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Gordon Research Conferences

One of the most immediately fruitful of the many channels of communication among scientists is the research conference that brings together a selected group of participants all of whom are actively engaged in a particular area of research. One of the best examples is the annual series of Gordon Research Conferences, of which there will be 54 this summer, on such topics as Nucleic Acids, Physical Metallurgy, Low Temperature Geochemistry, Biomathematics, and Energy Coupling Mechanisms. The full program appeared in the 12 March issue of *Science*.

The conference customs have long been established. The conferences are held on five New Hampshire campuses that offer the kind of pleasant isolation that is conducive to intensive and uninterrupted consideration of a problem. Each lasts a week. Each includes upward of 100 participants, from this country and abroad, selected from industry, universities, and private and government research laboratories. Each morning from Monday through Friday there is a 3-hour session and each evening from Monday through Thursday another session that continues—through informal discussions—until the last participant decides to go to bed. Afternoons are spent in individually arranged discussions, reading, or recreation. After five pleasant days, nine intensive sessions, and numerous informal contacts, the participants make way for the next group and the procedure starts over on a different topic the following Monday morning.

A feature of the Gordon Conferences that has contributed largely to their effectiveness is the ban on attributed publication. Any participant is free to publish or not, but he may not say that his paper was presented at or is based upon the discussion at a Gordon Conference. Because many publications do result, the whole scientific community benefits, but because no participant need worry about being quoted or about having to meet a publication deadline, everyone is free to present work in progress, new ideas, unanswered questions, or speculative hypotheses.

The conferences were started in 1931 by Professor Neil Gordon of Johns Hopkins University. They were for a time called the Gibson Island Conferences, but the name was later changed to honor their founder. They hold a unique position in the AAAS structure, for they have their own director, W. George Parks, and their own Council and Board of Trustees.

The success of the conferences has resulted in steadily increasing demands that more be held. From the start in 1931, the number grew to 6 in 1940, 16 in 1950, 36 in 1960, and 54 in 1965. A West Coast series has recently been started with two Gordon Conferences held at Santa Barbara, California, in the wintertime. Conference officers have helped other groups to organize similar meetings in the U.S. and abroad. The European series, called Euchem Conferences, includes three this year, on Electron Spin Resonance, High-Temperature Chemistry, and Mass Spectrometry, and six conferences are planned for next year.

Among all the methods for the storage and retrieval of scientific information, one of the best is still that of storing it in human brains and retrieving what is most pertinent at a particular time by asking intelligent questions. From 14 June to 3 September the Gordon Research Conferences will use this method to compare and consolidate on-going work and to help some 5000 scientists lay the basis for future advances in 54 active research areas.—DAEL WOLFLE