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A Proper Accounting

With the increase in numbers of scientific research workers, the great national meetings have tended to become unwieldy. Many simultaneous sessions must be held, with meetings scheduled in a number of different rooms and even in different buildings. It has thus become difficult for individuals to rendezvous and engage in the exchanges that were a valuable feature of earlier meetings.

These circumstances have fostered an increasing use of symposia, and many valuable special sessions are arranged in connection with meetings of the major scientific societies. These sessions in general are open to the public or at any rate to registrants. Increasing even more rapidly are the closed symposia. These involve specially invited small groups—often 20 or 30—who spend two or three days in intensive sessions. The participants may be brought together from all parts of the nation and even from abroad and include the more creative scientists active in a particular area of effort. The limited size of the group is a key ingredient in the success of these meetings. Transfer of information is facilitated; participants are less inhibited than they are in larger gatherings, and it is relatively easy to suppress the loquacious individual who insists on dealing in trivia. Informality sometimes characterizes the sessions, but a chairman maintains order and attempts to give direction. In other instances, the program is more formal. In any event, a large amount of information is transferred both in sessions and in personal contacts among the participants. For those directly involved, such meetings can be acutely stimulating, and significant scientific progress often can be traced to them.

Initiative for arranging the meetings usually comes from an established investigator. After a brief study of feasibility, including sounding out possible participants, he often seeks financial support amounting to \$5,000 to \$10,000. Because of his stature and his list of important potential participants, he can usually arrange for a subsidy. In most instances, funds are supplied by government agencies.

Unfortunately there are negative aspects of these closed meetings. Organizers of closed symposia tend to choose a small coterie of established individuals. This group gains the advantage of obtaining information concerning new research results far ahead of others. A net tendency is to favor senior investigators over younger men who have not yet won recognition. This favoritism often is compounded by what amounts to a policy of secrecy in the organization and conduct of the meetings. Understandably, the organizers usually have little stomach for the indignation of the uninvited. Less excusable is a common failure to communicate results or highlights of the symposia to the remainder of the scientific community. Often no direct notice of the event is forthcoming. Occasionally the papers are collected in a volume which appears only after the material is quite stale. Thus the conveners are in the position of expending public monies without a proper public accounting. At least one remedial step could easily be taken.

We feel that the organizers of government-supported symposia should be asked by the granting agencies to render in the open literature a brief report of the highlights of the meeting immediately after its completion. This would not remove all the aspects of special privilege; but it would insure that those not present could share in some measure in the proceedings, and development of the area of science involved would consequently be enhanced.—P.H.A.