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New Centers of Excellence

Anxiety over distribution of federal funds is widespread. A major crystallizing influence has been interest in the choice of a site for the new high-energy accelerator (*Science*, 13 Aug., p. 730). The Atomic Energy Commission received a total of 126 proposals from 46 states. Many of the proposals were well-prepared, lengthy documents, signed by presidents of universities. In almost every instance, sponsors included important political figures as well as congressional representatives. In its approach to the AEC one West Coast city was represented by 35 emissaries, including the mayor, who led the delegation and made the presentation.

In the course of preparing their proposals the various groups had to ask themselves searching questions concerning the quality of their local universities. They became highly aware of the importance of research and development in shaping civilization. They were reminded of the present distribution of federal expenditures for research, half of which go to twenty institutions. Appetite for government support has been thoroughly whetted throughout the nation. The accelerator can be awarded to only one group. Obviously, consolation prizes must be available for the remainder.

President Johnson has responded to this new reality in a memorandum entitled "Strengthening Academic Capability for Science Throughout the Country" (see *Science*, 24 Sept., p. 1483). The document calls for important changes in the distribution of federal research funds. The President states: "Research supported to further agency missions should be administered not only with a view to producing specific results, but also with a view to strengthening academic institutions and increasing the number of institutions capable of performing research of high quality." The President makes it clear that the institutions to be strengthened are other than the present leading twenty. "[F]unds are still concentrated in too few institutions in too few areas of the country. We want to find excellence and build it up wherever it is found so that creative centers of excellence may grow in every part of the nation."

This is a worthy objective. Can it be accomplished? What will it cost in money and human values? What is the time scale? Immediate substantial beneficial effects from the new policies are not likely to be felt widely. Partly this is because delays are inevitable in broad implementation of new policies. Moreover, many institutions will be unable to exploit the new opportunities effectively. Too few administrators understand what must be done to foster scientific creativity. They believe that excellence can be bought. A current fallacy is that "brains go where the money is." In fact, brains go where brains are. Brains go where there is a challenge. Brains go where brains are valued for intellectual as well as practical achievements.

Most of the leading twenty institutions have been great for a long time. They will continue to be excellent for they know how to obtain and maintain quality. They have the asset of traditions of superiority that tend to be self-sustaining. If federal support is curtailed, individuals at the great universities will suffer. Some may be forced to go elsewhere. Whether the new policies result in more good than harm will depend in part on how skillfully the policies are implemented to conserve existing strength. The results will also depend on the wisdom of administrators at the new centers and on the intellectual environment and traditions that they create. The work of achieving enduring excellence is the labor not of a year but of a generation.—PHILIP H. ABELSON