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Too Much Freedom of Information

The Federal Council for Science and Technology has instructed the grant-making agencies of the federal government to release successful proposals freely to the public media and, as far as seems appropriate, to any inquiring individual. This order imposes an undue burden on the agencies involved and should be reexamined with respect both to the amount of detail to be released and the policy of release to any inquiring individual.

Some kinds of information about each grant should certainly be made public, but not necessarily all details of the proposal. For example, it is understood that research plans are subject to change as the work proceeds. Why, then, require public access to these tentative plans? A request for a grant also gives individual salaries and other administrative and financial details that some institutions consider confidential. To meet some of these difficulties, the National Science Foundation warns applicants that information they consider confidential should be given in a separate statement accompanying the proposal. The National Institutes of Health saves trouble for itself and its grantees by instructing applicants to divide their proposals into two parts, a brief statement that will be made public and a more detailed one that will not.

The federal agencies are trustees of public funds, and their methods of operation should be publicly known, but that objective is satisfactorily achieved by the routine publication of these essential items for each grant: the granting agency, the recipient, the principal investigator, the amount of money, and a brief description of the purpose. No more should be required, but agency and recipient should both be privileged to give out fuller information whenever that seems desirable. And it can be expected that the significant findings and procedures will later be described in detail if the work itself justifies publication.

The requirement that information be released to any inquiring individual raises other problems. Here are two specific examples.

An apparatus manufacturer wanted to examine all NSF proposals that might contain apparatus ideas of commercial interest. NSF offered to let the Scientific Apparatus Manufacturers Association examine such proposals if it would then distribute the information impartially among manufacturers. This offer was declined; each manufacturer can do his own searching. NSF has recently had to supply office space and clerical help for a week to the first manufacturer's representative while he examined 500 proposals, hunting for commercially interesting apparatus ideas.

A university representative copied a successful application for a grant to support a program of science education. The university then submitted an essentially duplicate proposal and demanded that, since the original had been granted, the duplicate must also be granted, for it obviously met the same standards.

The agencies should not be required to release tentative research plans, salaries, descriptions of equipment to be used, or other such details in advance of the work. Nor should they be at the mercy of any trouble-making, self-seeking, or merely curious individual. The public interest will be better served if the agencies can concentrate on deciding which grants should be made in the future instead of on answering miscellaneous questions about the ones that have already been made.—DAEL WOLFLE