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The National Science Foundation

The latest annual report* of the National Science Foundation is excellent. It is a well-written account of the roles and the accomplishments of the agency that provides a basis for increased confidence in the leadership of NSF. This is due in part to the quality of the report and to its substantive content. It is also due to the fact that NSF has analyzed the current situation and taken defensible policy positions.

The National Science Foundation Act of 1950 assigned to the Foundation the responsibility to strengthen basic research and education in the sciences throughout the United States. Since then, other responsibilities have been added, including study, research, and evaluation in the area of weather modification and responsibilities under the National Sea Grant College and Program Act. Most of the Foundation's programs are concentrated in the country's universities and colleges. However, much effort has been devoted to the improvement of science education in primary and secondary schools.

The latest report emphasizes the close relationship among research, training, and the needs of society. "Basic research at academic institutions provides . . . apprentice-type training essential to graduate education while producing significant new knowledge." Furthermore, the report says, "production of knowledge as well as of scientific and technical manpower plays an important part in the cultural, social, economic and intellectual development of various regions of the United States. . . . Since it is exceedingly difficult to predict future utilization of basic knowledge most research is supported for its own intellectual value. However, this is done with the full realization, which is backed up by past experience, that most if not all, of the research results will sooner or later prove to be of direct value to society. Furthermore, if it is clearly evident that research activities in specific areas should be intensified because of present societal needs, attempts are made to stimulate this type of investigation."

In meeting its responsibilities the Foundation supports many programs; all of these are covered in the report. Where evolution of the Foundation's program has occurred, the changes are emphasized. This serves to convey the impression of an organization seeking to meet challenges.

About half the budget, or \$235 million, was used to support research. A corresponding fraction of the report is devoted to providing highlights of research activities. Each of the major disciplines is represented by one or more examples. A typical description begins with a brief, simple statement of the question asked and its significance. The principal results are summarized, and their implications are discussed in terms of relevance both to science and to society.

The weakest part of the report is that devoted to discussion of science policy planning. However, the weakness is ameliorated by a thoughtful policy statement adopted by the National Science Board on "Criteria for the Support of Research by the National Science Foundation."

Preparation of an excellent annual report covering the complex activities of a large organization is a difficult and time-consuming task. It to be hoped that the diligence of the Foundation will be rewarded by cohesive support from the scientific community during the difficult days ahead.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

* National Science Foundation Publication NSF-68-1 (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1968).