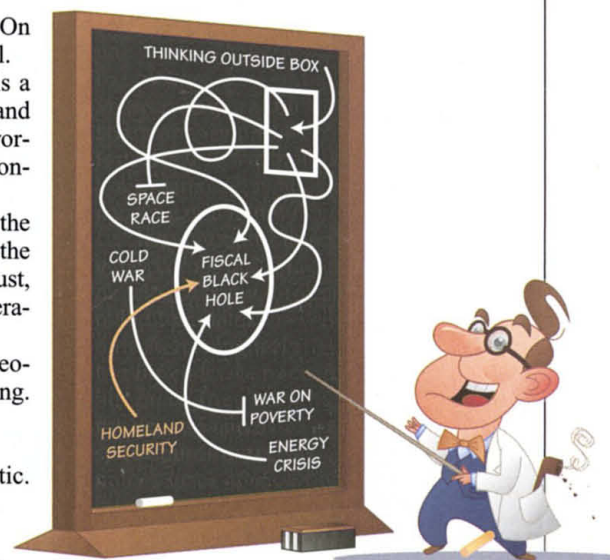


# Grant Swinger: Getting On in Hard Times

Following is a conversation with Dr. Grant Swinger, director of the Center for the Absorption of Federal Funds.

- Q:** How is the center doing in this difficult time? **A:** Doing well in project support. It's a competitive environment, but while others are still pushing the envelope, we're thinking outside the box. Soon we'll be out of the box.
- Q:** Outside the box? **A:** Program officers and reviewers like the term. On a par with "leapfrogging current concepts." Adds glitter to a proposal.
- Q:** What are the growth sectors these days? **A:** High-energy physics is a dog. Managed care is zilch. The genome still has legs. But homeland security is taking over. It came along when we needed it. We were worried after the doubling of NIH went through. "What's next?" we wondered. But something always turns up.
- Q:** There's always something? **A:** Looking back, we had the Cold War, the Space Race, the War on Poverty, the energy crisis, the energy glut, the Japanese challenge, the Japanese crash, the baby boom, the baby bust, the scientist shortage, and then the surplus, complexity, computer literacy, sustainability, and nanotechnology.
- Q:** What a list. **A:** Right. We've worked on all of them. Actually, our people have an advantage. They aren't torn between research and teaching. They've resolved that conflict.
- Q:** How? **A:** By doing neither.
- Q:** What do they do? **A:** Travel, attend meetings, confer a lot. It's hectic. For all of those issues, we've appointed task forces and steering groups, held workshops, convened committees, held conferences and retreats, did studies, conducted briefings, issued reports. Crushing workload for our staff and consultants and advisers. For closure on each one, we do an attractive report, spiral binding, colorful cover. But what's really important is a snappy press release and a short executive summary.
- Q:** Why's that? **A:** Reporters are too busy to read the reports. They have to write about them. Nobody reads the reports, except the people who write other reports and incorporate the previous reports into their reports. Sort of a food chain.
- Q:** Anything tangible come out of your reports? **A:** With the job shortage, we can take credit for the creation of a new academic rank: postdoc emeritus. And after all those years of talk about the importance of interdisciplinary studies, we're leading the charge for restoring disciplinary purity. You can't tell what anybody is these days. I just met a nano-theologian. Next we'll have psycho-metallurgists and neuro-agronomists. We should aim to keep it simple—chemists, mathematicians, biologists, etc. No hyphens.
- Q:** I see. Well, let's get back to homeland security. **A:** It's big. Given today's conditions, we've reactivated a part of the center that we mothballed at the end of the Cold War.
- Q:** Namely? **A:** The Institute for the Violent Resolution of Conflict. Many research centers work on international negotiations, compromise, and conciliation—soft stuff. We're big bang. And we find there's an appreciation of our approach.
- Q:** Where? **A:** It comes from the top, and the agencies get the cue. I can't say more than that.
- Q:** What else? **A:** We find that threat assessment is a growing field. The basic approach is to warn against complacency. No one is for complacency. Case in point: the recent warnings about an asteroid colliding with Earth. Far-fetched, but brilliant. I wish we had thought of it. NASA is broke, but they can't ignore it. They'll probably take the toilet out of the space station to pay for it. It's the only fixture left.
- Q:** What's next in line for the center? **A:** We're always looking. For a time, there seemed to be some promise in what they call outcomes research: What do you get for money spent on R&D? But we find that the funding agencies would rather not know. Another possibility is gene therapy. We might take a fling at it if they don't kill too many more patients in clinical trials. Could be bad PR. And there's bioethics; don't forget bioethics. Always good for getting funding for a conference, with plenty of top-line speakers ready to give their papers from previous conferences. Fortunately, no one reads the proceedings volumes.
- Q:** I can see you're quite busy. **A:** As I said, something always turns up. Now, let me ask you a question: What do you hear about xenotransplants?



A recent meeting at the Center for the Absorption of Federal Funds

**Daniel S. Greenberg**

Daniel S. Greenberg first introduced the mythical Grant Swinger to *Science* readers in 1964, when Greenberg was news editor of the journal. Greenberg is a Washington journalist and the author of *Science, Money, and Politics: Political Triumph and Ethical Erosion* (University of Chicago Press, 2001) and *The Politics of Pure Science* (University of Chicago Press, new edition, 1999).