

Letters

Research Opportunity

The report on the AAAS Conference on the Participation of Women in Scientific Research (AAAS News, 2 Dec. 1977, p. 917) recommends increasing research opportunities through funding of programs for women who are not affiliated with research organizations. I am convinced that this is a long-overdue reform in the funding system which should not be limited to women.

The chance to find new approaches to complicated research problems may be lost when granting agencies require that the researcher obtain a position in an established organization before applying for a grant. Criteria used in filling such positions are frequently not closely related to the ability to phrase important research questions and develop ways of answering them definitely. When a position in a research institution has been obtained, creativity may be stifled by the system, which funnels most female Ph.D.'s into a niche in the domain of an established researcher where they must retain the privilege by doing research which supports the interests and biases of that person rather than propose their own original ideas. Many able new scientists who are prepared and eager to make significant contributions to the understanding of major problems never get the opportunity to start because they are forced by discriminatory hiring practices and economic necessity to take a job in an organization that is not oriented toward those goals.

The solution to the present waste of research talent may be a reorganization of the system. During the postdoctoral training period, a new scientist could organize and present ideas in a grant application, to be submitted to peer review, and be awarded a grant without first being hired based on other institutional criteria. Awarding the grant to the person, not the institution, would allow the scientist to then contract with an institution for the facilities and services paid for by the overhead allowance in the grant. This system might make adminis-

trators more responsive to researchers, and efficiency of administration could be greatly improved by the keen competition for this business.

New nonprofit or private corporations for grant administration might be formed to bid for the overhead money if the present ones do not respond to the challenge of providing improved services and more adequate facilities. New institutions resulting from successful bidding for grant administration funds would encourage interdisciplinary cooperation among groups of scientists with diverse backgrounds but common goals because group members would no longer be forced to seek appointments in different departments of different universities, with the resulting isolation from each other.

Under this proposed funding system, the freedom and opportunity for initiative could result in greatly increased morale and productivity among new scientists. Women and minorities would be better able to achieve their career goals, and progress toward our national research goals would be greatly facilitated by a more efficient utilization of new talent with new ideas.

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Cancer Congress Boycott and Human Rights

Although believing in the veracity of the abrogation of human rights in Argentina, we cannot in the least agree with the way in which those who signed the letter of 21 October 1977 (p. 253) calling for the relocation or boycott of the 12th International Cancer Congress (to be held in Buenos Aires in October 1978) state their disapproval.

This initiative, which we hope does not achieve its aim, directly affects not

only the organizing committee and the participants of the congress but also those who are interested in problems related to cancer who have no responsibility whatever for the cited abrogation of human rights.

We believe this statement was presented in good faith by its authors, but it should be addressed to those who are really responsible for the problem and not to people who are engaged in scientific research on cancer and will meet in Argentina to share their experience, directly and undeniably related to the human right to health.

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Coal Trains

In discussing the problem of getting Rocky Mountain coal to Texas, John Walsh (News and Comment, 11 Nov. 1977, p. 587) shudders in print about "... the noise and dirt and inconvenience" of a 100-car train "passing a particular point every 45 minutes."

I suspect that people living or working near an urban freeway today are subjected to greater noise and health hazard than will be those who find themselves near the Texas coal-bearing railway of 1985. Most of the coal dust from the trains—and there is a surprisingly large amount lost in this manner—will be blown off in the sparsely settled northern portions of the transport routes. Freight trains operate at reduced speeds through most urban areas, which should cause both dust and noise to be less where they would be most objectionable.

Blocking of street and highway crossings in towns and suburbs will be an inconvenience to motorists and to some of the few remaining Texan pedestrians. If the trains move at 50 kilometers per hour (km/hour) through such crossings, the traffic will be delayed a total of 2.5 minutes out of each hour; at country crossings, where 100 km/hour could be maintained, the delay will be only 1.25 minutes out of each hour. Texans might be excused for regarding this inconvenience as a trifling trade-off for continued enjoyment of air conditioning and other benefits of electricity.

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