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The American Association for the Advancement of Science was founded in 1848 and incorporated in 1874. Its objects are to further the work of scientists, to facilitate cooperation among them, to improve the effectiveness of science in the promotion of human welfare, and to increase public understanding and appreciation of the importance and promise of the methods of science in human progress.

University Responsibility

In administering large amounts of money for research, government agencies have successfully avoided government control of higher education. But in the process, government officials and scientists have fostered another kind of external control over universities—control by panels representing the special interests of particular fields of science. Under a system that is now well established, Professor X of, say, biochemistry at Y University submits a request for support of his research to a government agency. On the advice of a panel of biochemists, the agency makes a grant for which Y University is fiscally responsible but which in a quite major sense is made to Professor X rather than to the university. Its continuation may be contingent upon his remaining in charge, and a change in research direction may require approval of the granting agency. Thus we have the curious situation in which a major development at Y University is decided upon by a group of biochemists none of whom may ever have been or may ever be at Y University.

This system has a number of advantages. Scientists like it, for most of them prefer to have research plans judged by their professional colleagues rather than by their deans and presidents. Government officials like it, for they can say that decisions concerning research support are made by those best qualified—research scientists in the fields involved. The specter of government control is avoided. And good research is accomplished.

But the system also has the bad effects of eroding university responsibility and of shifting faculty loyalty away from the university and toward the supporting agency and the government-science machinery that made the grant. The university as a collection of scholars responsible for the development and welfare of the university has in part given way to a collection of individuals supported by outside agencies and each loyal to his own source of support.

A new set of administrative choices is now to be made. Plans are being formulated for substantial federal grants to support major university improvements and developments rather than particular research projects or programs. And plans are being made for an expanded graduate fellowship program under which many fellows will be selected locally rather than nationally. Will these programs be supported on a department-by-department basis, with decisions made by panels representing individual fields of science? Or will they be handled on a university basis? The department of biochemistry at Y University would probably prefer to have its requests evaluated by a panel of biochemists than to trust the university faculty or officers to decide how best to use a grant made to the university as a whole. Making grants to individual departments would undoubtedly be popular and would represent a safe and cautious extension of an established system. But this course would further erode university responsibility. And this, we hold, is the wrong trend, not good for the university as an institution or, in the long run, for the grant recipient or the granting agency. The present system of supporting projects is unlikely to be changed. But in the newer programs there is an opportunity to restore balance and to strengthen the universities. Future scientific advances and the success of many national programs depend heavily upon the universities and will be best assured by strong universities capable of exercising responsible judgment over their activities.—D.W.