

SCIENCE

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EDITORIAL

From Rhetoric to Reality

Many, many Americans share the view of a man in a focus group held recently in Columbus, Ohio, who said, "I believe in supporting research because I believe in the possibilities." What an endorsement for the scientific enterprise! Surveys show that scientists are among the most respected professionals in the United States, that science-based institutions are highly regarded, and that citizens strongly support publicly funded research.

To make an up-to-date evaluation of these last assertions, Research!America commissioned Louis Harris and Associates to conduct a survey of the U.S. public during June 1995. Out of 1004 adults surveyed, with a margin of error estimated at 3.1%, the survey found that (i) 94% of respondents believed that it is important for the United States to maintain its role as a world leader in medical research; (ii) 65% opposed cuts in federal support for universities and hospitals, and those under the age of 30 opposed such measures by nearly 75%; (iii) 73% would pay more taxes to support medical research, which duplicates the results when the same question was asked in a 1993 Harris poll; (iv) 61% wanted their senators and congresspeople to support legislation that would give tax credits to private industries to conduct more medical research; and (v) 69% agreed with the statement, "Even if it brings no immediate benefits, basic science research which advances the frontiers of knowledge is necessary and should be supported by the Federal Government."

Despite these indications of the public's priorities, the congressional budget axe may soon be wielded with seeming disregard for years of public investment in research. Because members of Congress very rarely hear from their constituents about the value of investing in scientific research, there is a sense that threatened cuts are inevitable. Why hasn't the public spoken out? It is hard for scientists to feel optimistic about delivering on the promise of scientific opportunity to a public whose support often seems more rhetorical than real.

Conveying to the public a sense of reality about the future of scientific research is the crux of the matter. Very few nonscientists are aware that science is at risk. Fewer still realize that their tax dollars support science and that they therefore have a personal investment at stake. The challenge of activating positive but currently passive public support is every scientist's responsibility. Virtually every scientist is supported by public dollars, whether the source of those dollars is taxes, consumer spending, philanthropy, venture capital, or a combination thereof. Yet scientists feel awkward engaging in conversation with members of the public from the point of view of an employee reporting to the boss. This is ironic, because regardless of the nature of the public forum—one-on-one conversation, Rotary Club presentation, Internet bulletin board, or elementary school classroom—it is both appropriate and easy for scientists to convey a responsive attitude to the public.

If scientists approached public discussion with an "I work for you" attitude, it would go a long way toward bridging the gap between scientists and nonscientists, without having to wait several generations for improved science education to have a positive impact on the citizenry. Public opinion polls and focus groups reveal that members of the non-scientifically trained public would welcome the opportunity to meet scientists in settings where dialogue could take place and scientists could answer questions and offer their resources (most often brainpower) to help meet needs identified by citizen groups.

As initially awkward as it may be to give the culture of science a more populist orientation, it will be more difficult and take much longer to change the culture of the nonscientific community to accept "hands-off" support of research. Demonstrating accessibility as well as accountability to the public that pays their way and values their work is the easiest and quickest way for scientists to achieve a higher rank for science in the nation's priorities. When scientists convey accessibility, accountability, and pride in working in the public's interest, the public will be more likely to actively take up their cause, insisting to elected representatives that support for science be allocated not on the basis of cost-of-living increases or to accommodate across-the-board cuts, but on the basis of scientific opportunity, so that all citizens will benefit from a stronger economy and improved health and well-being just as rapidly as is scientifically feasible.

Mary Woolley

Mary Woolley is the president of Research! America in Alexandria, VA, a national nonprofit alliance dedicated to increasing public awareness about the value of medical research.