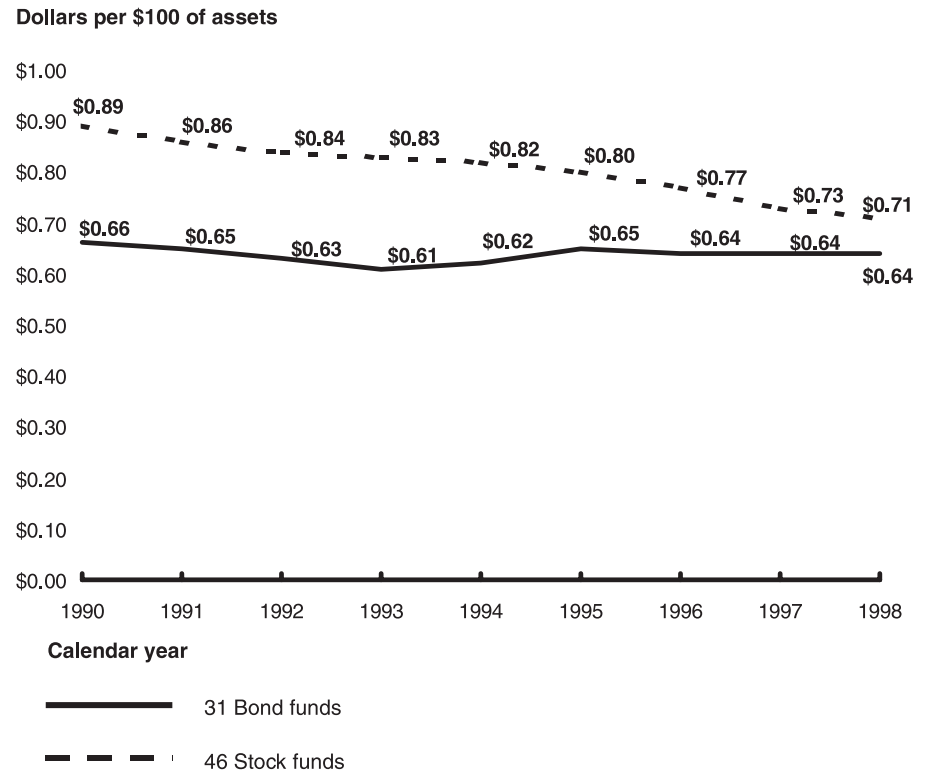
Among Largest Funds, Average Expense Ratios Declined for Stock Funds but Less so for Bond Funds

Because they grew more than other funds, the largest funds would likely have been subject to the greatest economies of scale, which could have allowed their advisers to reduce the fees they charge investors. In general, the expense ratios on large mutual funds investing in stocks have been reduced since 1990, but the ratios of funds investing primarily in bonds have declined only slightly since then. In addition, these declines did not occur consistently over the period from 1990 to 1998.

According to our own analyses and those performed by others, larger mutual funds have generally reduced their operating expense ratios during the 1990s. Using the data we collected on the 46 largest stock and 31 largest bond funds in existence from 1990 to 1998, we calculated a simple average of their operating expense ratios. The simple average represents the fee an investor would expect to pay by choosing among the funds at random. As shown in figure 3.1, the average expense ratio per \$100 of assets for largest stock funds declined from 89 cents in 1990 to 71 cents in 1998, which was a decline of 20 percent. The expense ratio for the largest

bond funds was 66 cents in 1990 and 64 cents in 1998, a decline of 3 percent.

Figure 3.1: Average Expense Ratios for 77 Largest Stock and Bond Mutual Funds From 1990 to 1998



Source: GAO analysis of data from ICI; Morningstar, Inc.; and Barron's Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly.

Analysis by the mutual fund industry association, ICI, also found that the advisers of large stock funds had generally reduced their funds' operating expense ratios. In its November 1998 study, ICI presented its analysis of data on the 100 largest stock funds established before 1980. It reported that the simple average of the operating expense ratios for these funds had declined from 82 cents in 1980 to 70 cents in 1997, representing a decline of about 15 percent.

The decline in the fees charged by the largest stock and bond funds did not occur consistently over the period from 1990 to 1998. For both the stock funds and the bond funds in our analysis, we calculated the percentage that operating expense revenues represented of these 77 funds' total assets during 1990 to 1998. This represents what the average dollar invested in these funds was charged in fees during this period. As shown in table 3.2,

the fees paid by the average dollar invested in the largest stock funds rose in the first years of this period before declining in the last several years. As table 3.2 also shows, the fees paid by the average dollar invested in the largest bond funds remained relatively constant during this period but also declined in the most recent years.

Table 3.2: Asset-Weighted Average Operating Expense Ratios for 77 Largest Stock and Bond Funds From 1990 to 1998 in Dollars Per \$100 of Fund Assets

Type of fund	Number of funds	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	Percentage change 1990-1998
Stock	46	\$.74	\$.78	\$.78	\$.80	\$.81	\$.79	\$.75	\$.68	\$.65	-12%
Bond	31	.62	.61	.61	.60	.61	.63	.61	.60	.58	-6

Source: GAO analysis of data from Morningstar, Inc., and Barron's Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly.

Asset Growth Usually Resulted in Lower Expense Ratios but Not All Funds Made Reductions

Although mutual funds in general appear to have reduced their operating expense ratios, our analysis and those by others indicated that not all funds had. The more funds' assets had grown, the more likely the fund adviser was to have reduced the expense ratios of those funds. Even among funds that grew significantly, however, not all had reduced their ratios by more than 10 percent.

Most Large Funds Had Reduced Expense Ratios

Our analysis and those by others indicated that the advisers for most large funds had reduced their funds' expense ratios. Of the 77 large funds for which we collected data, 54 funds, or 70 percent, had lower operating expense ratios in 1998 than they had in 1990 (see table 3.3). As can also be seen, the largest bond funds were less likely to be charging lower fees than were stock funds; 48 percent of the bond funds had lower expense ratios compared to 85 percent of the stock funds.

Table 3.3: Change in Operating Expense Ratios Charged by 77 Largest Stock and Bond Funds 1990-1998

Type of fund	Funds that reduced fees		Funds with no change in fees		Funds that raised fees		Total number of funds
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
Stock	39	85%	2	4%	5	11%	46
Bond	15	48	2	6	14	45	31
Total	54	70	4	5	19	25	77

Note: percentages do not total to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: GAO analysis of data from Morningstar, Inc., and Barron's Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly.

ICI also found that the expense ratios of large funds had declined over time. In its December 1999 study that discussed economies of scale for mutual funds, ICI provided data on the trend in operating expense ratios for 497 stock funds in existence as of 1998. ICI selected these funds because they all had assets of at least \$500 million and thus had

experienced significant asset growth and likely reached sufficient size to realize economies of scale. ICI reported that 368, or 74 percent, of these 497 funds had lower operating expense ratios as of 1998 than they had charged in their first full year of operation. Conversely, the expense ratios of the other 129, or 26 percent, of the funds ICI reviewed had either not reduced their ratios or had raised them since their first full year of operation.

The data on the largest funds cannot be used to ascertain what the trend in operating expense ratios has been for the industry as a whole. As noted, our sample consisted of the 77 largest funds in existence since 1990. ICI's study reviewed 497 funds with assets of over \$500 million. In both analyses, the percentage of funds that had reduced their expense ratios was about the same. SEC officials that reviewed our analysis noted that reviewing data for only the largest funds would bias the results towards those funds most likely to have reduced their expense ratios. As a result, a review of funds outside the largest funds could find that a smaller percentage of funds had reduced their expense ratios to any significant degree.

Funds With More Asset Growth More Likely to Reduce Expense Ratios, But Not all Funds Made Significant Reductions

In analyzing the largest mutual funds, we found that the largest reductions in expense ratios generally involved funds with the greatest growth in assets. Conversely, increases in expense ratios tended to involve funds with more modest asset growth and a few funds with asset reductions. However, our analysis also showed that not all funds that experienced significant asset growth had reduced their operating expense fees by at least 10 percent over the period from 1990 to 1998.⁴

The more a fund's assets grew, the more likely its adviser was to have reduced the expense ratio. As shown in table 3.4, the more the assets of the 46 largest stock funds had increased since 1990, the more likely they were to have lower operating expense ratios in 1998. However, not all funds had lower expense ratios even when they experienced significant asset growth. As can be determined from table 3.4, the assets of 40 of the large stock funds grew 500 percent or more from 1990 to 1998. Of these 40 funds, 10 funds, or 25 percent, had not reduced their operating expense ratios by at least 10 percent in the 9 years since 1990; and 2 of the funds were charging higher ratios in 1998 than they had in 1990.

⁴ We used 10 percent as the threshold for identifying a significant reduction because 10 percent is a traditional accounting measure of materiality, and it appeared to be a reasonable amount given the level of asset growth that occurred during this 9-year period.

Chapter 3
Mutual Fund Operating Expense Ratios Generally Declined

Table 3.4: Relationship of Asset Growth and Change in Operating Expense Ratios for Largest Stock Funds 1990-1998

Change in operating expenses	Percentage change in assets					Total
	+1,000	+500 to 1,000	+200 to 500	+200 to 0	Decline in assets	
Reduction over 30 percent	14	2				16
Reduction between 10 and 30 percent	7	7		1		15
Reduction under 10 percent	4	2	2			8
No change	1	1				2
Increase under 10 percent	1					1
Increase between 10 and 30 percent				1		1
Increase over 30 percent	1		1	1		3
Total	28	12	3	3	0	46

Source: GAO analysis of data from Morningstar, Inc., and Barron's Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly.

Although bond funds had generally experienced less growth than had stock funds, a similar relationship between asset growth and operating expense reductions also existed for the largest bond funds that we analyzed. As table 3.5 indicates, bond funds whose assets had grown since 1990 were more likely to be charging lower operating expense ratios in 1998. However, similar to the stock funds, not all of the advisers for bond funds with significant asset growth had reduced their funds' fees. As can be determined from table 3.5, the assets of 11 of the large bond funds grew 500 percent or more from 1990 to 1998. Of these 11 funds, 3 funds, or 27 percent, had not reduced their expense ratios by at least 10 percent in the 9 years since 1990.

Table 3.5: Relationship of Asset Growth and Change in Operating Expense Fees for Largest Bond Funds 1990-1998

Change in operating expenses	Percentage change in assets					Total
	+1,000	+500 to 1,000	+200 to 500	+200 to 0	Decline in assets	
Reduction over 30 percent	1					1
Reduction between 10 and 30 percent	4	3	2	1		10
Reduction under 10 percent	1		2	1		4
No change		1		1		2
Increase under 10 percent		1			2	3
Increase between 10 and 30 percent			2	5	1	8
Increase over 30 percent				2	1	3
Total	6	5	6	10	4	31

Source: GAO analysis of data from Morningstar, Inc., and Barron's Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly.

The December 1999 ICI study also reported that advisers for funds with greater asset growth had generally reduced their funds' operating expense fees by the largest amounts. Among the 497 funds, ICI determined that the funds in the top 20 percent of asset growth had reduced their operating expense ratios on average by 51 cents per \$100 of assets. In contrast, the

decrease in the expense ratio for the funds in the bottom 20 percent of asset growth averaged only 5 cents per \$100 of assets

**Funds with Higher
Operating Expense Ratios
Made Greater Reductions
Than Funds With Lower
Ratios**

The extent to which advisers reduced a fund's expense ratio appears to depend on the initial level of the ratio. In its December 1999 study, ICI found that changes in operating expense ratios among the 497 stock funds they analyzed were related to the level of the fees the funds charged when they first began operations. To conduct its analysis, ICI divided the 497 stock funds into 5 equal groups (quintiles) after ranking them by the expense ratios they charged during their first full year of operations. ICI reported that the funds in the quintile with the lowest ratios initially were charging an average of about 50 cents per \$100 of assets. By 1998, the average expense ratio charged by these funds had increased by 7 cents. In contrast, the funds in the quintile with the highest fees had an average operating expense ratio in the initial period of \$1.86, and by 1998 they had reduced their ratios by an average of 76 cents.

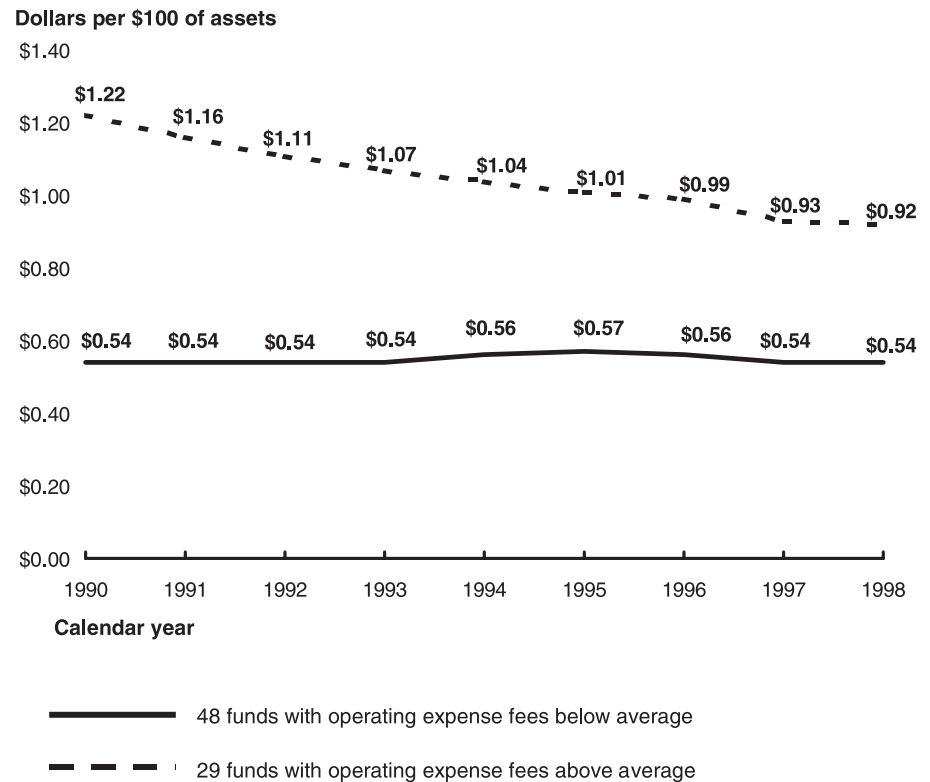
Our own analysis of the largest mutual funds confirmed this relationship between relative fee levels and subsequent operating expense ratio changes. To perform this analysis, we separated the 77 largest stock and bond funds into 2 groups based on whether their operating expense ratios were higher or lower than the combined average for each type of fund⁵ in 1990. This resulted in 29 funds whose 1990 expense ratios were higher than the average charged by funds of their type in 1990 and 48 funds whose ratios were lower. As shown in figure 3.2, the average ratio for the 29 high-fee funds declined from \$1.22 to 92 cents; the average ratio charged by 48 low-fee funds remained relatively flat at about 54 cents.

⁵We computed separate averages for each fund type. This resulted in the 46 stock funds being separated into 19 funds with fees higher than the stock fund average fee and 27 funds below the average. The 31 bond funds included 10 high-fee funds and 21 low-fee funds.

Chapter 3

Mutual Fund Operating Expense Ratios Generally Declined

Figure 3.2: Average Operating Expense Ratio From 1990 to 1998 for Funds With Above and Below Average Fees in 1990



Source: GAO analysis of data from Morningstar, Inc., and Barron's Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly.

The relative asset growth of these funds also may help to explain the changes in their operating expense ratios. Our analysis of these large funds indicated that the 29 higher fee funds had experienced a larger increase in assets than the 48 lower fee funds. As shown in table 3.6, the 29 funds grew 901 percent in average fund size during 1990-98, almost twice the 496-percent growth in average fund size of the other 48 funds. These results are consistent with our previously discussed findings that greater asset growth is generally associated with greater reductions in expense ratios.

Chapter 3
Mutual Fund Operating Expense Ratios Generally Declined

Table 3.6: Change in Average Size in Assets and Operating Expense Ratios from 1990 to 1998 for Largest Funds by Relative Fee in 1990

Type of fund	Asset size of average fund (dollars in millions)			Operating expense ratio (in dollars per \$100 of assets)		
	1990	1998	Percentage change	1990	1998	Percentage change
High fee funds	\$1,515	\$15,162	901%	\$1.22	\$.92	-25%
Low fee funds	2,510	14,948	496	.54	.54	0
Total	2,135	15,029	604	80	68	-15%

Source: GAO analysis of data from Morningstar, Inc., and Barron's Lipper Mutual Funds Quarterly.

Competition in Mutual Fund Industry Does Not Focus on Fees

The structure and nature of competition in the mutual fund industry appear to resemble the type of market referred to by economists as “monopolistic competition.”¹ In industries with this type of competition, entry is easy and many firms are present. Also, products differ from one another, which lessens direct competition on the basis of price. Our review found that the mutual fund industry has characteristics of a monopolistically competitive market. Although thousands of mutual funds appear to compete actively for investor dollars, this competition has not focused primarily on the price of the service—i.e., fees charged to shareholders. Instead, mutual funds compete primarily on performance returns, which implicitly consider fees, services, and other fund characteristics.

Mutual Fund Industry Exhibits Characteristics of Monopolistic Competition

In general, the mutual fund industry exhibits the characteristics of monopolistic competition. As stated above, markets or industries where monopolistic competition prevails typically have large numbers of firms and easy entry into the market/industry. Such industries also offer products that differ from one another in terms of quality, features, or services included. Our review, and the analyses of others, found that the mutual fund industry, with its numerous participants, easy entry, and many different products, has the traits of a monopolistically competitive market.

Characteristics of a Monopolistically Competitive Market

Economists often classify industries by the prevailing type of competition for products in those markets. For instance, perfectly competitive markets have large numbers of competing firms, easy entry into the industry, and standardized products. Such markets have commodity-like products; all units offered are basically the same, such as agricultural products. In such markets, the products of one firm are often very close or perfect substitutes for those offered by other firms. Firms in markets with perfect competition are unable to charge a price different from that set by the market.

Industries where monopolistic competition prevails usually have large numbers of firms and easy industry entry, but products are differentiated by characteristics, such as quality or service. Because their products differ, firms can charge different prices from other firms in the industry. This ability to distinguish one firm’s product from that of others, results in somewhat higher pricing levels than would result from a perfectly competitive market. In such markets or industries products are promoted

¹ In addition to monopolistic competition, economists also classify the nature of competition prevailing in markets into at least three other types that include perfect competition, oligopoly, and monopoly. The distinguishing features of each type vary across various characteristics, including the number of firms, ease of entry, degree of product differentiation, and competitive strategies used.

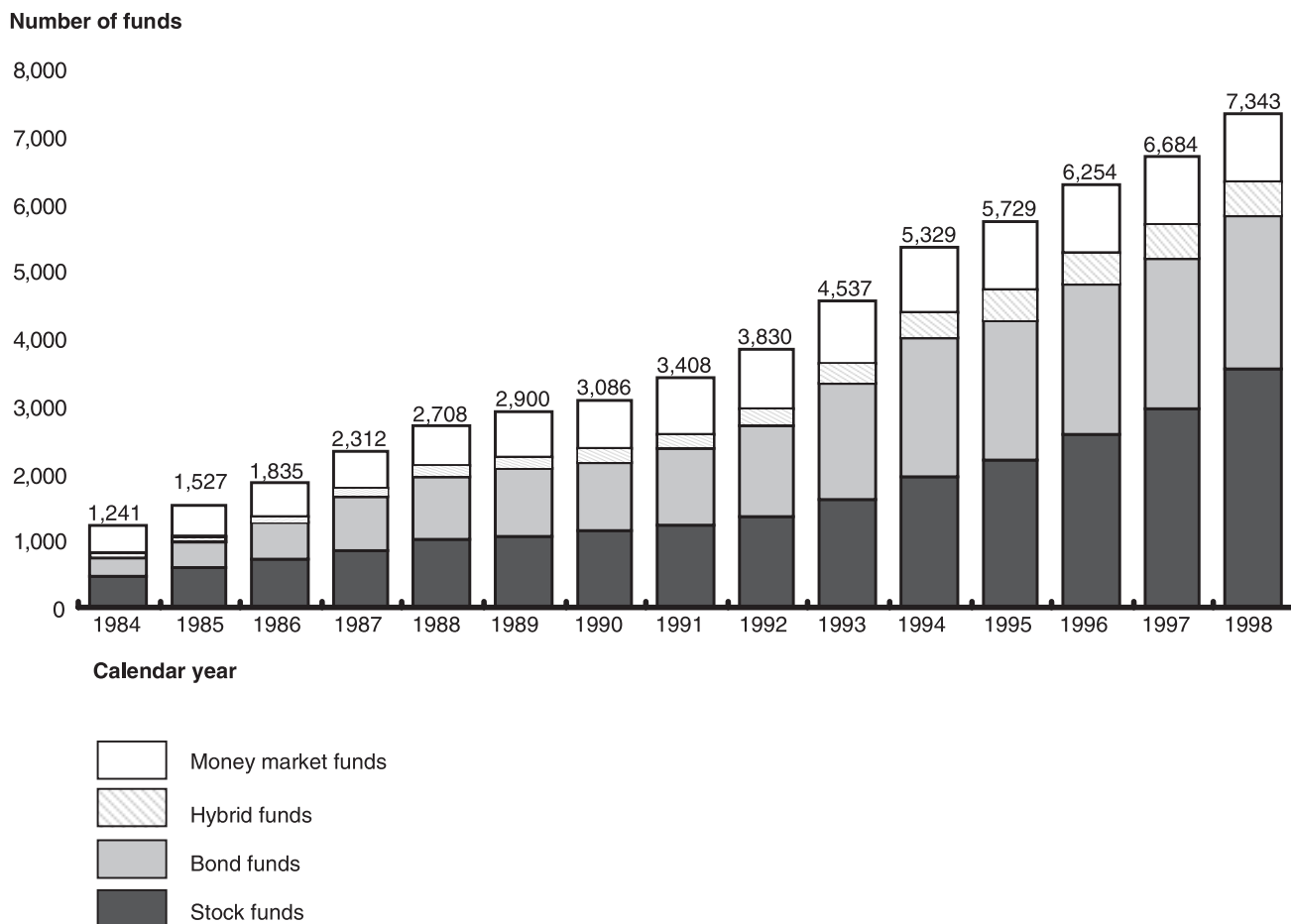
by brand, rather than price. Various features, such as quality, service, or other characteristics, differentiate products from one another, accordingly, prices differ.

The markets for various retail products and personal services are among those generally characterized by monopolistic competition. For example, one market that could be considered to have such competition could be medical services, such as doctors or dentists. These professionals generally do not compete primarily on the basis of the price of their services but instead rely on their reputations for quality and their physical location to attract customers. Other product markets that could be characterized as monopolistically competitive could include those for snack foods. Although a grocery would likely offer the widest selection and the lowest prices for snack foods, such products are also available at convenience stores, gas stations, and vending machines. These other retail outlets generally charge more for similar items but attract customers by offering more convenient locations and a reduced effort on the part of customers to make a purchase.

**Large Numbers of
Competing Funds and Fund
Complexes Exist**

The mutual fund industry is characterized by a large and growing number of funds. As shown in figure 4.1, the number of individual mutual funds in the industry has grown significantly since the early 1980s.

Figure 4.1: Number of Mutual Funds from 1984 to 1998



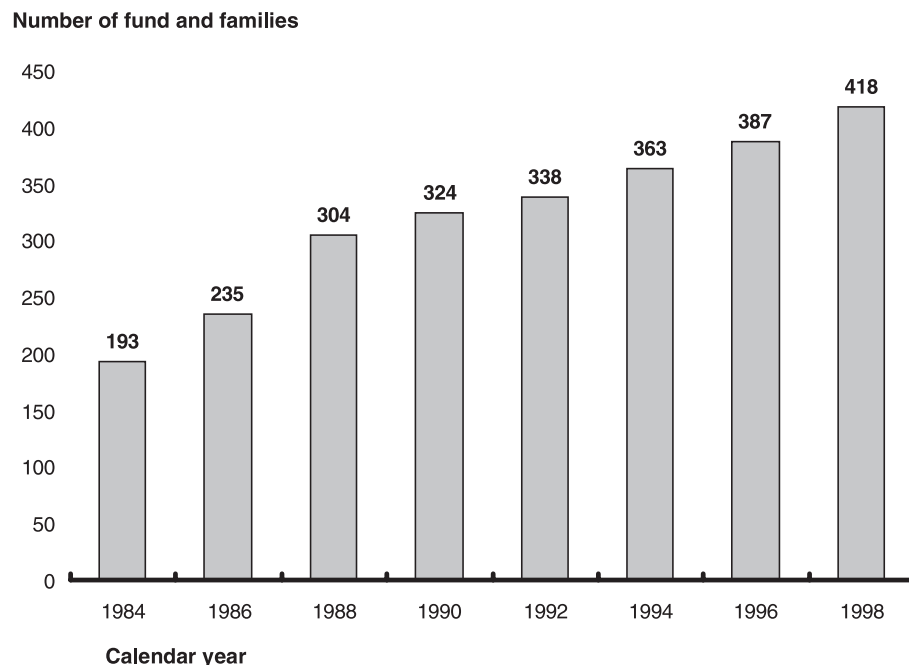
Source: GAO analysis of data from ICI.

Figure 4.1 shows that from 1984 to 1998, the total number of funds grew almost 500 percent, from over 1,200 to about 7,300. The number of stock funds increased 650 percent during this 15-year span to about 3,500, and the number of bond funds grew by 730 percent to about 2,300. The number of funds increased most dramatically during the 1990s, as over 4,200 new funds were created between 1990 and 1998. Stock funds represented more than half of the 1990s growth, increasing in number by over 2,300 funds.

The number of fund families also rose significantly during the same period. As shown in figure 4.2, the number of families grew from 193 in 1984 to 418 in 1998, a 117-percent increase over the 15-year period. Growth during the 1990s was more modest than in the 1980s, as the number of fund families

increased by 94 from 1990 to 1998 compared to an increase of 201 from 1984 to 1990.

Figure 4.2: Number of Mutual Fund Families for Selected Years From 1984 Through 1998



Source: ICI.

Concentration of assets under management in the mutual fund industry has changed little since 1984. Data compiled by an industry research organization showed that the 20 largest fund families accounted for about 65 percent of the total assets as of November 1998, compared to about 67 percent in March 1984. A statistical measure of industry concentration known as the Herfindahl-Hirshman Index,² which is used by the Department of Justice in assessing antitrust cases, also shows that the mutual fund industry is not concentrated. On a scale with a maximum value of 10,000, the mutual fund industry scored 329 as of May 1997, slightly lower than its score of 350 in 1984.

² The index determines a score of industry concentration based on the percentage market share of each firm in the industry. An index score of close to 0 would indicate perfect competition—where all firms have equal market shares—but a score of 10,000 would indicate a monopoly—where one firm has the entire market to itself. Therefore, the lower the index score, the higher the level of competition in the industry; conversely, the higher the score, the lower the level of competition.

Although Some Barriers Exist, Most Saw Relative Ease of Entry into Industry

Most of the officials we contacted, and documents we reviewed, indicated that entry into the mutual fund industry has been relatively easy. As previously discussed, ease of entry is a characteristic of monopolistic competition. In 1998 testimony before Congress,³ the ICI president indicated that barriers to entry were low, as start-up costs were not high and firms did not have to register in each state. Some officials explained that entry into the industry was also easy because new mutual fund advisers can quickly be operational by contracting with one or more of the various organizations that specialize in providing many, if not all, of the administrative services and functions required to operate a mutual fund.

Another factor officials cited that likely increases funds' ability to compete is the advent of fund "supermarkets." In recent years, various mutual fund or broker dealer firms have created fund supermarkets, through which they provide their customers the opportunity to invest in a wide range of funds offered by different mutual fund families. Industry officials said that such supermarkets provide small or new fund advisers access to investors.

Not all of the officials we contacted agreed that barriers to entry are low in the mutual fund industry. For example, an official of an organization that researches the mutual fund industry told us that start-up costs for new funds are high because a fund typically needs to attract at least \$100 million in assets before it adequately covers its costs. Another industry research organization official said that one significant barrier to entry is that new entrants lack a long enough performance history to be rated by the major mutual fund rating services. Many officials remarked that these ratings greatly influence investors' fund choices. Thus, new funds without such ratings would have much more difficulty attracting investors. Another barrier to entry faced by new fund advisers is obtaining adequate distribution of their funds. Recently, fund distributors, such as broker-dealer firms, have been reducing the number of funds and fund families they are willing to promote and increasing charges for their services, further escalating start-up costs.

Alternative Financial Products Also Represent Competition to Mutual Funds

In addition to the large numbers of competing firms in the mutual fund industry, other similar financial products also likely create competition for mutual funds. Currently investors seeking to invest in portfolios of securities, which is the type of investment that mutual funds offer, can also choose to purchase other products whose values are derived from the prices of various underlying securities. For example, World Equity

³ "Improving Price Competition for Mutual Funds and Bonds," before the Subcommittee on Finance and Hazardous Materials, House Commerce Committee, September 29, 1998.

Benchmark Shares (WEBS), which are traded on the American Stock Exchange, allow investors to purchase shares whose values are intended to track the prices of a selection of foreign stocks from various countries. Other firms have begun offering investors the opportunity to invest in custom-designed baskets of securities. With the dramatic decrease in the commissions charged to conduct individual securities transactions and the ability of investors to conduct their own transactions through on-line brokerage accounts, investors could also create their own portfolio of securities without having to invest in mutual funds.

Mutual Funds Offer Differentiated Products

Another characteristic of the mutual fund industry consistent with monopolistic competition is that it offers differentiated products. Although all mutual funds basically offer investors a standardized means for investing in a pool of diversified securities, firms offering mutual funds compete by attempting to differentiate their products from others. Mutual funds invest in a variety of securities that can be grouped primarily into three categories: stocks, bonds, and money market instruments. However, within these categories, funds can further differentiate the nature and/or mix of securities or bonds in the fund's portfolio, such as by investing in

- stocks of large, mid-size, or small companies;
- bonds of corporations or government entities;
- bonds with different maturities; or
- stocks or bonds of domestic or foreign companies or governments.

A fund's portfolio manager can be another differentiating factor. Funds commonly have specific portfolio managers who make investment decisions for the fund. At times, the popularity of a particular fund portfolio manager can be such that investors view that manager's fund as unique even though many other funds may exist that invest in similar types of securities.

Yet other differentiating factors would be the number and quality of services provided to shareholders. Among other services, the fund officials we met with spoke of providing 24-hour telephone service, allowing investors to access their accounts over the Internet, and providing well-trained customer service staff.

Mutual Fund Industry Generally Does Not Attempt to Compete On Basis of Fees

The competitive conduct of firms within the mutual fund industry does not generally emphasize the fees investors pay for the service. Instead, mutual fund advisers seek to differentiate their offerings primarily by promoting their funds' returns and their fund families' services. However, the potential for differentiation varies among the three primary fund categories. Because equity funds generally have the greatest variety of investment alternatives and styles, they have the greatest potential for differentiation. Because money market funds are the most standardized, they have the least potential for differentiation. Bond funds tend to be somewhere between the other two, although more like money market funds. Most officials saw these differences as leading to greater variation in the level of fees charged by stock funds than for bond and money market funds.

In general, firms offering mutual funds attempt to compete by emphasizing factors other than the operating expense fees they charge for their services. Although markets with commoditylike products usually compete primarily on the basis of price, when products can be differentiated, price competition tends to be less important than other factors. One academic analysis⁴ characterizes a monopolistically competitive industry as offering products that are near, but imperfect, substitutes. According to this study, to avoid competing on price, firms will strive to differentiate their products from those of their rivals, allowing them to set prices within a market niche. The authors describe various other factors, besides price, through which mutual funds can seek to differentiate themselves. These factors include funds' investment selections, trading and execution abilities, customer recordkeeping and reporting, and investor liquidity services. For example, funds can emphasize investor liquidity services by allowing investors to switch from one fund to other funds in the fund family by telephone.

In the academic papers and speeches we reviewed and the interviews we conducted, observers agreed that although the importance of fees to competition varies by fund type, mutual funds do not compete primarily on the basis of their operating expense fees. Observers noted that because the range of securities in which money market funds and bond funds can invest is generally more restricted than for other funds, they are not as differentiated and are more commoditylike. Therefore, fees for these funds can have a greater effect on their performance relative to other money market and bond funds and, thus, on their ability to compete. According to

⁴ "Competition and Change in the Mutual Fund Industry," Financial Services: Perspectives and Challenges, Erik R. Sirri and Peter Tufano, HBS Press (Boston, MA.: 1993).

one industry research organization's analysis, fees can dictate whether bond funds succeed or fail. This analysis indicated that for one type of fund—municipal bond funds—just a few basis points difference in operating expense fees can be critical to the overall performance of the fund because the returns on these funds vary so little from those of their peers.⁵

The greater importance of operating expense fee levels to money market and bond funds influences the fees that fund companies set for these types of funds. For example, firms offering money market funds, for competitive reasons, often waive portions of asset fees as a means of attracting additional assets to their funds. Industry officials also said that the less diverse nature of money market and bond funds contributes to their having lower fees than most stock funds.

For stock funds, industry officials explained that the large variety of investment objectives could lead to a wider range of investment returns and thus greater possibilities for differentiation among funds. An industry research organization official explained that because investment returns can vary much more from one stock fund to another, the fee levels of stock funds may be much less relevant to their relative performance. For this reason, officials generally acknowledged that firms offering stock funds did not attempt to compete primarily on the basis of operating expense fees charged by the fund. The chairman of one mutual fund firm stated that although price competition exists among money market and bond funds, for which the impact of operating expense fees was more obvious, stock funds were not subject to nearly as much price competition. In addition, an official of an industry research organization told us that because the range of returns for stock funds can be wider, the investment manager can add more value; thus, the operating expense fees on such funds are higher than those for money market and bond funds.

Instead of competing on the basis of the price of providing mutual fund services, fund advisers generally emphasize the performance of their funds when attempting to differentiate their funds from those of their competitors. Mutual fund firm officials and others in the industry acknowledged that funds compete primarily on the basis of their performance. However, mutual fund adviser and other industry officials also observed that because funds are required to report performance

⁵ Industry-Wide Expense Trends: Should Industry Growth Necessarily Translate into Lower Average Expense Ratios?, Blue Plate Special, Mutual Fund Café, Financial Research Corporation (Jan. 5, 1998; http://www.mcafe.com/pantry/bps_010598.html).

figures net of expenses, operating expense fees are indirectly taken into account in their competition.

To document factors mutual fund companies emphasize in their promotions, we analyzed a selection of mutual fund print advertisements for content. We evaluated 43 mutual fund advertisements for 28 different mutual fund families, which appeared in 5 randomly selected issues of popular business, news, or personal finance magazines and 1 business newspaper between July and November 1999. In 27 of the 43 advertisements, performance was the primary emphasis; and attributes of the fund adviser, such as its experience or strategy, were primarily emphasized in another 11. Fees and other charges were the primary emphasis in 2 of the 43 advertisements, both of which were from the same fund family. However, 16 of the 43 advertisements included statements that the funds described did not charge sales loads.

Opinions Were Mixed on the Effect of Competition on Fees

Opinions were mixed as to whether the large number of competing funds and fund complexes provided effective fee competition. Officials from mutual fund advisers, industry associations, and research organizations we contacted generally agreed that the large number of funds and fund complexes in the industry leads to active competition, which affects fees. An official of a bank-affiliated fund adviser told us that the industry is extremely competitive because the competition among so many different companies and funds highlights and maintains downward pressure on fees. Ease of entry to the industry could also exert downward pressure on fees. One mutual fund adviser official remarked that in an environment of easy entry where fees were too high, other firms would enter the industry and charge lower fees.

However, other officials, including financial planning firm representatives and academic researchers, disagreed with the contention that competition among the many mutual fund firms in the industry serves to effectively lower fees. An academic researcher testified before Congress on mutual fund issues that although the industry competes vigorously against other financial services industries, fee competition within the industry is not as effective, noting that most economists view competition in the mutual fund industry as imperfect. A senior official at one mutual fund firm said in a speech⁶ that about 50 fund advisers actually attempt to compete across all types of funds. He asserted that in other industries, this number would be

⁶ Remarks on Receiving the Special Achievement Award of the National Association of Personal Financial Advisors, John C. Bogle, Senior Chairman, The Vanguard Group (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 4, 1999).

enough to produce fierce price competition, but he found price competition conspicuously absent among mutual fund advisers.

**Competition on the Basis of
Price Not Completely
Absent**

Despite the fact that competition in the mutual fund industry does not focus primarily on the price of mutual fund services, some evidence of competition on the basis of fees did exist. For example, the two largest fund groups are among the industry's low-cost providers, with one group actively promoting its low fees and expenses as a means of attracting customers. Regulatory officials told us that the increased popularity of low-cost index funds, whose share of total stock fund assets increased from less than 2 percent in 1990 to 7 percent in 1999, was evidence that competition on the basis of fees occurs and that some investors are mindful of it.

Mutual Funds Are Not Required to Disclose Actual Amounts Charged to Individual Investors

Under existing law, mutual funds are required to inform investors of sales charges and ongoing operating expenses for the funds in which they invest. However, funds are not required to provide information on the actual dollar amount of each investor's share of the operating expenses that were deducted from the fund. This contrasts with most other financial products and services for which specific dollar charges are generally required to be disclosed. Studies and data that others, and we, collected indicate that mutual fund investors have focused more on fund performance and other factors than on fee levels. In contrast to the consideration they give fees, investors appeared more concerned over the level of mutual fund sales charges (loads). Industry participants acknowledged that such concerns have resulted in fund advisers lowering the loads charged on mutual funds since the 1980s.

Opinions varied on the usefulness to investors of the required fee disclosures. The mutual fund and regulatory officials we contacted generally considered mutual fund disclosures to be extensive and adequate for informing prospective investors of the fees they would likely incur on their mutual fund investments. However, some private money managers, industry researchers, and legal experts indicated that the current fee disclosures do not make investors sufficiently aware of the fees they pay. Having mutual funds disclose to each investor the actual dollar amount of fees he or she paid was one way suggested to increase investor awareness and to potentially stimulate fee-based competition among fund advisers. Although exact fee computations would require fund advisers and others to make systems changes and incur additional costs, alternative, less costly ways may exist for computing the fee.

Required Fee Disclosures Do Not Provide Amounts Paid by Individual Investors in Dollars

Neither federal statute nor SEC regulations expressly limit the fees that mutual funds deduct for operating expenses. Instead, mutual fund regulations focus on ensuring that investors are provided with adequate disclosure of the risks and costs of investing in mutual funds. At the time of purchase, mutual funds are required by law to provide certain information to potential fund investors about the funds, including information about the fees they will pay. This fee information is governed by certain provisions of the Investment Company Act of 1940 and various SEC rules and regulations that require fee disclosures so that investors can make more informed investment decisions.

Presently, all funds must provide investors with disclosures about the fund in a written prospectus. SEC rules require that the prospectus include a fee table containing certain specific information about the sales charges,

operating expenses, and other fees that an investor will pay as part of investing in the fund.

Figure 5.1 shows an example of a fee table for a typical mutual fund. As shown in the figure, the fee table required for mutual funds primarily consists of three sections. The first section presents information on shareholder transaction expenses, which investors pay out of the amount they invest. These include any sales charges or loads that will apply to the purchase of the fund shares, which are shown as a percentage of the amount to be invested. Investors are also to be informed of the percentage charges that may be assessed at redemption¹ or that apply to reinvested dividends or other distributions.² In addition, some funds charge redemption or exchange fees. Redemption fees are expressed as a percentage of the amount redeemed and are paid at the time the investor sells fund shares. Exchange fees can be assessed when investors exchange shares of one fund for shares of another fund in the same family. The fund depicted in figure 5.1 charges its investors a 5.75-percent load but does not levy any other sales charges.

¹ Funds must disclose the maximum of any deferred sales charges, which include sales charges that apply to the purchase of fund shares payable either upon redemption, in installments, or both expressed as a percentage of the offering price at the time of purchase or the NAV at time of purchase. These charges typically decline over a period of years such that if an investor holds the shares for the specified time, the charge will be waived.

² Funds must disclose the sales charges imposed on reinvested dividends and other distributions, such as returns of capital, as a percentage of the amount to be invested or distributed.

Figure 5.1: Example of a Fee Table
Required as Part of Mutual Fund Fee
Disclosures

FEES AND EXPENSES OF THE FUND	
<i>The following describes the fees and expenses that you may pay if you buy and hold shares of the fund.</i>	
Shareholder Fees <i>(fees paid directly from your investment)</i>	
Maximum sales charge imposed on purchases <i>(as a percentage of offering price)</i>	5.75%
Maximum sales charge imposed on reinvested dividends	0%
Maximum deferred sales charge	0%
Redemption or exchange fees	0%
Annual Fund Operating Expenses <i>(expenses that are deducted from fund assets)</i>	
Management Fees	0.34%
Service (12b-1) Fees	0.25%
Other Expenses	0.11%
Total Annual Fund Operating Expenses	0.70%
Example	
This Example is intended to help you compare the cost of investing in the fund with the cost of investing in other mutual funds.	
The Example assumes that you invest \$10,000 in the fund for the time periods indicated and then redeem all of your shares at the end of those periods. The Example also assumes that your investment has a 5% return each year and that the fund's operating expenses remain the same. Although your actual costs may be higher or lower, based on these assumptions your costs would be:	
One year	\$ 642
Three years	\$ 786
Five years	\$ 942
Ten years	\$1,395

Source: GAO example based on fee table in actual mutual fund prospectus.

The middle section of the fee table shown in figure 5.1 presents the fund's total operating expenses incurred over the previous year. Funds are

required to provide information on the management fee, distribution and/or service fees (referred to as 12b-1 fees), and any other expenses that are deducted from the fund's assets or charged to all shareholder accounts. Other expenses deducted from fund assets would include amounts the fund paid for transfer agent services, as well as record-keeping, printing, mailing, or other services. These fees and expenses are deducted from the fund's assets on an ongoing basis and presented in the fee table, in aggregate, as a percentage of the fund's average net assets for the prior year. In the fee table shown in figure 5.1, the total expenses deducted from the fund's assets over the course of the prior year represented 0.70 percent of its average net assets for that period.

In the last section of the fee table, mutual funds are required to present a hypothetical example of the total charges an investor is likely to incur on a fund investment. This portion of the fee table must show costs the investor will likely incur over 1-, 3-, 5-, and 10-year periods, assuming a \$10,000 investment in the fund, a 5-percent return each year, and fund operating expenses that remain constant throughout each period. SEC requires that the fee table include a statement that information in the example is intended to allow investors to compare the cost of investing in the fund with that of investing in other mutual funds.³

In addition to the disclosures required when investors initially purchase shares, mutual funds are required to provide shareholders of their funds, at least semiannually, reports that also include certain fee and expense information. In these reports, funds are to include a statement of operations that shows the total dollar amount of the various expenses the fund incurred over the prior period. Funds must also indicate the percentage of average net fund assets that these total expenses represent.⁴ Also, shareholders who purchase additional shares during the year must be provided an updated prospectus document, at least annually, which would include the fee table with the latest year's expense information. In

³ The disclosure requirements described here have been the result of various changes over time. The fee table was first required to be provided as the result of rule amendments in 1988. In 1998, the hypothetical investment amount illustrated in the fee table example was also increased from \$1,000 to \$10,000 to reflect the size of the more typical fund investment. Most recently, in March 2000, SEC proposed that mutual funds be required to report investment returns on an after-tax basis in prospectuses and shareholder reports because of the significant impact that taxes can have on an investor's return.

⁴ Specifically, the statement of operations must list the amounts paid by a fund for all services and other expenses in dollar amounts. These may include amounts paid for investment advisory services, management and administrative services, marketing and distribution, taxes, custodian fees, auditing fees, shareholder reports, and annual meeting and proxy costs.

practice, many mutual funds send an updated prospectus to all of their shareholders annually.

However, mutual funds are not required to provide investors with information showing the specific dollar amount of operating expenses that they paid as part of holding their mutual fund shares. Mutual fund shareholders generally receive a quarterly statement of account⁵ that denotes any money balances or account activity during the quarter. These quarterly statements generally indicate the number of shares held by the investor, the NAV of those shares as of the statement date, and the corresponding total value of the shares. These statements do not show, in either dollars or as a percentage of assets,⁶ the shareholder's portion of the operating expenses that were deducted from the fund's assets.

Charges for Other Financial Services Typically Disclosed in Dollars

Although mutual funds do not provide individual shareholders information on the specific dollar amounts of all fees paid, most other financial services or products are generally required to make such disclosures.

To compare the information investors receive on mutual funds, we collected information on the extent to which the users of certain other financial products or services are informed of specific dollar charges for such products or services. We collected this comparative information on products and services that we believed mutual fund investors would be likely to use, such as bank deposit accounts or stock or bond transactions through a securities broker-dealer. Our information sources for determining disclosure requirements for these other products included applicable federal statutes or regulations; in some cases, we summarized common industry practices regarding fee disclosure information. As shown in table 5.3, investors in other financial products or users of other financial services generally receive information that discloses the specific dollar amounts for fees or other charges they pay.

⁵ Mutual fund shares distributed by broker-dealers are subject to SEC and NASD rules, including NASD rule 2340 that requires that quarterly account statements be provided to investors. Some banks also sell mutual funds but most use securities broker-dealers to conduct such activities. In a limited number of transactions, bank personnel sell mutual funds to investors and will either issue periodic statements similar to those issued by broker-dealers themselves, or such periodic statements will be issued by the broker-dealer who distributed the shares to the bank. Furthermore, Title II of the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act passed in 1999 will require that banks conducting more than 500 securities transactions per year move such activities into a securities broker-dealer after May 12, 2001.

⁶ Funds sometimes charge investors other fees, such as for account maintenance or wire transfers, that are set dollar amounts that may be deducted from an investor's account and shown on subsequent statements.

Table 5.1: Fee Disclosure Practices for Selected Financial Services or Products

Type of product or service	Disclosure requirement
Deposit accounts	Depository institutions are required to disclose itemized fees, in dollar amounts, on periodic statements.
Bank trust services	Although covered by varying state laws, regulatory and association officials for banks indicated that trust service charges are generally shown as specific dollar amounts.
Investment services provided by individual investment advisers	When the adviser has the right to deduct fees and other charges directly from the investor's account, the dollar amounts of such charges are required to be disclosed to the investor.
Wrap accounts ^a	Provider is required to disclose dollar amount of fees on investors' statements.
Stock, bond, or other securities purchases	Broker-dealers are required to report specific dollar amounts charged as commissions to investors.
Real estate property purchases	Brokerage commissions generally are specified as a percentage of property value but disclosed as a specific dollar amount on purchase documents.

^aIn a wrap account, a customer receives investment advisory and brokerage execution services from a broker-dealer or other financial intermediary for a "wrapped" fee that is not based on transactions in the customer's account.

Source: Applicable disclosure regulations and/or rules, and/or industry practice.

The information in the table illustrates that in contrast to mutual funds, the providers of the featured services and products usually disclose the specific dollar amount of the charges their users incur. We believe that such disclosures may be one reason for the apparently vigorous price competition among firms offering these services and products. For example, securities commissions were formerly fixed by law, with transactions commonly costing hundreds of dollars. In 1975, SEC invalidated fixed commission rates as being in violation of the antitrust laws. Subsequently, certain securities firms began competing for customers primarily by promoting their lower charges for conducting transactions. Competition among these firms, commonly known as discount brokers, has been heightened by their increasing use of the Internet, with their commissions for buying or selling securities now less than \$10 or \$20 at some firms. Banks also frequently compete for customers on the basis of the fees they charge on checking accounts, and advertisements for "no-fee checking" have become common.

However, the fee disclosures provided by mutual funds may exceed those of certain other investment products, although such products may not be completely analogous to mutual funds. For example, fixed-rate annuities or deposit accounts that provide investors a guaranteed return on their principal at a fixed rate do not charge the purchasers of these products any operating expense fees. The financial institutions offering these products

generate their profits on these products by attempting to invest their customers' funds in other investment vehicles earning higher rates of return than they are obligated to pay to the purchasers of the annuities. However, the returns they earn on customer funds and the costs they incur to generate those returns are not disclosed as operating expenses to their customers.

Mutual funds differ from such products in that they do not guarantee their investors a specific return, and their fund fees are directly deducted from fund assets for specific expenses associated with operating the funds, including adviser compensation for its investment management services. Thus, investors placing money in mutual funds are essentially hiring the fund adviser to provide money management services rather than purchasing an investment product with a stated return as they do with annuities and other fixed-rate investment products. As a result, disclosure of the dollar amounts of mutual fund fees would be akin to the dollar amount disclosures that customers receive for brokerage services or checking account services. In contrast, customers purchasing or placing money in fixed-rate investments, such as certificates of deposit or annuities, are not told the amount that the financial institution earns on the customer's capital. In these cases, the customer is purchasing a product with specific features, including its promised return, rather than obtaining a service from the provider as they are with mutual funds.

Mutual Fund Fees Are Not a Primary Consideration for Investors

According to surveys and other information, investors tend to consider other factors before considering fees charged by mutual funds. On the other hand, investors appear to be more sensitive to mutual fund loads, and these charges have declined over time.

Various Other Factors Get Greater Consideration Than Fees

Investors themselves have indicated that other factors take precedence over fees when they evaluate mutual funds. To assess the extent to which investors consider fee information when selecting and evaluating mutual funds, we consulted a wide variety of sources, including academic literature, industry research firms and other industry experts, mutual fund advisers, industry associations, and regulators. Our review of this information revealed that when evaluating funds, investors generally gave greater consideration to several other factors before considering fund fees. The primary factor investors used in selecting mutual funds was generally the fund's performance. Other factors also given greater consideration than fees included fund manager or company characteristics, the investments made by funds, or fund risk levels. For example, a 1995

random survey conducted on ICI's behalf of individuals who had recently made stock or bond fund purchases⁷ asked what information they had considered beforehand. Cited by 75 percent of the 653 respondents, fund performance was most frequently considered, followed by fund risk (69 percent), investment goals (49 percent), and portfolio securities (46 percent). Cited by only 43 percent of the respondents, fees and expenses ranked fifth.

Even after purchasing shares, investors apparently continue to consider other factors ahead of fund fees when reviewing their mutual funds. A 1997 ICI report⁸ relating the results of interviews with over 1,000 recent mutual fund purchasers, selected at random, stated that 76 percent of those surveyed had considered fees and expenses before making their purchases. However, respondents cited five other factors, including account value and rate of return, as information they monitored more frequently than fees and expenses after they had made their purchases.

The apparent lack of investors' attention to fees by investors has been a source of concern for regulators. During testimony before the House Subcommittee on Finance and Hazardous Materials of the Committee on Commerce,⁹ SEC's Chairman stated: "The Commission is very concerned... that many fund investors are not paying attention to the available information about fees." He further stated that the agency's research showed that fewer than one in six fund investors understood that higher expenses can lead to lower returns, and fewer than one in five could give any estimate of expenses for their largest mutual fund. He cited other research that found that about 40 percent of fund investors surveyed believed incorrectly that a fund's annual operating expenses have no effect on its gains.

Both critics and industry participants told us that the unprecedented bull market of the last 10 years has allowed investors to ignore the impact of fees. In a January 1998 study¹⁰ that looked at the trend in mutual fund fees, one research organization noted that fees are not a primary consideration for investors and that as long as stock prices are rising, investors would

⁷ Shareholder Assessment of Risk Disclosure Methods, ICI (Washington, DC: Spr. 1996).

⁸ Understanding Shareholders' Use of Information and Advisers, ICI (Washington, DC: Spr. 1997).

⁹ "Improving Price Competition for Mutual Funds and Bonds," before the Subcommittee on Finance and Hazardous Materials, House Commerce Committee, Sept. 29, 1998.

¹⁰ "Industry-wide Expense Trends", Mutual Fund Café: Blue Plate Special, Financial Research Corporation, (Boston, MA: Jan. 5, 1998).

accept even the highest of fees. Some industry participants stated that when market returns eventually revert to lower levels, investors might then take more interest in the fees they pay on their mutual funds.

Some research indicated that the majority of mutual fund investors are likely to be less sensitive to the fees their funds charge because they rely on the advice of investment professionals when selecting funds. According to research by ICI and others, the majority of mutual fund investors make their purchases on the basis of advice from an investment professional, such as a broker-dealer representative or private money manager. For example, ICI's 1997 report on the 1995 survey of over 1,000 investors who had recently purchased mutual funds stated that about 60 percent had consulted with investment advisors to assist with their decisions. Some industry participants said that investors who rely on investment advisors are not likely to exert much pressure for lowering fees.

Investors Appear More Aware of Sales Loads than Operating Expense Fees

Although investors do not appear to give primary consideration to the fees funds charge as a percentage of fund assets, they are aware of loads. Many officials we interviewed attributed load declines to investor awareness.

Various studies have documented the fact that the share of funds charging front-end loads has been declining over time. For example, one industry research organization reported that the share of front-end load fund sales had gone from 90 percent of sales by third-party sales forces (such as broker-dealers) in 1990 to about 38 percent by 1998.¹¹

In addition to the declining sales of front-end load funds, sales of no-load funds have risen. Table 5.2 shows the relative share of mutual funds purchased by investors using two of the primary distribution methods used by fund advisers: (1) sales by proprietary or third-party sales forces, such as the sales representatives of a broker-dealer, who are generally compensated by a sales load; and (2) sales directly to investors by the fund through its own mutual fund distributor, which is the customary method for no-load funds. As shown in table 5.2, new sales of funds sold directly to investors rose from about a third, to almost 40 percent of the dollar volume of all new mutual funds sold in 1998.

¹¹ "Pricing Structure Trends: Prime Destination for Net Flows is Back-End Loaded Shares," Mutual Fund Café: Blue Plate Special, Financial Research Corporation (Boston, MA: Feb. 1, 1999).

Table 5.2: Sales of Mutual Funds for Select Years 1984 to 1998 by Type of Distribution Method**Dollars in millions**

Year	Distribution method			
	Sales by third-party sales forces		Direct sales by advisers to investors	
	Sales	Market share	Dollar volume	Market share
1984	\$26,893	67%	\$13,522	33%
1991	124,522	62%	74,806	38%
1998	542,600	61%	348,210	39%

Source: GAO analysis of ICI data.

The level of loads charged by mutual funds has also declined since the 1980s. The customary percentage charged as a front-end load in 1980 or earlier was 8.5 percent. This amount has declined to the 5-percent range, according to officials from the fund advisers, industry research, and other organizations we contacted. Our analysis of the 77 largest stock, bond, and hybrid mutual funds in existence from 1990 to 1998 also illustrated this trend. In 1990, 43 of these funds charged investors loads. Using data from 1984, which was the earliest period we reviewed, we found that 16 of these funds had loads of more than 6 percent, including 14 that charged at least 8 percent. However, by 1998, 5 funds had eliminated their loads; of the remaining 38 load funds, none charged a load greater than 6 percent, with the average load being 4.62 percent. During this same period, some of these funds were raising their loads. The loads charged by six funds increased from 4.00 to 4.25 percent, and one fund raised its load from 4.00 to 4.75 percent.

Investor awareness was the reason industry participants cited for investor resistance to paying loads and the overall decline in loads. According to some industry participants, investors had become increasingly resistant to paying the higher front-end loads. An industry expert told us that investors are generally more concerned about the concept of a front-end load because they “see it occur” when the amount is deducted from their initial investments on their account statements. Operating expense fees, on the other hand, are deducted from fund assets rather than from the individual investor’s account. Research findings indicate that investors continue to resist load charges. For example, officials from one industry research organization told us their research found that up to a third of mutual fund investors would never be willing to pay a load or commission when buying a fund. In another research organization’s survey, only 4 percent of over

4,000 investors and potential investors queried cited mutual fund loads as their preferred means of paying for investment advice.¹²

Opinions Varied on Adequacy of Current Fee Disclosures

Industry participants' opinions varied on the adequacy of mutual fund fee disclosures to investors. Many, including fund adviser officials and researchers, indicated that current disclosures adequately highlight the fees that investors can expect to pay on their mutual fund investments. However, others, including academic researchers and private money managers we contacted, raised concerns about the adequacy of the disclosures. Some officials suggested that additional information, such as dollar amounts or comparative data on other funds' charges, would be useful.

Most Officials Found Disclosures Adequate

Most of the officials from the mutual fund advisers, research organizations, regulators, and other organizations we contacted said that mutual fund fee disclosures made under the current requirements provided adequate and important information to investors. Several officials noted that investors can use the standardized information found in the fee table of the prospectus to compare costs easily between funds. For example, one mutual fund adviser official likened the percentage fee information in the fee table to unit pricing that allows consumers to compare the cost per ounce of various products in grocery stores. Several officials also said that mutual funds make more extensive disclosures than those made by other financial services and products, and two noted that U.S. mutual fund disclosures are more detailed than those of other countries.

Some Expressed Concerns Regarding the Adequacy of Mutual Fund Fee Disclosures

Although most opinions were positive about the fee information that mutual funds are currently required to disclose, some industry observers raised concerns about the adequacy of these disclosures. Several, including academic researchers, investment advisers and regulatory representatives, saw problems with the fee disclosures. A private money manager we interviewed questioned the usefulness of hypothetical fee disclosures in prospectuses, citing the fact that investors have not exited from high-cost funds to any large degree. In his opinion, these disclosures are too simplistic, and they fail to include benchmarks or indicate the impact of fees on returns. He commented that "No one sends the investor a bill, and the fund simply quietly and continually deducts its fees. The result is that the information is ignored." Two researchers and a mutual fund representative also stated that investors ignore fee disclosures.

¹² 1996 Series on Personal Financial Advice: Payment Practices Preferred by Customers (Report 5 of 9), Dalbar, Inc. (Boston, MA: Nov. 1996).

Some mutual fund adviser officials told us that current disclosures may actually provide investors too much information. Given the prominence of fee information in required disclosures, some fund adviser officials expressed concern that disclosures could emphasize cost over performance or other factors important to investors. Another criticized the fee table as being too complex, and possibly confusing, for investors.

As mentioned earlier, the SEC Chairman has stated that investors are not paying attention to the available fee information. He voiced concern that the fee structures of some mutual funds are too complex, making it more difficult for investors to evaluate overall costs and services. In a 1998 speech to an ICI gathering, the chairman asked “Do you really expect investors to understand alphabet soup of A, B, C, D, I, Y, and Z shares? To figure what combination of front-end loads, CDSLs,¹³ 12b-1 charges, commissions and who knows what else they are paying?” He also has urged the mutual fund industry to place less emphasis on fund performance and more emphasis on clearly detailing fund risks and expenses, or fees, as the industry markets its products. He warned the industry that by focusing fund selling strategy on the bull market to the exclusion of other key variables, such as risk and expense, the industry is setting itself up to disappoint millions of investors.

To address this issue, SEC has taken steps of its own to encourage investors’ use of disclosures. In April 1999, the agency began offering a computer program, publicly accessible over the Internet, which lets investors compare the cost of owning a particular fund with the costs of similar funds. To use this program, an investor enters information from a fund prospectus, and the program calculates the effect of fees and other charges on the investment in the fund over time.¹⁴

Disclosing to Investors Actual Dollars Paid in Fees Was One Suggested Improvement

To improve fee disclosure to mutual fund investors, some officials favored providing investors with a personalized fee statement that would show the specific amount of fees paid by the investor on his or her holdings. In his September 1998 testimony, the SEC Chairman indicated that the information from such statements might help investors understand the relationship between fees and returns on their mutual fund investments.

¹³ CDSL is an acronym that stands for “contingent deferred sales load,” a charge, or load, imposed at the time of redemption. This is an alternative to front-end loads to compensate financial professionals for their services, and it typically applies only for the first few years of share ownership.

¹⁴ Information about the mutual fund cost calculator is available on the Internet at www.sec.gov/news/press/99-36.txt.

Others who advocated requiring mutual funds to provide investors with the dollar amount of fees they paid indicated that such disclosure would increase investors' awareness of the fees they are charged. We interviewed representatives of industry research firms, industry experts, and private money managers, who supported personalized expense statements for investors. Generally, they told us that such personalized expense statements would be useful to investors, and they would be more likely to focus shareholders' attention on costs than the fee table in the prospectus currently does. Representatives of some mutual fund advisers also acknowledged that such statements could serve to focus investors' attention on the fees they pay on their mutual funds.

Some officials indicated that such disclosures may also increase competition among fund advisers on the basis of fees. An attorney specializing in mutual fund law told us that requiring funds to disclose the dollar amount of fees in investor account statements would likely encourage fund advisers to compete on the basis of fees. He believed that this could spur new entrants to the mutual fund industry that would promote their funds on the basis of their low costs, in much the same way that low-cost discount broker-dealers entered the securities industry. A market participant told us that having dollar amounts disclosed on investors' periodic statements could also lead to increased fee-based competition among mutual fund advisers. His expectation is that after such information begins to appear in investor statements, fees will probably be more frequently mentioned in fund advertisements.

Information from a survey of investors generally indicated that they supported getting dollar amount disclosures of the mutual fund fees they paid but would be unwilling to pay for this disclosure. We obtained information from a large securities broker-dealer that had recently included a number of mutual fund fee questions in a November 1999 survey as part of a series of periodic customer surveys it conducts. Of more than 500 responses to the question "If mutual fund companies were to provide the specific dollar amount of fees paid on your investment per quarter, how useful would it be to you?" about 89 percent indicated that the information would be useful or very useful. However, of over 500 responses to a question asking if respondents would be willing to pay for this information, about 54 percent indicated "very unlikely," versus about 14 percent who checked "very likely" or "somewhat likely," although no estimates of the cost were provided.

Industry Representatives Raised Concerns Over the Effort to Produce, and the Usefulness of, Such Statements

We also solicited the views of industry representatives on the feasibility of providing personalized fee statements for their shareholders. Representatives of several mutual fund advisers and broker-dealer firms that market mutual funds to their customers responded that changing their accounting systems to accommodate such statements would be costly and would be of limited benefit to individual investors. They stated that providing accurate fee information specific to each investor would require keeping detailed records on fund expenses incurred each day and apportioning them daily among investor holdings.

Another complication mutual fund adviser officials cited was that in some cases, broker-dealers, rather than the advisers, maintain a significant portion of mutual fund investors' records. As a result, these broker-dealers, too, would have to change their accounting and information management systems. A fund adviser maintains a single account for each broker, called an omnibus account, which includes all shares held by that broker-dealer's customers. Because the fund adviser has no record of the individual customers included in each omnibus account, broker-dealers would have to set up their own systems to apportion fee information among their customers' accounts. This would require broker-dealers to revise their accounting and information management systems to receive the cost data from each fund adviser and then apportion this information among customer accounts holding that adviser's funds.

One broker-dealer with about 6.5 million customer accounts estimated that developing the systems necessary to produce such statements might cost as much as \$4 million, with additional annual costs of \$5 million. At our request, representatives of a prominent industry research firm estimated the likely costs to funds for providing quarterly personalized expense statements. They responded that programming to get the necessary information would require some up-front fixed costs, but they would probably amount to less than a penny per shareholder. Besides these up-front costs, fund adviser representatives had indicated to us that there would also be annual costs to provide the statements. Using the estimates of the broker-dealer mentioned previously, we calculated that its costs to provide such statements would be less than \$1 per customer per year.

Mutual fund adviser officials and others also questioned whether the information provided by these personalized fee statements would be meaningful. One objection they raised was that unlike the standardized percentage fee information in the fee table, individual investors' fee information would not be directly comparable to the fees they incur on other funds because of differences in the number of shares held or the

investment objectives of the funds. Some officials said that investors might make inappropriate investment decisions solely on the basis of the dollar amounts of fees they paid. Some said, for example, that investors might choose to exchange their stock fund shares for those of money market funds, which typically have lower fees than stock funds, even though it may not be appropriate in light of their investment and financial goals. Industry representatives also pointed out that because fee disclosure is intended to help investors make investment decisions, the information on periodic statements would come too late, after an investor has already made his or her investment decision.

We agree with industry representatives that the operating expenses, currently shown in the required fee table disclosures as a percentage of fund assets, are more appropriate for comparing fee levels across funds when investors are initially choosing between funds. However, the purpose of the dollar amount disclosures would be to further highlight for investors the costs of the mutual funds in which they have invested and to supplement the disclosures they already receive. Concerns that investors might make inappropriate investment decisions based solely on the dollar costs of their mutual funds could be addressed by advising investors to consider such specific fee information in conjunction with their own investment goals and other factors, rather than isolated from other considerations.

Less Costly Means of Calculating the Individual Dollar Costs of Fees Might Be Considered

Providing investors with information on the dollar amounts they pay in mutual fund fees likely could be accomplished in various ways. As noted above, some industry participants provided estimates of their costs to calculate exact dollar amounts of fees each investor paid during a statement period. However, less costly alternatives may exist. For example, one fund adviser representative suggested that an alternative means of calculating the fee would be to multiply the average number of shares in each account during the statement period by the fund's expense ratio for that period. He stated that the figure derived in this way would be a reasonable approximation of the dollar amount of fees the investor paid. He added that it also would be less costly and burdensome than computing an exact amount, because it would not entail maintaining daily expense and share records for each investor.

Another way of disclosing the dollar amount of investor fees would be to use preset investment amounts. For example, each investor's statement could include the dollar amount of fees paid on \$1,000 invested in the fund. Investors could then use this dollar amount to determine how much in fees they paid based on the value of their own particular accounts. One market

participant we spoke with offered a similar example of a disclosure involving preset investment amounts. Although he would prefer that periodic statements disclose the specific dollar amount that was deducted for fees from each investor's account during that period, he believes an acceptable alternative would be for statements to include a table showing fees for the reporting period on accounts of various sizes, such as \$1,000, \$5,000, \$10,000, and others.

Another Option Was to Provide Comparative Fee Information

We also sought opinions on whether mutual funds should be required to provide investors with comparative information on fees charged by both their own, and comparable, funds. Such disclosures would be similar to requirements for automakers or major appliance producers to provide data on gas mileage or efficiency ratings to prospective purchasers of those items.

Survey information indicated that investors would support receiving such information but not if it was costly to prepare. In the previously mentioned survey conducted by a large broker-dealer, about 97 percent of the over 500 respondents indicated that such data would be very useful or somewhat useful. However, about 54 percent indicated that they would be "very unlikely" to pay, compared to about 14 percent who checked "very likely" or "somewhat likely," although no estimates of the cost were provided.

Industry participants also raised various concerns over requiring funds to provide comparative information on fees. Most industry participants told us that this requirement would be difficult to implement while providing little, if any, benefit to investors. One concern was that determining the appropriate fund groupings for comparison purposes would be problematic. Another was that lack of comparability could result if fund advisers were left to identify the peers for their own funds. In addition, one industry research organization official questioned why mutual funds should be subjected to such a requirement when other financial products are not similarly required to provide such comparative information.

Mutual Fund Directors Required to Review Fees

The organizational structure of most mutual funds embodies a conflict between the interests of the fund shareholders and those of the adviser that can influence the fees a fund charges. This conflict arises primarily because part of the fees charged by the fund, which reduce investors' returns, are the adviser's revenue and a source of profit to the adviser's owners. As one safeguard against this potential conflict, the Investment Company Act of 1940 requires the presence of independent directors on a mutual fund's board of directors, who review and approve the fees their fund charges. Congress passed amendments to the act in 1970 that imposed a fiduciary duty on fund advisers, tasked fund directors with additional responsibilities regarding fees, and gave investors the right to bring legal action against fund advisers charging excessive fees. A series of court cases interpreting this duty has served to clarify the information that fund directors must review to determine if fees are excessive. As a result, mutual fund directors are expected to review, among other things, the adviser's costs, whether fees are reduced as fund assets grow, and the fees charged by other advisers for similar services to similar funds. Although mutual fund adviser representatives indicated that their boards are vigorous in reviewing fees and seeking reductions, some other industry participants were critical of mutual fund directors' fee oversight, stating that the current practices serve to keep fees at higher levels than necessary. SEC has recently proposed changes regarding the requirements applicable to fund directors, but these are not specifically fee-related, and their impact on the level of fees is uncertain.

Mutual Funds' Organizational Structure Embodies Conflict of Interest Over Fees

Although most mutual funds are organized as corporations, their structure and operation differ from a typical corporation because of the relationship between the fund and its adviser. Typically, the adviser, who is a legal entity separate from the fund, conducts the fund's operations, and the advisory fees it charges to the fund represent revenue to the adviser, creating a possible conflict of interest. However, at least one mutual fund family's organizational structure appeared to reduce this conflict between the interests of its shareholders and the adviser by operating similarly to a credit union, wherein the shareholders of its funds own the entity that operate the funds.

Mutual Funds Organization Includes Two Primary Legal Entities

The mutual fund structure and operation differ from those of a traditional corporation. In a typical corporation, the firm's employees operate and manage the firm; and the corporation's board of directors, elected by the corporation's stockholders, oversees its operations. After subtracting its expenses from its revenues, a corporation can use the resulting profits to conduct further operations; or its board of directors can vote to distribute a portion of these profits to the stockholders as dividends.

Although generally organized as a corporation, a mutual fund differs from other corporations in several ways. A typical mutual fund has no employees but is created by and operated by another party, the adviser, who contracts with the fund, for a fee, to administer fund operations. A primary service the adviser typically provides is to select and manage the fund's investment portfolio.¹ Advisers can provide additional services but frequently subcontract with other organizations, such as transfer agents, for services such as maintaining shareholder records. Advisers are legal entities separate from the mutual funds they manage, and any profits they get from operating the fund accrue to the owners of the adviser. The fund shareholders are entitled to the income from, and gains or losses in the value of, securities in the fund's portfolio but are not entitled to profits from the adviser's operations. In addition, the relationship between a fund and its adviser is rarely severed.² Figure 6.1 illustrates the contrast between the structure of a traditional corporation and that of most mutual funds.

¹ In some cases, the adviser may contract with other firms to provide investment advice, which then act as subadvisers to the fund.

² Investment Company Amendments Act of 1970, S. Rep. No. 91-184, 91st Cong., 2d Sess. (1970), reprinted in [1970] U. S. Code Cong. & Ad. News 4897, 4901 (1970).

**Figure 6.1: Comparison of
Organizational Structure of Typical
Corporation and Typical Mutual Fund**

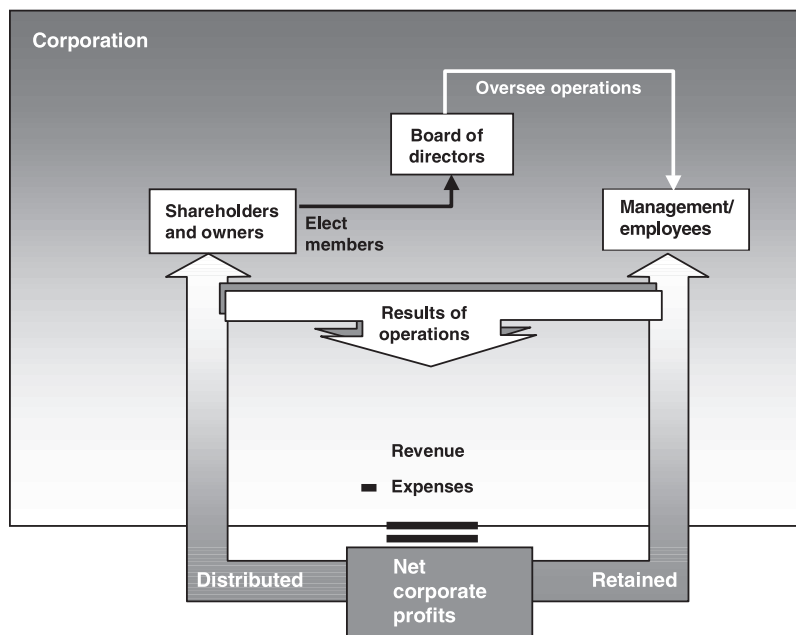
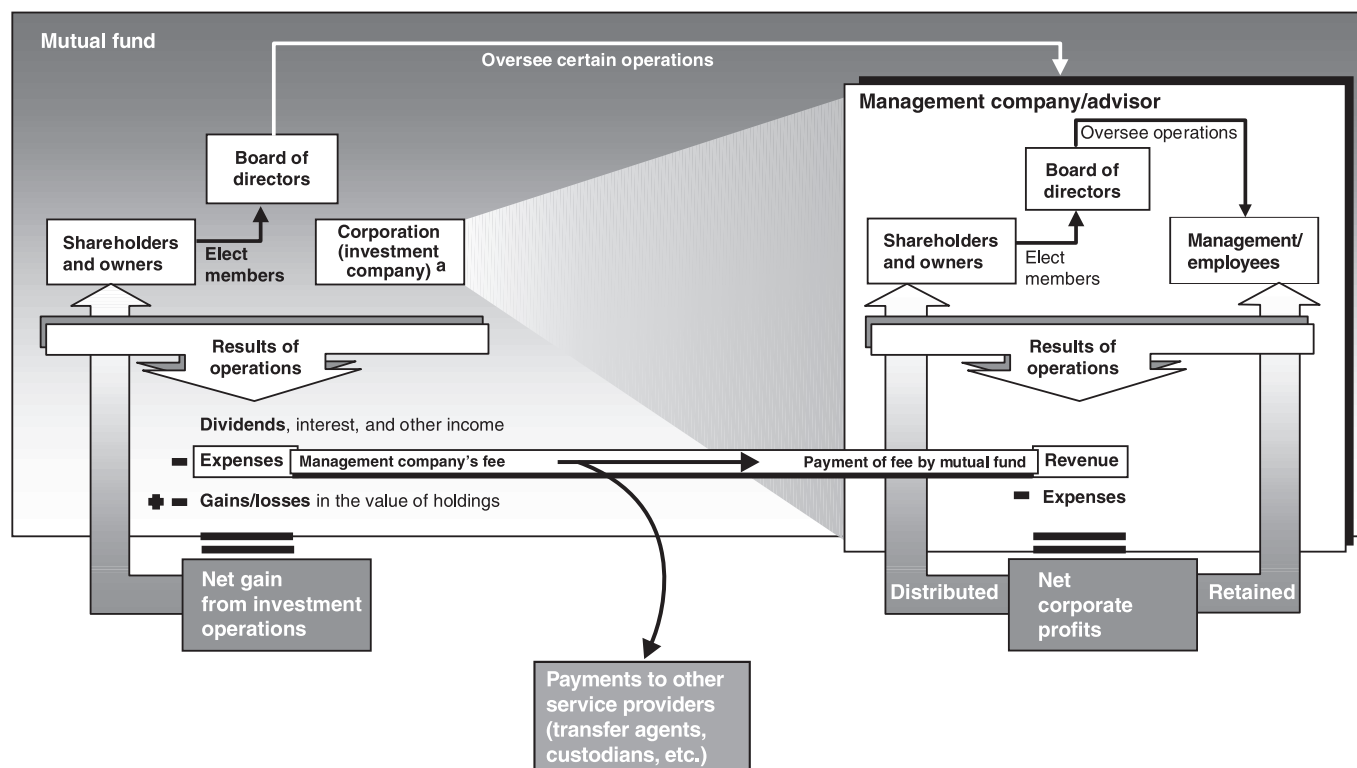


Figure 6.1: Continued



Source: GAO analysis of corporate and mutual fund structures.

As shown in figure 6.1, the mutual fund's expenses are collected by its adviser and other service providers as revenue. In most cases, some of the expenses deducted from a fund's assets are paid by the fund to other entities, such as transfer agents or custodians, but some advisers may also perform such services for a fund. An adviser's profits are derived after subtracting any payments to third parties and its own operating expenses, separate from those of the fund, from the revenue it collects from the fund. In addition, an adviser may have other revenues and expenses from other lines of business in which it engages.

Regulators and Congress have recognized that the interrelationship between the mutual fund and its adviser creates a potential for conflict between the adviser's duties to the fund shareholders and the adviser's duties to provide profits to its owners. In describing this conflict, SEC recently noted that fund shareholders would generally prefer lower fees

(to achieve greater returns), but the stockholders or owners of the adviser would prefer to maximize profits through higher fees.³

Congress also acknowledged this potential conflict; in the Investment Company Act of 1940, it established certain safeguards designed to protect the interests of fund shareholders. The primary safeguard was to have mutual fund directors⁴ oversee certain of the adviser's activities. Although representatives of the adviser generally participate as fund directors, the act requires that at least 40 percent of the directors be individuals without any significant relationship with the fund's adviser. Congress intended that the unrelated directors, known as the independent directors,⁵ serve as an independent check on the adviser. The board's remaining directors, which are typically employees of the fund's investment adviser, are known as "interested" directors. An additional safeguard provided by the act is the requirement that fund shareholders approve the advisory contract.

**The Organizational Structure of
One Mutual Fund Family
Appears to Minimize the
Potential Conflict of Interest**

Although most mutual funds are organized as described above, one mutual fund family—Vanguard—has a unique organizational structure that its officials credit for allowing it to have among the lowest fees in the industry. As of November 1998, Vanguard was the second largest fund family in the industry, operating more than 100 different funds with over \$367 billion in total mutual fund assets. Most other mutual funds are operated by advisers owned separately by a third party; however, the Vanguard Group, Inc.—which operates the Vanguard funds⁶—is jointly owned by the funds themselves and, therefore, by the funds' shareholders. The company required specific permission from SEC to deviate from the standard structure envisioned by the Investment Company Act of 1940 in order to organize itself in this way.

³ Proposed Rule: Role of Independent Directors of Investment Companies, Rel. Nos. 33-7754; 34-42007; IC-24082, 64 Fed. Reg. 59825 (Oct. 15, 1999) (to be codified 17 C.F.R. parts 239; 240; 270 & 274).

⁴ Although the Investment Company Act of 1940 does not dictate a specific form of organization for mutual funds, most funds are organized either as corporations governed by a board of directors or as business trusts governed by trustees. When establishing requirements relating to the officials governing a fund, the act uses the term "directors" to refer to such persons, and this report also follows that convention.

⁵ Independent fund directors cannot be affiliates of a fund's investment adviser, be immediate family members of an affiliated person of an adviser, have beneficial interests in securities issued by the adviser or the principal underwriter or any of their controlling persons, be registered broker-dealers or affiliated with broker-dealers, or be affiliated with any recent legal counsel to the funds.

⁶ About 30 of the 100 Vanguard funds use the services of independent investment managers, which provide portfolio selection and advice services for these funds. These firms receive a subadvisory fee paid out of fund assets. However, the Vanguard Group, Inc., and not the investment manager, provides all other administrative services for these funds.

According to documents obtained from Vanguard, this structure allows the Vanguard Group to provide the funds' services on an at-cost basis. As a result, the profits from operating the funds are returned to the fund shareholders through lower operating expenses rather than going to the owners/stockholders of a separate adviser, as is the case for most other mutual funds. According to materials provided by Vanguard, the Vanguard family's operating expense ratios averaged 0.28 percent, which it stated were the lowest in the industry. In 1998, the average fund fee was 1.25 percent. Vanguard's average expense ratio is also lower because it operates several index funds,⁷ which have among the lowest ratios of all fund types.

Although this structure appears to minimize the conflict of interest between the typical mutual fund and its adviser, it is not a structure that has been widely replicated within the industry. According to SEC officials, one other fund company had an organizational structure similar to that of Vanguard's but later changed its structure to resemble the third-party ownership structure used by most firms in the industry. The third-party structure that is most prevalent does allow the firm that initially provides its own capital to create a mutual fund to earn a return on the investment it put at risk. In addition, it can use that capital to subsidize the fund in the event that the fund needs an influx of capital, as occurred for several money market funds that incurred losses on structured notes investments in 1994. In contrast, having the fund adviser owned by the fund shareholders, as is the case for Vanguard, is more analogous to the structure of a credit union, whose depositors and borrowers are the owners of the institution. However, credit unions may be more prevalent because the services they provide are more generically required by the public and the affiliated groups that tend to create such institutions than are mutual fund services.

Mutual Fund Directors Have Specific Responsibilities Regarding Fees

Because of the conflict of interest inherent in the organizational structure of a typical mutual fund, fund directors have been tasked by law to oversee fees charged to shareholders. These responsibilities regarding fees are derived from both state and federal law. The primary federal statute governing mutual fund activities, the Investment Company Act of 1940, tasks fund directors with specific duties to review and approve the fees their funds charge. Concerns over the level of fees led to amendments of the act in 1970 that imposed additional responsibilities on fund directors, placed a fiduciary duty on fund advisers, and granted investors the right to

⁷ Index funds invest in the securities represented in a broad-based index such as the Standard & Poor's Index.

sue advisers for charging excessive fees. A series of court cases interpreting this duty has served to clarify the information that fund directors review to determine if fees are excessive.

**Federal and State Laws
Provide Responsibilities for
Mutual Fund Directors**

Because mutual funds are typically organized as corporations, the laws of the states where the funds are incorporated also place various general duties on fund directors. These duties generally require them to act in the best interests of the shareholders they represent.⁸

In addition to the general duties imposed by state law, federal law provides specific responsibilities relating to the composition and duties of a fund's board of directors. The Investment Company Act of 1940 is the primary federal statute governing mutual fund operations, and it establishes various requirements and duties for mutual fund directors.⁹

Under the act, a mutual fund's board of directors is generally entrusted with protecting the fund shareholders' interests and policing conflicts of interest that might arise in connection with payment for services to the fund. Under section 15(c) of the act, the terms of any advisory contract and its renewal must be approved, in person, by a vote of a majority of the independent directors. The section also specifies that fund directors are to obtain and consider any information necessary to evaluate the terms of both advisory and underwriting contracts and that fund management must furnish this information to the directors. The requirement that directors obtain and review such information was added as a result of amendments in 1970 to the Investment Company Act of 1940.

In addition to the requirement that they approve the overall advisory contract and its fees, a mutual fund's directors are also required to review distribution fees. A fund is prohibited from using fund assets to pay for the sale and distribution of its shares unless it adopts a plan of distribution

⁸ Under state law, directors are typically bound by duties of care and loyalty to the shareholders they represent. The duty of care requires directors to carry out their responsibilities in good faith and to exercise the degree of skill, diligence, and care that a reasonably prudent person would exercise in the same circumstances in the management of his or her own affairs. The duty of loyalty prohibits directors from benefiting personally from opportunities rightfully belonging to the company. This requires the directors to place the interests of the corporation above their own individual interests. State common law provides the "business judgement rule." This rule provides that directors will not be found liable for their actions, provided that they act reasonably and in good faith for the best interests of the corporation, even if their decisions turn out to be wrong.

⁹ This discussion focuses on mutual fund directors' specific responsibilities regarding the fees their funds charge. The law also places various other responsibilities on fund directors that exceed those of the directors of a typical corporation. These additional responsibilities include approving the contracts between the fund and the adviser and the other service providers, approving trading practices, and monitoring investments in derivatives as well as other duties.

approved by the directors—known as a rule 12b-1 plan. Such plans must be approved by a majority of both (1) all of a fund’s directors (both the interested and independent directors) and (2) the independent directors separately.

**Fund Adviser
Responsibilities Increased
After Concerns Over Fees**

Congress also tasked mutual fund advisers with additional fee-related responsibilities in 1970. The impetus for the 1970 amendments to the Investment Company Act arose primarily from findings of two studies of mutual fund operations done in the 1960s. One of the studies was by the Wharton School of Finance in 1962,¹⁰ and SEC prepared the other in 1966.¹¹ The Wharton study found that mutual fund shareholders lacked bargaining power relative to the adviser, which resulted in higher fees.

In its study, SEC found that litigation by fund shareholders had been ineffective as a check on fund advisers because of the difficulty in proving that the adviser was charging excessive fees. The standard being used by most courts at the time was whether the fees charged by advisers represented a flagrant misuse of fund resources. Because of the difficulty of proving that fees charged met such a standard, SEC recommended that the Investment Company Act be amended to impose a reasonableness standard on fund advisers regarding the fees they charge. SEC noted that such a standard would clarify that advisers would charge no more than what would be charged if fees were negotiated on an “arm’s-length” basis (i.e., as if between unrelated parties).¹²

However, the amendments to the Investment Company Act of 1940 did not contain SEC’s reasonableness standard after objections to it were raised by industry participants, who feared that courts would substitute their judgment over that of fund directors. As a compromise, the legislation instead placed a fiduciary duty on the fund adviser regarding the fees it receives. Specifically, section 36(b) of the act¹³ imposes on the adviser a fiduciary duty with respect to compensation or material payments the adviser or its affiliates receive from the fund. The statute does not further define the fiduciary duty imposed. Typically, under state common law, a

¹⁰ A Study of Mutual Funds: Prepared for the Securities and Exchange Commission, Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, PA: 1962).

¹¹ Public Policy Implications of Investment Company Growth, SEC (Washington, DC: 1966).

¹² SEC also recommended that application of the reasonableness standard not be affected by shareholder or director approval of the advisory fee and that recoveries be limited to excessive compensation paid in the 2 years prior to commencement of an action.

¹³ 15 U.S.C. §80a-35(b).

fiduciary must act with the same degree of care and skill that a reasonably prudent person would use in connection with his or her own affairs.

Section 36(b) also granted investors and SEC the right to bring claims in federal court against the adviser, the directors, officers, and certain other persons¹⁴ for breach of fiduciary duty regarding the compensation or payment they receive from the fund. Investors have a 1-year period in which to bring suit, and damages are limited to fees received by the advisers within the prior year.¹⁵ In reviewing such cases, section 36(b) directs the courts to give consideration as is deemed appropriate under all circumstances to board approval and shareholder ratification of the compensation or advisory contract.

Court Decisions Have Shaped Directors Responsibilities

Court decisions have played an important role in shaping the role of mutual fund directors regarding fees. Since 1970, various cases were filed under section 36(b), and the resulting decisions have served to provide specific guidelines for fund directors. These guidelines arise primarily from a Second Circuit Court of Appeals case decided in 1982.¹⁶

After the Investment Company Act was amended to give investors the right to sue advisers for charging excessive fees, a series of cases was brought under this new section of the act. However, section 36(b) of the act, which provides investors with the right to sue a fund adviser for breach of fiduciary duty regarding fees, does not contain specific standards for determining when such a breach has occurred. Instead, the federal courts adjudicating the claims brought by investors under 36(b) have developed standards for making such determinations. These standards focus on assessing whether a payment is excessive.

The key case that established the standard for determining whether a fund's fee is excessive was Gartenberg v. Merrill Lynch Asset Management Inc (Gartenberg). The shareholders in Gartenberg sued the investment adviser for breach of fiduciary duty with respect to its compensation. The shareholders of this money market fund claimed that given the fund's size and growth, the adviser's profits were excessive due to its disproportional

¹⁴ Section 36(b) authorizes excessive fee claims against officers, directors, members of an advisory board, investment advisers, depositors, and principal underwriters if such persons received compensation from the fund.

¹⁵ Courts have held that section 36(b) is an equitable claim; therefore, plaintiffs do not have the right to a jury trial.

¹⁶ Gartenberg v. Merrill Lynch Asset Management, Inc., 694 F.2d 923 (2d Cir. 1982), *cert. denied*, 461 U.S. 906 (1983).

fee. In Gartenberg the fee schedule called for payment of 0.50 percent (1/2 of 1 percent) of the fund's average daily value of net assets under \$500 million and for various intermediate percentages as the value of the net assets increased down to 0.275 percent for assets in excess of 2.5 billion.¹⁷ In dismissing the investors' claim of excessive profits, the district court emphasized that the principal factor in determining whether the adviser breached its fiduciary duty to the fund with regard to fees is to compare a fund's fees to the fees charged by other funds in the industry.

In upholding the district court's decision, the Second Circuit Court stated that to be guilty of a violation under section 36(b), the fee must be "so disproportionately large that it bears no reasonable relationship to the services rendered and could not have been the product of arm's-length bargaining." The Second Circuit Court disagreed with the district court's suggestion that the principal factor to be considered in evaluating a fee's fairness is the price charged by other similar advisers to funds they managed. The court stated that "the existence in most cases of an unseverable relationship between the adviser-manager and the fund it services tends to weaken the weight to be given to rates charged by advisers of other similar funds." The court further stated that since a fund cannot move easily from one adviser to another, advisers rarely compete with each other on the basis of fees and advisory contracts.

The court thus reasoned that although fund directors may consider the fees charged by similar funds, it indicated that other factors may be more important in determining whether a fee is so excessive that it constitutes a breach of fiduciary duty. These include

- the nature and quality of the adviser's services,
- the adviser's costs to provide those services,
- the extent to which the adviser realizes and shares with the fund economies of scale as the fund grows,
- the volume of orders that the manager must process,
- indirect benefits to the adviser as the result of operating the fund, and
- the independence and conscientiousness of the directors.

Since Gartenberg, additional cases have been decided that continue to apply the standards established by the Gartenberg court.¹⁸ The court

¹⁷ Gartenberg v. Merrill Lynch Asset Management Inc., 528 F. Supp. 1038 (S.D.N.Y. 1981), *aff'd*, 694 F. 2d 923 (2d Cir. 1982), *cert. denied*, 461 U.S. 906(1983).

¹⁸ Schuyt v. Rowe Price Prime Reserve Fund, 663 F. Supp. 962 (S.D.N.Y.), *aff'd*, 835 F.2d 45 (2d Cir. 1987), *cert. denied*, 485 U.S. 1034(1988); Krinsk v. Fund Asset Management, 715 F. Supp. 472 (S.D.N.Y.

decisions in Gartenberg and the cases that followed it, therefore, have served to establish the current expectations for fund directors regarding fees. As a result, regulators expect mutual fund directors to review the types of information the courts identified as important when assessing whether the fees their fund pays to its adviser are excessive. As noted above, among the information to be considered by directors is how their fund's fee structure compares to those of similar funds. Under such standards, independent directors are not required to seek the lowest fee. For example, SEC's chairman characterized these duties by stating that "[d]irectors don't have to guarantee that a fund pays the lowest rates. But they do have to make sure that the fees fall within a reasonable band" of other funds' fees.¹⁹

Opinions on Boards' Effectiveness in Overseeing Fees Vary

Opinions on mutual fund boards' effectiveness in overseeing fees varied. Some fund adviser officials depicted directors as assertive in reviewing fees, even seeking reductions and resisting fee increases. However, other industry participants expressed various criticisms of directors' effectiveness in overseeing the fees mutual funds charge, including that directors lack sufficient independence and that legal standards governing their actions are flawed. To address concerns over a potential lack of independence among mutual fund boards, SEC and others have various initiatives under way, but they are not likely to have a significant impact on fees because most funds already have them in place.

Fund Officials Say Boards Are Effective in Lowering Fees

Mutual fund adviser officials indicated that their boards of directors follow rigorous review processes when reviewing their funds' fees. Officials at several of the 15 mutual fund advisers we contacted described a rigorous process of review that their independent directors use to evaluate the investment management contract and to review fees. For example, officials at one fund adviser said that their board members are successful businessmen and women who are very knowledgeable about how the funds operate. The officials said that these directors obtain expert advice, when needed, with which to make their fee-related decisions.

Adviser officials told us that their fund directors often obtain data from independent sources, such as the industry research organizations Lipper and Morningstar, Inc. They told us that their directors also actively seek out other materials they need to help them do a thorough job of reviewing

1988), aff'd, 875 F. 2d 404 (2d Cir.), cert. denied, 493 U.S. 919 (1989); Kalish v. Franklin Advisers, 742 F. Supp. 1222 (S.D.N.Y. 1990), aff'd , 928 F. 2d 590 (2d Cir.), cert. denied, 502 U.S. 818 (1991).

¹⁹ May 15, 1998 remarks before the Investment Company Institute, Washington, DC. See also Krinsk v. Fund Asset Management, 715 F. Supp. at 502-03 .

fund costs. Several indicated instances where fees were lowered or fee raises were denied at the board's insistence.

Adviser officials we contacted indicated that their fund directors meet several times a year, and a committee of independent directors typically meets at least annually to discuss the investment adviser's contract and related fees. They said that they provide directors large amounts of information relevant to the investment management contract and fee schedule, and they include comparative fees paid by similar funds for these services. According to the adviser officials, independent directors typically review and deliberate on the information provided by the adviser before meeting with fund officials, consult with independent counsel on the terms of the proposed contract, and compare the fees they are being asked to approve with those of peer groups of funds. Adviser representatives depicted their funds' independent directors as tough negotiators who scrupulously review available information and then lower fees or refuse fee hikes when they feel such actions are warranted.

SEC examinations we reviewed cited few deficiencies relating to directors' role in evaluating fees. According to an SEC official, SEC examines all mutual fund families within a 5-year cycle. In our review of SEC examinations of 16 fund advisers conducted between 1995 and 1999, we found 3 instances citing deficiencies related to the directors' role in reviewing fees. Two stated that minutes of board meetings failed to indicate that certain factors had been reviewed or discussed, and one found that the directors for two funds in a particular family had not received information on certain expense information when they approved their investment advisory agreements.

Some Officials Criticized Directors' Effectiveness in Overseeing Fees

Various industry participants criticized mutual fund directors' effectiveness in overseeing fees charged for operating their funds. A primary criticism of mutual fund directors is that they lack sufficient independence and knowledge to effectively oversee the fund adviser's activities and fees. Such allegations have appeared in various press and magazine accounts. In addition, some of the industry participants we contacted raised similar criticisms. A private money manager told us that because a fund's investment adviser or an affiliate usually manages the fund, its independent directors cannot be truly autonomous in negotiating adviser fees and contracts. According to an industry analyst, a general lack of experience with mutual fund operations prevents independent directors from being as effective as they could be in keeping fees down. Because of their inexperience, the independent directors will often defer to the

opinions of the interested directors, who are also employees of the adviser, during the deliberations of the board.

Critics have also indicated that the legal standards applicable to directors' oversight of fees are flawed. One factor that directors consider is how their fund's fee compares to those charged by other similar funds. However, a private money manager stated that directors have no basis, therefore, for seeking a lower fee if their fund is charging fees similar to those of other funds. An industry analyst indicated that basing a fund's fees on those charged by similar funds results in fees being higher than necessary. He stated that although it is a safe way to set fees, in light of the Gartenberg standards, such practices do not contribute to lower fees.

SEC and ICI Proposed Reforms to Increase Director Independence and Knowledge

In response to criticism that independent directors on mutual fund boards may not be sufficiently independent of the adviser, SEC and ICI took steps to examine ways in which independent directors might be more autonomous.²⁰ In February 1999, SEC conducted 2 days of public discussions, with various industry participants and critics evaluating independent directors' responsibilities and ways in which they could more effectively carry them out. Shortly thereafter, ICI assembled an advisory group to identify and recommend best practices for fund boards to consider adopting.²¹ In addition, in response to the SEC chairman's call for improved fund governance, a Mutual Fund Director's Education Council, chaired by a former SEC chairman and administered by Northwestern University, has been formed. The Council intends to foster the development of programs to promote independence and accountability in fund boardrooms.

In October 1999, SEC promulgated proposed rules to enhance the independence of certain mutual fund boards. SEC noted in its introduction to the proposed rules that in order to truly enhance the effectiveness and independence of all fund directors, the Investment Company Act would need to be amended, but SEC's recent attempts to achieve such changes by legislation were never enacted. As a result, SEC's proposal applies to funds that rely on exemptions granted by SEC of certain statutory conflict of

²⁰ In 1992, SEC staff conducted a study of the regulation of investment companies to determine whether existing regulations imposed unnecessary constraints on funds and whether there were gaps in investor protection. As a result of this study, the staff recommended that the act be amended to require that the minimum proportion of independent directors be increased from 40 percent to a majority, that independent director vacancies be filled by the remaining independent directors, and that independent directors be given the authority to terminate advisory contracts. Notwithstanding the SEC staff recommendations, the legislation was never enacted.

²¹ Enhancing a Culture of Independence and Effectiveness, ICI (Washington, DC: Jun. 24, 1999).

interest prohibitions.²² According to SEC officials, almost all funds rely on one or more of these rule exemptions, and thus the proposal would apply to virtually all funds.

Under SEC's proposal, funds relying on any of these exemptions would be required to have independent directors who constitute either a majority or a super-majority (two-thirds) of their boards and who select and nominate other independent directors. In addition, if the independent directors use legal counsel, such counsel would be required to be separate from that used by the fund's adviser.

SEC's proposed rule amendments also would require funds to provide additional information to investors about fund directors. Under the proposal, funds would be required to provide investors with basic information about the identity and business experience of the directors, the extent to which the directors own shares of funds within the fund family, and any potential conflicts of interest.

These proposed rule amendments may not significantly affect the level of fees in the mutual fund industry. First, the rule proposals focused on enhancing director effectiveness and do not specifically address fees. SEC officials acknowledged that most funds already have a majority of independent directors on their boards. Officials at the 15 fund advisers we contacted also told us that the requirements they place on their boards already meet SEC's proposed changes. Most of them indicated that a majority of their boards are independent directors, they set their own compensation, and they nominate and select new independent members. In addition, they have separate outside counsel and advisors to help them evaluate the fees and contracts they are responsible for negotiating in the shareholders' best interests.

Others argue that even though many funds have these requirements in place, they should be required for all funds so that all investors have consistent protections. Some commenters to the proposed rule amendments stated that the proposed changes are burdensome and that SEC is attempting to do by regulation what it has been unable to achieve through legislation. Others claim that the proposal is a necessary measure to provide investors consistent protection. As of May 16, 2000, the amendments in the proposal had not yet been adopted.

²² Examples of these exemptive rules include Rule 12b-1, which permits the use of fund assets to pay distribution expenses; Rule 17a-8, which permits mergers between certain affiliated funds; and Rule 18f-3, which permits funds to issue multiple classes of voting stock.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Because of the unavailability of comprehensive data on costs advisers incurred operating mutual funds, we were unable to determine to what extent the growth in mutual fund assets during the 1990s provided advisers the opportunity to reduce fund expense ratios. We found that many large funds had reduced their operating expense ratios between 1990 and 1998, with the average fee among the largest stock funds declining by 20 percent. However, not all funds reduced their fees, including some that had grown by more than 500 percent during that period. These results also reflect the largest funds, whose advisers were most likely to have experienced economies of scale that would have allowed them to reduce these funds' expense ratios. In addition, our sample consisted primarily of the largest and fastest growing funds in the industry and thus may not reflect the characteristics and the trend in fees charged by other funds.

We also found certain limitations in the mechanisms that regulators currently rely on to influence fee levels. As with other financial products, regulators rely on competition as means of setting prices for products and services. However, competition in the mutual fund industry is not generally price-based and thus may not be strongly influencing fee levels.

Regulators also rely on fee disclosures to inform investors of the fees that funds charge. The information that is disclosed in mutual fund prospectuses and annual reports allows investors to compare the relative fees and expenses charged by differing funds. However, while mutual fund statements show the dollar amounts of any transaction fees deducted from shareholder accounts, they do not disclose the actual dollar amounts of each investor's share of the fund's operating expenses. Some officials we interviewed acknowledged that such information would reinforce the fact that investors are paying for mutual fund advisers' services. Including the dollar amount paid in fees along with each investor's account value would also put mutual fund statements on comparable footing with that of other financial services whose specific charges also routinely appear in confirmation and account statements. Fees stated in dollar terms, considered in conjunction with other relevant information such as investment goals, could spur investors to evaluate the services they receive from their funds in exchange for the fees being charged and to compare their funds' services and fees with those of other funds with similar investment objectives. Prominently and regularly disclosing to investors the specific dollar amount of operating expense fees each investor pays could also encourage more fee-based competition among fund advisers, as has occurred with brokerage commissions and other financial services.

To produce such information, fund advisers may have to make changes in their account management systems to collect and calculate information that is not currently maintained. Advisers and certain broker-dealers whose customers invest in mutual funds would also incur both one-time and ongoing costs. However, estimates for these costs did not appear to be inordinately high—with some estimates generally indicating that such costs might be a few dollars or less per investor. In addition, industry participants have already identified alternative, less costly, ways of calculating the dollar amount of fees paid by individual fund investors, such as by multiplying a fund's share value by its expense ratio and an average of the number of shares held by an investor during the prior period rather than by maintaining information on each investors actual daily share of expenses.

Another alternative means of disclosing dollar amounts of operating expense fees paid on individual investor statements would be to provide the dollar amount of fees paid for preset investment amounts, such as \$1,000, which investors could use to estimate the amount they paid on their own accounts. In determining how such disclosures could be implemented, regulators will have to weigh the costs that the industry may incur to calculate fees for each investor against the burden and effectiveness of providing investors with the requisite information and having them be responsible for making such calculations on their own.

Regulators also rely on mutual fund boards of directors to serve as a check on the fees charged by the funds they oversee. Currently, fund directors annually review the fees of the funds they direct and, among other things, generally maintain their funds' fees within a reasonable range of fees charged by other funds. Opinions about fund directors' effectiveness varied, and regulators are taking steps to increase directors' independence from their funds' advisers. However, these steps are not likely to have a significant impact on fees because most funds already have many of the proposed reforms in place and their purpose is to generally enhance director effectiveness and did not specifically address fees. Our analysis of the largest funds' fees, which showed higher fee funds migrating to lower fee levels while lower fee funds generally retained their levels, is consistent with assertions that mutual fund directors are choosing to keep fees at a level comparable to those of other funds. Whether this level is appropriate for the industry is not known.

Recommendations

To heighten investors' awareness and understanding of the fees they pay on mutual funds, we recommend that the Chairman, SEC, require that the periodic account statements already provided to mutual fund investors

include the dollar amount of each investor's share of the operating expense fees deducted from their funds. This disclosure would be in addition to presently required fee disclosures. Because these calculations could be made in various ways, SEC should also consider the cost and burden that various alternative means of making such disclosures would impose on (1) the industry and (2) investors as part of evaluating the most effective way of implementing this requirement. Where the form of these statements is governed by NASD rules, SEC should require NASD to require the firms it oversees to provide such disclosures.

Agency and Industry Comments and Our Evaluation

We requested comments on a draft of this report from the heads, or their designees, of SEC and NASDR. In addition, we requested comments from the mutual fund industry association, ICI. Each of these organizations provided us with written comments, which appear along with our responses to individual comments in appendixes I through III. Additional technical comments from SEC were incorporated into this report as appropriate.

Overall, each of the commenting organizations agreed that our report raised important issues and contributed to the public dialogue on mutual fund fees. In his letter, the director of SEC's Division of Investment Management indicated that SEC staff agreed that investors need to be aware of and understand the fees that mutual funds charge. The letter also indicated that the SEC staff welcomed the report's recommendation and intended to consider it carefully. The vice president of NASDR's Investment Companies/Corporate Financing Department agreed in his letter that investors should consider fees, expenses, and other issues in addition to performance in making investment decisions.

However, the letters from the SEC, NASDR and ICI officials raised several issues about our report. ICI's letter notes that although promoting investor awareness of the importance of fund fees is a priority for ICI and its members, ICI officials had reservations about the account statement recommendation that investors periodically receive information on the specific dollar amounts of the fees deducted from their mutual fund accounts. Their concern was that this requirement could erode the value of the fee information currently provided in the prospectus and thus impede informed assessments of fee levels at competing funds, which could paradoxically diminish rather than enhance investors' overall understanding of fund fees.

We agree with ICI and the other commenters that the current disclosures made by mutual funds, which provide fund expense ratios expressed as a

percentage of fund assets and include an example of the likely amount of expenses to be incurred over various holding periods for a hypothetical \$10,000 account, are useful for investors in comparing between funds prior to investing. The additional disclosure we recommend is intended to supplement, not replace, the existing disclosures, and should serve to reinforce to investors that they do pay for the services they receive from their mutual funds as well as indicate to them specifically how much they pay for these services.

SEC, NASDR, and ICI also commented on our observation that other financial products and services disclose specific dollar amounts for the fees charged to their users, but mutual funds do not. In their comments, these organizations generally indicated that not all charges are disclosed for other financial products and services; thus, the disclosures for mutual funds are not that dissimilar. For example, SEC noted that funds disclose to investors specific dollar charges subtracted from their accounts, such as for sales loads or account fees, but do not disclose the specific charges that are levied outside the account. SEC stated that this is similar to banks not disclosing the spread between the gross amount earned by the financial service provider on customer monies and the net amount paid to the customer.

We do not agree with the commenting organizations that mutual funds' lack of disclosure of the specific operating expenses to individual investor accounts is comparable to the practices of banks or other businesses that do not disclose the difference between their investment or operating earnings and the amounts they pay to the individuals who provided those operating or investment funds. Investors in mutual funds have in essence hired the adviser to perform the service of managing their investment dollars for them. The fees that the adviser and the other service providers deduct from the fund's assets represent the price of the services they perform. Although such fees are deducted from the fund overall, each individual investor's account is ultimately reduced in value by their individual share of these deductions. However, the specific amount of these deductions is not disclosed in dollar terms to each investor. In contrast, customers and users of other financial services, such as private money managers, banks, and brokerage firms, are told of the specific dollar amounts subtracted from their individual assets or accounts.

Customers who place money in savings accounts, bank certificates of deposit, or bonds are not purchasing investment management or financial transaction services as are mutual fund investors. Thus, customers placing money in those other investment or savings products are generally told

what the nominal returns will be, regardless of how the firm providing the product will use the customer's capital to conduct investment or operating activities intended to produce sufficient income to provide the promised rate of return to the customer. In such cases, customers are not entitled to the residual returns earned by their capital but instead are promised and paid a fixed return.

Furthermore, the fact that not all financial products provide information on all their charges to account holders does not reduce the likely usefulness of such information to the millions of mutual fund investors. Instead, independent evaluations of the usefulness of providing such information for those other products would be necessary to determine if similar disclosures would also benefit the users of those other products.

All three commenting organizations also generally questioned our finding that mutual funds do not compete primarily on the price of their services. SEC noted that although an argument could be made that more price competition should occur in the mutual fund industry, it is not completely absent. ICI emphasized that because funds report performance on an after fees and expenses basis, mutual funds do compete on the basis of their fees. NASDR stated that our draft report did not address the fact that mutual funds present performance net of expenses.

Our report notes that a mutual fund is required to disclose its performance net of fees and expenses; its performance is the primary basis upon which funds compete. However, competition on the basis of net returns may or may not be the same as competition on the basis of price. Separating the fee from the return would remind investors that a fee is embedded in their net returns. In addition, our report also notes that when customers are told the specific dollar amounts of the fees or charges, such as they are for stock brokerage transactions or bank checking accounts, firms in those industries appear to more frequently choose to compete directly on that basis, resulting in greatly reduced charges for such services. Implementing our recommendation to have such information provided to mutual fund investors could provide similar incentive for them to evaluate the services they receive in exchange for the fees they pay. Disclosing such information regularly could also encourage more firms to compete directly on the basis of the price at which they are willing to provide mutual fund investment services.

SEC and ICI also questioned the legal accuracy of some of the statements made by individuals we interviewed regarding the role of mutual fund directors in overseeing fees. The individuals we quoted were critical of the

director practice of setting their funds' fees only in relation to the fees charged by other funds; however, both SEC and ICI indicated that fund directors, by law, are required to review a wide range of information when assessing the fees charged by their fund advisor and other service providers.

We have added text to the report to indicate that comparing one fund's fees to those charged by other funds is not the only factor that directors are required to consider when evaluating fees. However, in the opinion of the individuals whose comments we cited, directors are primarily emphasizing such comparisons over the other factors they are also required to consider as part of their fee reviews. As a result, these individuals see directors as maintaining fee levels, or at least allowing fees to be lowered only to the extent that other funds are taking similar actions.

Furthermore, we recognize that a firm's comparison of the prices it charges with those its competitors charge is a legitimate and perfectly acceptable means for firms to evaluate their own business strategies. However, in the mutual fund industry, which competes indirectly on the basis of such charges, such comparisons may serve to maintain fees at a consistent level or allow them to be reduced only by amounts similar to those of other funds' reductions, as the individuals we interviewed stated. Although we did find that fees for many mutual funds have declined, we also noted in chapter 2 of our report that we were unable to determine if the growth in fund assets would have provided advisers the opportunity to reduce fees by even more.

Comments From the Securities and Exchange Commission

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



UNITED STATES
SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20549

May 10, 2000

Thomas J. McCool
Director, Financial Institutions
and Markets Issues
General Government Division
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

Re: GAO Draft Report
Mutual Fund Fees: Additional Disclosure Could Encourage Price
Competition

Dear Mr. McCool:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the General Accounting Office's draft report and assessment of mutual fund fees. The report provides a wide-ranging analysis of mutual fund fees and the market forces and regulatory requirements that impact those fees. I commend the GAO for contributing to the public dialog about this important matter.

The report raises important issues concerning the impact of mutual fund fees on investors. The major conclusion of the report is that additional disclosure could help increase investor awareness and understanding of mutual fund fees and, thereby, promote additional competition by funds on the basis of fees. The report recommends that the Commission require that periodic account statements include additional disclosure about the portion of mutual fund expenses that the investor has borne.

We agree that investors need to be aware of and understand the fees that mutual funds charge. The question to be answered, however, is how best to accomplish that goal. As the report points out, there are advantages and disadvantages of the report's recommendation and alternatives that need to be considered. We welcome the report's recommendations and suggestions, and will consider them carefully.

As you know, Congress and the Commission have sought to protect investors from excessive fees in two ways. First, the securities laws require full and complete disclosure of fees so investors can make informed decisions. Second, the Investment Company Act establishes procedural safeguards relating to the corporate governance structure of funds to protect against potential conflicts of interest, including those involving fees. In this regard, the Commission has taken many steps in recent years to protect the interests of shareholders. Below we summarize the recent initiatives.

Appendix I
Comments From the Securities and Exchange Commission

Thomas J. McCool
Page 2

Following this summary are our general comments and observations concerning various issues addressed in the report.

I. Recent Initiatives Relating to Mutual Fund Fees

A. Disclosure and Investor Education Initiatives

The primary focus of our disclosure effort has been to make fund fees and expenses more transparent to investors and to allow investors the ability to compare fees and expenses between different funds, as well as to educate investors about the importance of fees.

In the 1980s, the Commission became concerned that the increasing variety of sales loads and other fund distribution arrangements could, unless uniformly presented, confuse investors. For that reason, since 1988 every mutual fund prospectus has included a fee table. The fee table is a uniform, tabular presentation that shows both charges paid directly by a shareholder out of his or her investment, such as front-end and back-end sales loads as well as recurring charges deducted from fund assets, such as management and rule 12b-1 fees. The fee table is accompanied by a numerical example that illustrates the total dollar amounts that an investor could expect to pay on a hypothetical investment if he or she received a 5% annual return and remained invested in the fund for various time periods. The fee table is intended to present fund investors with expense disclosure that can be understood easily and that facilitates an investor's comparison of expenses among funds.

In 1998, the Commission required the fee table to be included in a new plain English risk/return summary that appears in the front portion of all prospectuses. The risk/return summary functions as a standardized "executive summary" of key information about the fund. As part of these changes, the Commission increased the investment amount illustrated in the fee table example from \$1,000 to \$10,000 to reflect the size of a more typical fund investment and to approximate more closely the amount of fees and expenses that a typical investor would expect to incur over time. The Commission also improved the method of presentation for several items included in the fee table, including temporary expense reimbursements, fee waivers, and certain account fees paid directly by shareholders.

Most recently, the Commission proposed that mutual funds be required to report investment returns on an after-tax basis in prospectuses and shareholder reports. The proposal reflects the fact that taxes represent the largest single expense borne by many fund investors. Recent estimates suggest that taxes may reduce the average stock fund's total return by 2.5%, an amount larger than the expense ratios of most funds.

Although information about mutual fund fees has been made clearer and more readily available than in the past, the Commission remains concerned that many investors are not paying attention to information about fees. These concerns have prompted the Commission to mount an extensive investor education campaign to improve the financial

See comment 1.

Appendix I
Comments From the Securities and Exchange Commission

Thomas J. McCool
Page 3

literacy of investors. The Commission has published and posted on its website a brochure about investing in mutual funds that contains a section on the importance of fees. In town meetings and speeches to investors across the country, the Commission has emphasized the importance of fees in evaluating mutual fund investments. The Commission is a major sponsor of the Facts on Savings Campaign, a joint effort among government agencies, financial industry associations, and consumer organizations to help Americans of all ages and incomes to "get the facts" they need to save and invest wisely.¹ The campaign includes information about mutual funds and the importance of fund costs in determining the amount that will be accumulated for retirement or to meet other financial goals. In January of this year the Commission issued an investor alert that advises mutual fund investors to look at more than past performance, recommending, in particular, that they assess a fund's costs which can have an enormous effect on performance. To assist investors in assessing costs, the Commission posted on its website a Mutual Fund Cost Calculator, an innovative interactive web-based tool that investors can use to calculate the costs of mutual fund ownership. During the first quarter of 2000, the calculator averaged over 8,500 hits per month – making it one of the most frequented portions of the SEC website.

B. Fund Governance Initiatives

Because independent directors play such an important role under the Investment Company Act in approving the contract between the investment adviser and the fund, we have undertaken a series of initiatives to strengthen their ability to perform that role.

In February 1999, the Commission hosted a two-day public Roundtable on the role of independent fund directors. Participants included independent directors, investor advocates, executives of fund advisers, academics, and legal counsel. One panel at the Roundtable was entitled "Negotiating Fees and Expenses." The Roundtable served to heighten the industry's awareness of the importance of directors in protecting the interests of shareholders.

In October 1999, the Commission proposed new rules and rule amendments to enhance the independence and effectiveness of mutual fund directors. One proposal would require funds that rely on Commission exemptive rules to have independent directors that constitute at least a majority of board members. Although, as you point out, many fund boards currently have a majority of independent directors, our proposal would strengthen the governance for the remainder that do not. Taken together, the rule proposals (along with an accompanying interpretive release) are designed to reaffirm the important role that independent directors play in protecting fund investors, strengthen

¹ Other government agency sponsors include the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, the North American Securities Administrators Association, and the Federal Trade Commission. Other financial industry and consumer sponsors include the American Association of Individual Investors, American Stock Exchange, Bank Securities Association, Certified Financial Planner Board of Standards, International Association for Financial Planning, Investor Protection Trust, National Association of Securities Dealers, National Investor Relations Institute, Securities Industry Association, and the Security Traders Association.

Appendix I
Comments From the Securities and Exchange Commission

Thomas J. McCool
Page 4

fund directors' hand in dealing with fund management, reinforce directors' independence and provide investors with greater information to assess directors' independence.

In June 1999, an advisory group of industry experts formed by the Investment Company Institute recommended a set of fifteen "best practices" for funds and their boards to consider.² Some recommendations were designed to enhance the independence of independent directors.³ Other recommendations were designed to enhance the effectiveness of fund boards as a whole.⁴

Finally, in response to Chairman Levitt's call for improved fund governance, a Mutual Fund Directors Education Council has been created. The Council, chaired by former SEC Chairman David S. Ruder and administered by Northwestern University, will foster the development of programs to promote a culture of independence and accountability in fund boardrooms.

We believe that these mutual fund governance initiatives have and will continue to focus increased attention on the importance of directors performing their duties as effectively as possible, particularly in the critical areas of considering and approving the advisory contract and overseeing fund fee levels.

II. General Comments on the Report

A. Competition in the Mutual Fund Industry

Your report states that, "competition in the mutual fund industry is not generally price-based, and thus may not be strongly influencing fee levels...."⁵ Although one certainly could argue that there should be more competition in the industry, it is hard to argue that there is an absence of price competition. The two largest fund groups are among the industry's low cost providers; and another large and well-funded low cost provider recently entered the industry. Low cost index funds have grown from less than 2% of stock fund assets in 1990 to 7% today. Directly marketed funds, which tend to have lower expenses, have increased their market share from 35% in 1990 to 46% today.

² *Report of the Advisory Group on Best Practices for Fund Directors*, Investment Company Institute, June 24, 1999.

³ For example, independent directors should comprise at least two thirds of the board; obtain qualified counsel who is independent from the fund's adviser; and meet separately from management when evaluating advisory and underwriting contracts.

⁴ For example, fund directors should invest in funds on whose boards they serve and should periodically evaluate the board's effectiveness. New fund directors should receive appropriate orientation and all fund directors should keep abreast of industry and regulatory developments.

⁵ Executive Summary, p.6.

Thomas J. McCool
Page 5

The fact that there are many non-price factors that appear to influence an investor's choice of a mutual fund (*e.g.*, reputation of the adviser, historical performance, sales channel, level of customer service, investment objectives), so that fee and expense levels do not strongly influence this choice reflects typical behavior by consumers when they select financial services.

An additional factor not mentioned in the report is that, in addition to competing among themselves, mutual funds face strong competition from outside the fund industry. For example, due to the low cost of trading on-line, many investors now prefer to construct their own investment portfolios in lieu of relying on mutual funds. Exchange traded funds, a new pooled investment vehicle sponsored by large brokerage firms and stock exchanges, offer low costs and the ability to buy and sell shares at any time during the day at the current market price. Advances in technology enable investment advisers and broker-dealers to extend individual account management services to customers with much smaller accounts than had been economically feasible in the past. Individual accounts allow for more personalized investment management and tax planning services than are possible in a pooled vehicle such as a mutual fund. These changes in the market place are likely to put further pressure on funds as they strive to remain competitive.

B. Analysis of the Largest Funds

The report correctly points out that existing studies regarding mutual fund fees reach somewhat contradictory conclusions and that some of these studies' methods have been questioned. Thus, the report describes the analysis that you conducted concerning trends in expense ratios based upon data concerning 77 of the largest mutual funds that grew faster than the average fund in the industry.

We note that your results show that asset growth usually resulted in lower expense ratios and are generally consistent with other data we have studied, which tend to confirm that so-called "economies of scale," at least in many cases, are being passed on to fund shareholders.

C. Mutual Fund Directors Required to Review Fund Fees

The report discusses the fact that, under the Investment Company Act of 1940, fund directors are required to review and approve the compensation paid to the fund's adviser. In your discussion of directors' effectiveness in fulfilling these duties, there are a couple of sentences in the report attributed to private money managers and others stating that directors can fulfill their obligations by ensuring that a fund's fees are within a range of similar funds. While these statements may be their personal opinions, we believe the statements are incorrect both as a matter of law and as a matter of practice.

As your report discusses in Chapter 6, case law concerning the obligations of directors in approving the advisory contracts requires directors to consider much more than whether the fees are within the range charged by other similar funds, including the

Thomas J. McCool
Page 6

nature and quality of services provided by the adviser, the advisor's costs, and any economies of scale from managing additional assets. Additionally, our inspections of funds confirm that directors generally are diligent in performing their obligations and do consider many factors in determining whether to approve an advisory contract. Moreover, we note that our corporate governance proposals would require fund registration statements to disclose the factors considered by fund directors when they approved the fund's contract with its investment adviser. We are concerned that a reader of your report may be misled as to how directors fulfill their obligations. Accordingly, we believe that the report should make clear that directors are required to consider more than what other funds charge, and in fact do so.

D. Expense Comparisons Among Funds

One important issue that is not discussed in the report relates to the difficulty of comparing the expense ratios of different funds. Sometimes all of the services provided as part of the process of investing in the fund are bundled into the fund's expense ratio. Other times, the expense ratio excludes the cost of certain services, such as marketing and/or financial advice, because they are paid separately by each individual shareholder.

For example, an investor who is very concerned about costs and willing and able to do his or her own financial planning would likely invest in a low cost fund. A second investor that is less knowledgeable and/or less price sensitive may prefer to pay extra money for more services. If this investor purchased a mutual fund after obtaining financial advice from a broker-dealer, insurance company, or bank, the fund's costs would likely be different because the advice might be paid for by payment of a sales load or a rule 12b-1 fee. If the purchase were made pursuant to a wrap fee program, the fund's costs would be lower because the advice would be paid for separately by the investor. Alternatively, this investor could pay separately for advice from a fee-only financial planner and then invest directly in a low cost fund.

E. Expense Comparisons to Other Financial Services

A major theme of the report is that mutual funds do not provide fee information comparable to that provided by other financial service providers.⁶ In particular, the report notes that although customer fees for other financial services are often disclosed in specific dollar amounts, mutual fund shareholders do not receive information about the dollar amount of fund operating expenses attributable to their shares.

As noted in the report, mutual funds differ from most financial services with respect to the way in which services are delivered and paid for. Most financial services are provided by a financial firm (bank, securities firm, insurance company) directly to the

⁶ Mutual funds are compared to bank deposit accounts, bank trust services, investment advisory services provided by individual investment advisers, wrap accounts, purchases of stocks, bonds and other securities, and purchases of real estate.

Thomas J. McCool
Page 7

customer. Mutual fund services are provided by an entity (the fund) separate and distinct from the financial firm that is its sponsor. As a separate entity, the fund not only bears its own expenses, it is owned by the "customer."

We believe that the fee information provided by mutual funds and by other types of financial services is nevertheless, quite similar. Like other financial services, mutual funds provide information about the dollar amount of fees they charge directly to an individual account. For mutual funds, this includes sales loads, redemption fees, account fees, and other charges levied directly on shareholder accounts. For other financial service providers, this includes itemized fees on deposit accounts, brokerage commissions on stock transactions, fees charged by individual investment advisers, broker commissions on real estate transactions, and similar fees.

Like other financial services, mutual funds do not provide information about expenses incurred outside the account. For mutual funds, this includes the investment advisory fees and all other expenses paid out of fund assets. For other financial services, for example, this includes the spread between the gross amount earned by the financial service provider on customer funds and the net amount paid out to the customer.

F. Disclosure Concerning Fees Paid by Investors

The Commission's approach to disclosure has been to ensure that investors receive information about fees that allows the investor to make an informed decision prior to making a purchase, as well as after becoming a fund shareholder. In addition to the information provided to a prospective investor before the purchase (as described above) the Commission's rules also require that investors receive ongoing information about expenses after they have made a purchase. First, investors receive annual and semi-annual reports that disclose the actual expense ratio of the fund. Second, investors receive an updated prospectus on an annual basis that includes a fee table and a fee example. The fee information in the prospectus is generally based upon actual fees that the fund paid in the prior year. While reports to shareholders and updates to prospectuses are mentioned in the report, we believe it should be noted that mutual fund investors under current regulations receive and have access to information on an annual basis which enables them to assess and understand the fees they bear and to effectively compare the fees of funds.

* * * * *

We recognize that investors need to be further educated about the fees and expenses that mutual funds charge. As part of our responsibilities in regulating mutual

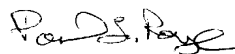
See comment 2.

Appendix I
Comments From the Securities and Exchange Commission

Thomas J. McCool
Page 8

funds, we will consider the recommendations in your report very carefully in determining how best to inform investors about the importance of fees. Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment on your report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul F. Roye". The signature is stylized with a large, looped "P" and "R".

Paul F. Roye

The following are GAO's comments on the Securities and Exchange Commission's May 10, 2000, letter.

GAO's Comments

1. The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) described various changes since the 1980s to the fee disclosures that mutual funds are required to make. To acknowledge this, we have added a footnote to our discussion of the currently required disclosures that describes some of the changes made to these disclosure requirements over time.

2. SEC stated that our report should note that the current disclosure does provide investors with access to information on an annual basis that enables them to assess and understand the fees they bear and to effectively compare fees. We agree that disclosure of such information is currently required, and we have added additional language to our report to clarify that these disclosures are made annually. However, these disclosures present fund expense ratios as a percentage of fund assets and include an example of the likely amount of expenses to be incurred over various holding periods for a hypothetical \$10,000 account. Furthermore, these reports are provided to investors only semiannually. Although investors can use this information to compare among funds, the additional disclosure we recommend is intended to supplement, not replace, the existing disclosures, and should serve to reinforce to investors the fact that they do pay for the services they receive from their mutual funds. The specific dollar amounts we recommend that funds disclose should also have the added immediacy of being unique to each investor and his or her account. By disclosing these additional dollar amounts on investors' quarterly account statements, funds will provide fee disclosures to investors more frequently than they currently do.

Comments From the National Association of Securities Dealers Regulation, Inc.

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



Thomas M. Selman
Vice President
Investment Companies/Corporate Financing

NASD Regulation, Inc.
1801 K Street, N.W., Suite 800
Washington, D.C. 20006-1500
202 728 8068
Fax 202 974 2732

May 8, 2000

Thomas J. McCool
Director, Financial Institutions and Markets Issues
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. McCool:

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to comment on your draft report entitled Mutual Fund Fees: Additional Disclosure Could Encourage Price Competition (April 19, 2000) (the "Report"). We have summarized in bullet form below our overall comments on the Report's recommendation, as well as certain technical comments on the Report. We would be happy to discuss our comments with you at your convenience.

As we have discussed, NASD Regulation shares your concern that some investors may "chase" performance, and we agree that investors also should consider fees, expenses and other issues when making an investment decision. We would be happy to work with you and your staff on these important policy questions.

I. Overall Comments on Report's Recommendation

- The Report concludes that "unlike many other financial products and services where the dollar amount paid by the customer is clearly and regularly disclosed, mutual fund disclosures do not include the actual dollar amounts of the fund fees individual investors pay."¹ Based on these conclusions, the Report recommends that the Securities and Exchange Commission and NASD Regulation, Inc. require mutual funds and certain broker/dealers to provide in periodic account statements "the dollar amount of mutual fund fees each investor paid . . . in addition to presently required fee disclosures."²
- The Report's recommendation raises several issues:

¹ See Report, Chap. 7, pp. 1-2.

² See Report, Chap. 7, p. 5.

Now on p. 96.

Now on p. 97.

Thomas J. McCool
May 8, 2000
Page 2

See comment 1.

- First, the Report seems to assume that mutual funds impose ongoing fund operating expenses, such as Rule 12b-1 fees and advisory fees, at the account level. In fact, funds impose these expenses at the entity level. Moreover, NASD member broker/dealers are generally required to send at least quarterly to all customers account statements that detail, among other things, all charges and debits imposed at the account level.

See comment 2.

- Second, the Report's recommendation may be difficult, if not impossible, to implement. Aside from the fact that mutual funds do not perform the shareholder-level accounting envisioned by the proposal, many broker/dealers would not have access to the information about the mutual fund's expenses necessary to comply with these rules.

See comment 3.

- Third, the Report seems to conclude that mutual fund markets are less than competitive because investors base their investment decisions more on performance than on the level of mutual fund fees. We share the concern that some investors may place too much reliance on past performance, and we agree that they also should consider other issues, such as a fund's fees and expenses. However, investors who focus solely on low expenses (such as some money market fund investors) may sacrifice performance that they might obtain if they were to consider other factors, such as a fund's investment objective and the quality of the fund adviser's investment management.
- Fourth, the Report seems to assume that other financial intermediaries provide full disclosure of itemized expenses that reduce the return on customers' investments. Rules governing these institutions may require them to provide certain disclosures in periodic account statements regarding account-level fees. However, these rules do not require disclosure of the dollar amount of operating expenses incurred at the entity level that reduce the return a customer earns on his or her investment. Similarly, the rules governing other unregistered collective investment vehicles, which operate analogously to mutual funds, do not require (and the GAO does not propose to require) disclosure of customer-specific entity-level expenses.
- Fifth, the Report does not address the fact that mutual funds present performance information net of expenses. Other financial intermediaries are cited as models for disclosure, without discussing the fact that these intermediaries frequently advertise performance numbers that do not reflect the fees charged to customers.

II. Other Technical Comments on Report

Now on p. 27; see
comment 4.

- Chapter 1, page 7. The Report states that "NASD rules prohibit funds from charging a front-end load that exceeds 8.5 percent of the initial investment. Some mutual funds, known as 'no-load' funds, do not have sales charges." These sentences require some clarification.

Appendix II
Comments From the National Association of Securities Dealers Regulation, Inc.

Thomas J. McCool
May 8, 2000
Page 3

See comment 4.

- NASD Rule 2830 regulates NASD member broker/dealers that sell mutual funds, but does not regulate the funds themselves, since NASD Regulation has no jurisdiction over the mutual fund entities. Rule 2830(d) prohibits NASD member broker/dealers from offering or selling shares of any mutual fund or unit investment trust if the sales charges of such funds are deemed excessive under the rule. Additionally, the maximum permissible front-end and deferred sales load varies depending on certain factors, such as whether the fund offers certain rights of accumulation and quantity discounts, and whether the fund imposes an asset-based sales charge or service fee.
- Rule 2830(d)(3) prohibits NASD members from describing a mutual fund as "no load" or as having "no sales charge" if the fund has a front-end or deferred sales charge, or if the fund's total asset-based sales charges and service fees exceed 0.25% of average net assets per annum.

Now on p. 29; see comment 5.

- Chapter 1, page 11, footnote 7. We understand that the effective date of the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act provisions that eliminate the bank exclusion from the definitions of "broker" and "dealer" under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 is May 12, 2001 (not March 12, 2001).

Now on p. 42; see comment 6.

- Chapter 2, page 21, footnote 11. The Report's estimate of mutual fund adviser revenues was obtained by multiplying fund assets by operating expense ratios. Many mutual funds have waived various expenses, including adviser fees, for various reasons. If this estimate does not take into account fee waivers, it may be inaccurate.

Now on p. 74; see comment 7.

- Chapter 5, pages 16-17. In the third full paragraph on page 16, the Report discusses "Table 5.4" (which we believe should refer to Table 5.2) as showing the "two . . . primary distribution methods used by fund advisers." A fund investment adviser usually does not directly distribute fund shares. A mutual fund distributor, which is a registered broker/dealer, generally performs this function.

Again, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Report. Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss these comments further.

Sincerely,



Appendix II
Comments From the National Association of Securities Dealers Regulation, Inc.

Thomas J. McCool
May 8, 2000
Page 4

cc: Cody Goebel
U.S. General Accounting Office

R. Clark Hooper
Thomas A. Pappas
Joseph P. Savage
NASD Regulation, Inc.

John H. Komoroske
NASD, Inc.

The following are GAO's comments on the National Association of Securities Dealers Regulation's May 8, 2000, letter.

GAO's Comments

1. The National Association of Securities Dealers Regulation, Inc. (NASDR) commented that our draft report assumed that mutual funds impose ongoing fund operating expenses, such as Rule 12b-1 fees and advisory fees, at the account level. NASDR stated that, instead, funds impose these expenses at the entity level. In addition, it noted that NASD member broker/dealers are generally required to send all customers, at least quarterly, account statements that detail, among other things, all charges and debits imposed at the account level.

We have added language to both the Executive Summary and chapter 5 that clarifies that shareholder account statements do show amounts deducted directly from shareholder accounts, such as transaction charges and sales loads. However, the statements do not show in dollars each investor's share of the operating expenses that were deducted from the fund. In chapter 5 we mention that NASDR rules require quarterly statements.

2. NASDR stated that our recommendation may be difficult, if not impossible, to implement. It stated that mutual funds do not perform the shareholder-level accounting envisioned by the proposal and that many broker/dealers would not have access to the information about the mutual fund's expenses necessary to comply with these rules.

From discussions with operational staff at various mutual fund advisers and broker dealers, we learned that although such information is not currently calculated, compiling and making the calculations necessary to report to individual investors is feasible. As we discussed on page 79 of chapter 5, producing such information will require some additional programming and will entail some development and ongoing costs to fund advisers and broker dealers, but the estimated costs did not appear to not be prohibitive. On the basis of these discussions, we believe that SEC and NASDR can determine a cost-effective way for funds and others who maintain shareholder accounts to provide this information to shareholders.

3. NASDR commented that if our recommendation results in investors focusing solely on identifying funds with low expenses, such investors may sacrifice the performance that they might obtain if they were to consider other factors, such as a fund's investment objectives and the quality of the fund adviser's investment management.

As we stated in the conclusions to this report, investors should evaluate a fund's expenses in conjunction with their own investment goals and objectives. A reasonable approach may be for investors to first determine what types of funds they wish to invest in on the basis of the their tolerance for risk and the types of markets or securities invested in by the fund. After determining a desired fund category type, the investors could then evaluate the relative fees, expenses, and services provided by funds within each investment category.

Adequate disclosure is one of the primary goals of the securities laws. Withholding such specific information from investors because it could potentially be used inappropriately would not be consistent with the spirit of these laws. We would anticipate that funds would likely include explanatory materials with the disclosures we recommend to better ensure that investors evaluate the specific operating expense fee dollar amounts in context with their investment objectives and other information relevant to the fund.

4. We have changed the language noted in chapter 1 to clarify that NASDR regulates broker-dealers and not the funds. We also added footnotes stating that maximum permissible sales loads vary depending on certain factors, such as whether the fund imposes an asset-based sales charge or service fee; and stating the required conditions for a no load mutual fund.

5. We corrected the effective date of the applicable Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act provisions to May 12, 2001.

6. We calculated our estimates of fund adviser and service provider revenue by multiplying fund expense ratios by fund assets. These estimates used the net expense ratios reported by the funds in our sample, which exclude the amounts of any fund operating expenses that may be waived by the fund adviser.

7. In chapter 5, we corrected the table number to table 5.2 and changed wording in the sentence to reflect that direct sales are made by a fund, either through an internal or external sales force, and not the fund adviser.

Comments From the Investment Company Institute

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



INVESTMENT COMPANY INSTITUTE

MATTHEW P. FINK
PRESIDENT

May 3, 2000

Thomas J. McCool
Director, Financial Institutions
and Markets Issues
General Government Division
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. McCool:

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to comment on GAO's draft report entitled Mutual Fund Fees: Additional Disclosure Could Encourage Price Competition. The draft report's analysis of several issues associated with mutual fund fee levels makes a valuable contribution to this important subject.

The draft report's single most important finding is that mutual fund fee levels generally have declined during the nine-year period studied by the GAO. For example, the draft report notes that 85 percent of the large equity mutual funds examined reduced their total expense ratios, and that these reductions averaged 20 percent. In addition, the draft report indicates that mutual fund fee levels reflect economies of scale that can arise when a fund's assets grow. Of the mutual funds GAO reviewed that experienced significant asset growth in the 1990s, 89 percent reduced their fee levels. GAO's conclusions as to both trends in fee levels and economies of scale are consistent with the results of academic studies, as well as with a series of research reports prepared by the Institute during the last two years.

Our overall view is that the draft report does a commendable job of addressing important and complex topics. The comments set forth below represent suggestions about how certain elements of the draft report could be clarified or strengthened.

Competition Based on Performance Leads to Competition Based on Fees

We agree with the draft report's conclusion that the mutual fund industry is highly competitive, with low levels of concentration among existing fund companies and low barriers to entry for new ones. The draft report notes in several places that mutual funds compete primarily on the basis of investment performance. Less prominent attention is given to the fact that by law, mutual fund performance results must be calculated after fees and expenses are deducted. Because of this requirement, investors who consider a fund's performance when making investment decisions are indirectly taking into account the impact that fees can have on a fund's returns. This indirect consideration of fees through performance appears to be highly relevant to shareholders' investment decisions. As of year end 1999, more than 78 percent of shareholder accounts and 86 percent of shareholder assets were invested in equity mutual funds

See comment 1.

1401 H STREET, NW ■ WASHINGTON, DC 20005-2148 ■ 202/326-5801 ■ FAX 202/326-5806 ■ EMAIL fink@ici.org

Appendix III
Comments From the Investment Company Institute

Thomas J. McCool
U.S. General Accounting Office
May 3, 2000
Page 2

that charged less than the industry average. Moreover, in recent years, the typical equity fund investor has paid annual fees that were about one-third less than the average equity fund charged, indicating a strong investor preference for lower-cost funds.

Equally important, because funds compete fiercely on the basis of net performance, they have an incentive to keep fee levels as low as possible. A small difference in performance can affect a fund's competitive standing, which in turn substantially impacts the fund's ability to attract additional investments. The report would, in our view, better reflect both the competitive nature of the market and shareholder behavior if these facts were included.

Fund Advisers' Revenues are not Equivalent to Total Fee Revenues

Our second comment arises from the draft report's apparent assumption that "total fee revenues" are the same as the revenues of fund investment advisers. The ICI data on "total fee revenues" (from which this observation is drawn) includes fees paid not only to fund investment advisers, but also to third parties, such as shareholder servicing, 12b-1 and custodial fees. These fees cannot accurately be described as revenues of the adviser. More important, data from various fund information providers indicates that advisory and administrative fees received by fund advisers are diminishing as a percentage of total fee revenues, and now typically account for only 50 to 60 percent of total annual fund expenses. This fact appears to significantly impact the draft report's observations about fund asset and adviser revenue growth rates. The draft report suggests that these growth rates have been similar for the past decade. Instead, a more accurate finding would be that advisers' revenues have grown more slowly than both overall fund expenses and assets.

Mutual Fund Directors Have Contributed to Broad Based Fee Reductions

Third, the draft report lists many of the legal duties of mutual fund directors in overseeing fees. These governance responsibilities are unique, go well beyond what is expected of typical corporate directors, and were specifically designed by the authors of the Investment Company Act to provide safeguards for fund shareholders. Because fund directors play such an important role in fund governance, we believe additional discussion of these qualities is merited. We are not aware of any other competitive industry -- in the world of financial services or outside it -- in which a firm is required to have an independent body annually review the "price" the firm wishes to charge for its products or services. One individual apparently suggested to GAO staff that fund directors have served to increase rather than reduce fee levels, contending that directors only consider the fees charged by similar funds. This individual's claim was presented without any supporting evidence, and is contradicted directly by the applicable legal standards governing the work of directors. These legal standards require directors, as fiduciaries, to always act on shareholders behalf and to consider carefully a broad range of specific factors when reviewing fees. The claim also overlooks the fact that fund advisory fees can only be increased if approved by the fund's shareholders, as well as by the directors, including a majority of the independent directors. Finally, the individual's claim is contradicted by the various studies, now including GAO's draft report, that show mutual fund fees declining. GAO's data shows that 70 percent of the largest mutual

See comment 2.

See comment 3.

Thomas J. McCool
U.S. General Accounting Office
May 3, 2000
Page 3

funds reduced their total operating expense ratio between 1990 and 1998. As noted earlier, of the funds in this group that experienced significant asset growth in the 1990s, 89 percent experienced fee reductions.

Mutual Fund Fee Disclosure Is Unsurpassed

Fourth, an area that should be clarified is the draft report's assessment of the disclosure practices of competing financial services products. The draft report asserts that, unlike mutual funds, most other financial services disclose "specific dollar amounts of all fees paid." With all due respect, we do not believe that this assertion is supportable. To cite just two types of financial services listed in the draft report, we are not aware of any bank in the country that discloses to depositors the amount of the spread that the bank earns on a depositor's balances in savings and checking accounts. We are also not aware of any brokerage firm that discloses routinely the mark-up charged to investors when selling securities. And we are not aware of any other financial product that, like mutual funds, is required to aggregate all of its fees in order to promote comparability and easy understanding.

We believe very strongly that the mutual fund fee table provides the most comprehensive and understandable disclosure of fees in the financial services world. The fee table -- which must be prominently presented in the front of every fund prospectus -- was recently made even simpler for investors by the Securities and Exchange Commission following the most exhaustive field-testing ever undertaken by that agency. The fee table lets fund investors easily compare all of the costs of competing mutual fund investments on an apples to apples basis. We believe the draft report should reflect the SEC's significant efforts in this area.

In our view, mutual funds disclose far more than other financial products because they provide investors with a precise expense ratio, which allows for exact cost comparisons of annual fees for thousands of competing mutual funds. Funds also provide investors with a standardized hypothetical, which shows in dollars and cents the exact impact that a fund's annual fees and sales charges will have on a \$10,000 investment over 1, 5 and 10 year periods. No other financial product provides disclosure that is this comprehensive, and we were disappointed to see the draft report suggests otherwise.

Requiring Even More Fee Disclosure Could Be Counterproductive

Finally, notwithstanding the decline in fund fee levels and the shareholder preference for lower cost funds noted earlier, the draft report states that additional government regulation is needed to make investors more aware of mutual fund fees. The draft report states that awareness of fund fees might be heightened if fund companies were required by the SEC or NASD Regulation to include customized fee information on shareholder account statements.

Promoting investor awareness of the important role fees can play in long term financial planning is a priority for the Institute and its members. We have a long history of supporting investor awareness proposals and will continue to do so, but we have reservations about the account statement recommendation. Our reservations stem from our concern that this

See comment 4.

Appendix III
Comments From the Investment Company Institute

Thomas J. McCool
U.S. General Accounting Office
May 3, 2000
Page 4

requirement could erode the value of the standardized, all-inclusive fee information in the prospectus and thus impede informed assessments of fee levels at competing funds. Paradoxically, this could diminish rather than enhance investors' overall understanding of fund fees.

The Institute appreciates the opportunity to offer comments on a few of the more significant issues in the draft report. As noted in your letter, we would welcome the chance to meet with you to provide additional comments.

Very truly yours,



Matthew P. Fink

The following are GAO's comments on the Investment Company Institute's May 3, 2000, letter.

GAO Comments

1. The Investment Company Institute (ICI) notes that our report indicates that mutual funds compete primarily on the basis of investment performance but gives less prominent attention to the fact that mutual funds disclose their performance after fees and expenses have been deducted. ICI states that as a result, investors who consider performance are indirectly taking into account the impact of fees on returns. ICI also states that this indirect consideration appears to be highly relevant to shareholder investment decisions because, as of year-end 1999, more than 78 percent of shareholder accounts and 86 percent of shareholder assets were invested in equity mutual funds that charged less than the industry average. Finally, ICI states that by competing on the basis of net performance, funds have an incentive to keep fee levels as low as possible because small differences in performance can affect a fund's competitive standing.

At the beginning of each discussion of how funds compete, our report notes that funds are required to disclose performance net of fees. However, competition on the basis of net returns may or may not be the same as competition on the basis of price, and such indirect competition may not result in the same level of fees as could likely result from more direct fee-based competition. As we noted in chapter 5 of the report, the charges associated with other financial services, such as bank checking accounts and stock brokerage, which are generally disclosed in dollar terms to the users of these services, have been subject to vigorous competition directly on the basis of these costs, which has resulted in lower charges for many consumers. In addition, we noted that loads, which are disclosed in investor statements, have also declined over time. In addition, because past performance is not an indication of future returns, relying on such disclosures alone would not be sufficient for ensuring that adequate competition is occurring on that basis.

The statistics that ICI cites in its letter regarding the majority of mutual fund shareholders invested in funds charging fees lower than the industry average is based on a calculation of the simple average fees charged by funds in the industry. As we note in chapter 3 of our report, calculations using simple averages of mutual fund fees are biased upwards by the growing proportion of new funds, funds investing in foreign securities, and other funds that tend to have higher expense ratios than older funds investing in domestic securities. Therefore, finding that most investors are invested in funds charging less than such an average is not sufficient

evidence to indicated that fund investors overall are highly fee-conscious, particularly in light of surveys we reviewed that indicated that investors generally considered fees to be less important than other factors in making their investment decisions. In addition, although ICI's studies reported that some investors are increasingly investing in lower fee funds does not obviate the need for more explicit disclosure of fees and the increased competition that could result.

2. ICI noted that our draft report assumed that total fee revenues were the same as the revenues of fund investment advisers. ICI states that the expense ratios deducted from fund assets include amounts that are used to compensate not only the fund adviser but also other entities for shareholder servicing, marketing (12b-1 fees), and other services. ICI's letter also notes that adviser fees now typically account for 50 to 60 percent of fund expense ratios. It further states that the report suggests that the growth rates of fund assets and adviser revenues have been similar in the 1990s. ICI indicates that a more accurate finding would be that advisers' revenues have grown more slowly than both overall fund expenses and assets.

Although our report previously acknowledged that the expense ratio includes fees charged for various purposes, we have added additional text where appropriate to indicate that the fees deducted from fund assets represent revenue to more entities than just the fund advisor. However, all fees, regardless of which entities receive them as revenue, are deducted from investor assets; thus, our overall conclusion that such fees and assets grew at comparable rates remains accurate.

3. ICI commented that the duties that mutual fund directors have regarding the fees funds charge exceed those of typical corporate directors. ICI emphasized that these duties are unique and were specifically designed to provide safeguards for fund shareholders. ICI notes that one of the individuals with whom we spoke about mutual fund directors appears to have suggested that mutual fund directors' activities may be serving to increase fees by evaluating a fund's fees in light of those charged by other funds. ICI states that directors, as fiduciaries, are legally required to act on shareholders' behalf and to consider a broad range of specific factors when reviewing fees. ICI indicates that the individual's claim is also contradicted by various studies, including our own, that found fees have declined.

ICI has identified various duties placed on mutual fund directors that exceed those of the directors of a typical corporation, and we have added

a footnote in chapter 6 to acknowledge these additional responsibilities. However, as our report points out, these additional duties, particularly those related to the approval of the advisor's contract and its fees, arise because of the potential conflicts of interest between fund shareholders and the adviser. As a result, the independent directors are required to review and approve the fund's contract and fee arrangement with the adviser.

Congress intended that the independent directors of mutual funds serve as a check on the adviser because of the conflicts between the interests of the adviser and fund shareholders. However, the critics of fund directors whose comments we cited are of the opinion that directors are placing primary emphasis on comparing their funds' fees to those of other funds rather than the other factors that directors are required to consider as part of their fee reviews. Therefore, these individuals see directors as maintaining fee levels, or at least allowing fees to be lowered only to the extent that other funds are taking similar actions. Although we did find that fees for many mutual funds have declined, we also noted in chapter 2 of our report that we were unable to determine if the growth in fund assets would have provided advisers with the opportunity to reduce fees by even more than they had. Furthermore, a firm comparing the prices it charges its customers to those charged by competitors is a legitimate and perfectly acceptable means for such firms to evaluate their own business strategies. However, in an industry that only indirectly competes on the basis of such charges, such an activity may serve to maintain fees at a consistent level or allow them to be reduced only to the extent that other funds reduce theirs, as the individuals we interviewed stated.

4. ICI commented that the assertion in our report that unlike mutual funds, most other financial services disclose the specific dollar amounts of all fees paid is unsupportable. As an example, ICI states that no bank it is aware of discloses to depositors the amount of the spread that the bank earns on a depositor's balances in checking or savings accounts. ICI states that the fee disclosures required of mutual funds are the most comprehensive and understandable in the financial services world. It also notes that these disclosures have been recently made simpler by the Securities and Exchange Commission.

We agree with ICI that the currently required disclosures are comprehensive and reasonably understandable. In response to this comment by ICI and others on the draft report, we have added a footnote that discusses some of the recent changes to the disclosures we describe in our report.

Although the disclosures that mutual funds make are comprehensive and useful for investors in comparing the relative fees charged by different funds, the information in them discloses fees in percentage terms and uses hypothetical examples, which are less direct indications of the specific prices charged to any one investor. In our report, we cite five examples of other common financial services or transactions with which most mutual fund investors are also likely to be familiar, such as checking accounts, stock brokerage, or bank trust services. These services disclose in periodic statements the specific fees in dollars charged to customers. As we point out, mutual funds do not similarly provide specific dollar amounts of charges on the periodic statements they provide to individual investors.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contacts

Thomas J. McCool, (202) 512-8676

Cody J. Goebel, (202) 512-7329

Acknowledgments

In addition to those named above, Michael Burnett, Suzie Bright, Melvin Thomas, Darlene Wall, and Desiree Whipple made key contributions to this report.

Ordering Copies of GAO Reports

The first copy of each GAO report and testimony is free. Additional copies are \$2 each. Orders should be sent to the following address, accompanied by a check or money order made out to the Superintendent of Documents, when necessary. VISA and MasterCard credit cards are accepted, also. Orders for 100 or more copies to be mailed to a single address are discounted 25 percent.

Order by mail:

**U.S. General Accounting Office
P.O. Box 37050
Washington, DC 20013**

or visit:

**Room 1100
700 4th St. NW (corner of 4th and G Sts. NW)
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, DC**

Orders may also be placed by calling (202) 512-6000 or by using fax number (202) 512-6061, or TDD (202) 512-2537.

Each day, GAO issues a list of newly available reports and testimony. To receive facsimile copies of the daily list or any list from the past 30 days, please call (202) 512-6000 using a touch-tone phone. A recorded menu will provide information on how to obtain these lists.

Viewing GAO Reports on the Internet

For information on how to access GAO reports on the INTERNET, send e-mail message with "info" in the body to:

info@www.gao.gov

or visit GAO's World Wide Web Home Page at:

http://www.gao.gov

Reporting Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs

To contact GAO FraudNET use:

Web site: <http://www.gao.gov/fraudnet/fraudnet.htm>

E-Mail: fraudnet@gao.gov

Telephone: 1-800-424-5454 (automated answering system)

**United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001**

Bulk Rate Postage & Fees Paid GAO Permit No. G100
--

**Official Business
Penalty for Private Use \$300**

Address Correction Requested

