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The Annual Meeting

With 144 annual meetings under its belt, AAAS to outward appearances has mastered the job of staging the world series of science and technology. The impression is pleasant but hardly accurate. Toil and struggle go into the architecture of every meeting, and basic questions arise concerning the objectives that are sought.

When AAAS was young, the annual meeting served the purpose of assembling the scattered band of America's scientist-philosophers to read learned papers and to engage in fraternal discourse. More than a century later, the configurations of scientific research and practice are vastly changed, while the scale and sophistication of information diffusion systems put the annual meeting in another light. With close to 300 affiliated societies now in the AAAS network, some of them at or beyond the membership strength of AAAS, the burden of in-depth updating of the state of science must be shared by the disciplinary organizations.

What, then, are the purposes served by the annual meeting of AAAS? Several come to mind. The meeting helps, however briefly, to underscore the essential interdependence of scientific fields and to break down parochialism. It offers a bridging mechanism to link thoughts and experiences originating from diverse starting points and premises. It offers opportunities for challenge and cross-fertilization, both being essential counterweights to elitism and arrogance in science. It reminds scientists that there exists an implicit contract with society, and that the freedom to pursue research and apply its results carries commensurate accountability. The meeting is both a celebration of the centrality of science in our affairs and a process for disclosing its directions and meanings for the human condition. For one short week both the glory and the limits of science go on display, and for furthering public understanding of science (ergo the advancement of science) it would be hard to suggest a substitute. If there are those who come to the meeting not to share its excitement but to express dissent, they can expect a hearing within the accepted rules of civil discourse, but no license for disorder and disruption.

The 145th AAAS meeting has been rerouted to Houston. That decision by the Board of Directors, adopted out of respect for the concerns of women in science, will take AAAS for the first time to a city rich in scientific drive, creativity, and technological innovation. It will also situate the meeting close by our Latin neighbors whose needs, goals, and rising expectations for progress furnish the thrust for the AAAS project in Western Hemispheric Cooperation in Science, which has helped to shape a new and promising federation of scientific associations. The Houston meeting will be different in still another respect: it will be held during the first week of January to take advantage of the collegiate intersession.

The quality of the annual meetings of AAAS is determined chiefly by the ideas and labors of our members and affiliated societies. It is not programmed from the top down. In every sense, it is the members' meeting. The role of the headquarters staff is to negotiate for symposia, to sort out and coordinate the ideas that swarm in, to be watchful that controversial topics are presented fairly and with balance, and to make sure the final program fairly reflects the contemporary range of interactions among science, technology, and society. It is a very large order. The problem of coherence is perhaps the trickiest part of it, as the news media struggle to capture and report with accuracy the main currents of science, technology, and human values to the external audience, which furnishes the multiplier effect in explaining what science is about.

Looking back on the 1978 meeting, the directors of the Association share a variety of sentiments: much satisfaction, appreciation to those who contributed so much, and confidence that the Houston meeting will be still better.—WILLIAM D. CAREY