

Letters

ACE Report: Further Inequalities in the Academic Ratings

Belonging, as I do, to one of the low-man-on-the-poll departments, I cannot, unlike Wasserburg in his incisive and comprehensive letter (5 August, p. 575), disclaim bitterness in respect to the American Council on Education's pamphlet, "An Assessment of Quality in Graduate Education." Nevertheless, some reply from one of the underdogs is imperative, both in support of Wasserburg and in our own best interest.

The "Assessment" is a detailed and carefully constructed edifice, but it is based upon several sampling premises that are only half true: namely, (i) that the sampled population will distinguish between quantity and quality, allowing for the fact that the small department can have but few research programs; (ii) that people in the same profession, but not in the same field, are qualified to judge the quality of work with which they are not familiar; and (iii) that these opinions, when assigned numerical values and correlated according to statistical scholarship, will produce a rank order that is meaningful.

Nobody needs to be told that Harvard, Caltech, and California (Berkeley) are great. What does need to be publicized is the nature of the special training a student can get at smaller institutions of quality, of which my own is not least. We happen not to be active in high energy experimental physics, and we thereby forego the professional publicity value attached to that popular field, but among several others, we have at least two outstanding research programs worth a student's consideration: ultrasonics and the liquid state, for one, and strange particles from outer space, for another. We are a productive research department: from June 1964 to June 1966 we published 37 papers in those standard journals that have a referee system, not to mention 14 more letters, conference reports, and chapters in books. I am

sure there are many more institutions like ours and many other disciplines in which similar conditions hold, and which have been done the same injustice by the inherent bias in the sampling methods of the "Assessment." There is an ineluctable confusion between quality and quantity in the responses to the poll: only the big balanced departments make high marks.

One outraged suggestion stemming from this injustice is that we should make an advertising appropriation in next year's department budget, so that physicists outside our specialties who are approached by the polltakers will at least know we are active. The ACE would be doing a real service if it helped in spreading such facts to the students of the incoming generation and were less concerned with uncontrolled opinion.

As a job of statistical manipulation, the "Assessment" is indeed done well, but it nevertheless reminds me of the Johnsonian dictum about women preaching and dogs walking on their hind legs, which I paraphrase slightly: "What is surprising is not that it is done well, but that it is done at all." Five years hence, if such a survey is again proposed, it should either be vetoed or so modified as to avoid the undeniable damage that its predecessor will have done among staff and students to morale, recruitment, and financial support.

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Let the Great Smokies Escape High-Speed Roads

Carter's article on the proposed transmountain road through the Great Smokies (News and Comment, 1 July, p. 38) gave an excellent summary of the critical problem facing this area. Having hiked and camped in the Smokies on several occasions, I would

like to present some additional information.

1) This is the last large publicly owned wilderness area east of the Mississippi. Once gone, it can never be replaced.

2) The Wilderness Act was not intended to chop our national parks into small segments with interconnecting high-speed roads.

3) The proposed road threatens a scenic area of the Appalachian Trail which in itself is being considered for national park status. Moreover, the proposed wilderness plan sponsored by the National Park Service fails to protect three famous trout streams: Hazel, Eagle, and Forney creeks.

May I urge support for the proposal outlined by the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club which would provide adequate protection for the entire park.

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Science Needs No Diplomatic "Guidance"

At first glance, Langer's report on a peace questionnaire being sent to American scientists by a scientific commission of the Soviet Peace Committee (News and Comment, 15 July, p. 276) appears straight forward, but closer inspection shows it to be an uncritical dissemination of official views to the naive American scientists who might otherwise be misled into co-operating. Presumably this guidance is appropriate because, to quote your correspondent, "it is the business of the diplomats to take a position" on this questionnaire. Why? Certainly, the free speech injunctions of our Constitution make clear that public discussion or interchange is an area where government must not meddle and I see no way in which the international nature of the public interchange alters this restriction. The idea that diplomats should guide scientists as to what matters are suitable for interchange is directly opposed to the international character of science and the normal attitudes of scientists. If a questionnaire on peace action is "verboten," what about a questionnaire on population limitation or on problems of automation and economics or on action toward world law? What would be the fate of an effort by United States scien-