Letters

ACE Report: Quality Ratings in the Academic Marketplace

In Wolfle's editorial (27 May, p. 1189) about the report, "An Assessment of Quality in Graduate Education," published by the American Council on Education, the conclusion is reached that "the ratings are highly dependable statements of the quality of graduate departments, as judged by informed peers." It is further concluded that "the tabulated ratings can be used as the quality equivalent of a social register." In his article (News and Comment, p. 1226), John Walsh refers to this report "as a new Consumer's Guide to the academic marketplace." As a member of an institution which has come out relatively unscathed by the report, I feel that I can comment without personal bitterness on the inequities of the original study, some of its failures and pernicious effects, and on the further failure of your editorial and article to evaluate the meaning of such a report.

The first of these is the failure to recognize that scholarship and education in a field may be carried on with great competence by a few people, often at institutions not included in any social register. To properly judge academic quality, the work of individual staff members, even in obscure schools and working on obscure disciplines, would have to be taken into account.

A second point is that the categorization of each field used in the report is far too broad. The more specific breakdowns made for the field of biology show that constructing meaningful subdivisions is difficult. Nonetheless, some attempt must be made. The scholarship at one university in a particular field that is currently popular should not be compared with scholarship at another university which may not enjoy the popularity of these fields presently in vogue. A popularity contest may identify popularity, but it is doubtful that it can indicate academic excellence. Solid-state physics at university A cannot be compared with particle physics at B or astrophysics at C.

A third point is the numerical assignment of excellence. While there may well be a case for subdividing various universities into degrees of excellence, it is exceedingly doubtful that the difference between first and fifth or such values as 4.60 and 4.33 are any indication whatsoever of relative merit. More important, however, is the fact that these refined university grade point averages force a relative ranking and provide more significant figures than there is significance to the results. It is an abuse to attempt to name a university as first or second or fifth in a broad general field. It is both possible and important to enumerate departments in schools which offer distinguished training in particular professional subjects without the construction of an absurdly refined scale.

In several cases it would appear that some departments with an outstanding faculty and an excellent graduate program have been relegated to the wasteland of a low numerical rating, due perhaps to the unpopularity of that particular school or department within the viewpoint of people surveyed. Other departments are similarly rated very high because of the great academic appeal of certain few staff members which they currently have. The tenor of the report thus is not to enumerate the schools which offer excellent graduate training in a variety of aspects of certain professional disciplines, but instead to play the "academic handicap game" and indicate, in a popularity poll point of view, which school is nosing out another school for reasons which are at best obscure.

In addition, this report suffers very seriously from the point of view of omissions. There are some departments and universities which are new in existence, but which have outstanding departments, producing and training some of the best graduate students in the field today. Some of these departments do not receive mention in this report. Insofar as this report actually serves as a "consumer's guide to the marketplace," it may have the effect of discouraging graduate students from going to schools where they would receive better training than is available in many of the departments which are listed in the report.

The author of this report comments in the preface that the study required "many man months of painstaking conscientious work." Considering the importance of such a study and the consequences which such a study would have, it would seem even more useful if a few more months had been put into the preparation of a more intelligently-prepared questionnaire and to a more intelligent evaluation of the results. I am in complete agreement with the recommendation of the advisory committee that a report of this type should be repeated within five years to avoid "fixing of reputations when the academic scene is changing constantly." The scene is changing so rapidly, as a matter of fact, that the author, on 11 April 1966, found it desirable to endow the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with no Nobel laureate on its faculty. A simple review of the list of Nobel awards made the previous year would certainly have removed such a statement.

I have interviewed entering graduate students at a number of institutions and have found that the majority of them have chosen their school for obscure and often erroneous reasons. They are terribly impressed by the prestige factor and often by the judgment of senescent academics who remember a myth of their alma mater. This report will do little more than build up the prestige of the well established schools and help perpetuate the myth that an excellent education can be obtained at only certain schools.

I can only hope that any student considering a choice of schools will consider this report "a kind of academic handicappers manual" and seek more specifically to discover if he may find the instruction and companionship of intelligent and imaginative scholars in the educational institution he is considering.

G. J. WASSERBURG
Geological Sciences, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena

Father of the World Weather Watch

My colleague, M. Neiburger, has called my attention to an oversight in my recent editorial (8 April, p. 159). He felt I had failed to give due credit to the late Harry Wexler for the origin

of the concept of the "World Weather Watch," but had instead credited it to the recent National Academy of Sciences report to which I referred. I certainly did not intend such an implication.

To the best of my knowledge, the first mention of the "World Weather Watch" concept is contained in the document "First Report on the Advancement of Atmospheric Sciences and their Application in the Light of Developments in Outer Space," published by the World Meteorological Organization sometime in 1962. The draft of this report was prepared early in 1962; Harry Wexler and V. A. Bugayev were architects of many of the main features of the plan, as well as authors of the draft.

The idea of the World Weather Watch, and the name itself, apparently came out of the early discussions by Wexler and Bugayev, though it is often hard to know precisely where a name or concept finds its earliest source.

Those of us who knew and admired Wexler's fertile and unbounded mind can imagine Harry coming up with such an idea as the keystone of a vastly improved global meteorological observing system, or, if it had been Bugayev or some other participant who first advanced the idea, of Harry's seizing on it with enthusiasm and generously helping to elaborate it as it was described in the WMO first report.

WALTER ORR ROBERTS
National Center for Atmospheric Research, Boulder, Colorado 80302

Dimethyl Sulfoxide Conference

In the review of the DMSO Conference (Meetings, 17 June, p. 1646) a statement appears concerning our work at Letterman General Hospital. The impression is given that we have successfully completed studies with the use of topical DMSO as a vehicle for antibacterial agents in treating infections of the skin and as a vehicle for the topical application of insect repellents. This is incorrect. At the meeting, I tried to make clear that we were just beginning these studies when our work with DMSO on human skin in vivo was interrupted. I said that we plan to resume these studies, because the demonstrated rapid and deep penetration by materials incorporated in DMSO into the horny layer of the human skin and into the follicles indicated that DMSO might increase the effectiveness of incorporated antibacterial agents in the treatment of pyodermas, dermatophytoses, and acnes. I also said that it might be possible that the application of suitable insect repellents in DMSO, and their penetration into the horny layer and slow extrusion over many weeks could so prolong the effectiveness of the repellents as to render them much more useful in preventing insect-vectored diseases, including malaria.

MARION B. SULZBERGER
Letterman General Hospital, San Francisco, California 94129

Our group was quoted as reporting that "topical application of 70 percent DMSO helps clear gingivitis, without indication of untoward effect." We made no such statement; as a matter of fact we have had no experience whatsoever in this area of therapy. The following statement should be substituted: ".007 Decadron in a 70 percent solution of DMSO was found to have a useful suppressant action on certain chronic lesions of the oral mucous membranes without indication of untoward effects."

AUSTIN H. KUTSCHER
School of Dental and Oral Surgery, Columbia University, New York 10032

Our work regarding intravesical instillation of DMSO was incorrectly reported. It was stated "that the instillation of undiluted DMSO for one hour daily into bladders of dogs resulted in no structural or functional changes." We reported gross edema following the intravesical instillation for one hour of varying concentrations of DMSO. The gross edema was minimal using 10 percent DMSO solution, moderate with 25 percent DMSO solution, but severe when 50 or 100 percent DMSO solutions were tested. Furthermore, the bladder of the dogs tested with 50 and 100 percent DMSO concentrations exhibited an acute inflammatory cell response both grossly and microscopically, 24 hours, and also, 7 days after the single test period. We did not demonstrate any effect from various DMSO concentrations on bladder function by the method we used. Our study definitely demonstrated that adverse effects occur locally when 50 and 100 percent DMSO test solution is instilled into the urinary bladder for a one hour period.

HARVEY J. LERNER
803 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania