Letters

Information Services

Nicholas Wade's delightfully ironic report about UNISIST (Intergovernmental Conference for the Establishment of a World Information System) and SIE (Science Information Exchange) (21 April, p. 266), which I greatly enjoyed, contained some small factual errors that perhaps ought to be corrected.

The 91 percent decline in use that Wade reports is for only one of SIE's many services (one which amounted to only 5 percent of SIE's output services). Wade could have been more positive in showing that SIE already does have a pretty comprehensive coverage of the federal research program (71,300 projects reported by 24 federal agencies) (*1*). Furthermore, the demand for services is increasing, predominantly from the federal side, even though the agencies must now pay for the service. Although not mentioned in the report of the General Accounting Office (GAO), usage based on dollar income will have risen from about $200,000 in fiscal year 1970 to over $350,000 in fiscal year 1972.

As an aside, the Department of Justice, which is quoted as saying they "never heard of SIE," was registering research projects with SIE as far back as fiscal year 1969. I particularly enjoyed this as an example of "left hand, right hand."

The problem is how to make a central information service work, considering the rivalries of the large agencies. SIE can fill this role, provided we can secure support in getting the information from all the recalcitrant, indifferent, or somnolent groups. We are still trying hard with the Federal Council for Science and Technology and the Office of Management and Budget.

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Reference

1. "Effectiveness of Smithsonian Science Information Exchange Hampered by Lack of Complete, Current Research Information" (General Accounting Office, Washington, D.C., 1972), p. 6.

. . . With regard to coverage of ongoing research by SIE, Wade fails to mention that the GAO noted that SIE registered more than 71,300 federally supported research projects, and 19,700 that were not federally supported, in fiscal year 1970. Thus SIE's file, while not complete (no accurate figure exists for what a complete file should contain), is fairly comprehensive and, for many agencies, reasonably complete. The work of many of the agencies which the GAO report stated were not registering their research with SIE fell outside the types of studies being registered at SIE at the time the study was made. The SIE has primarily been concerned with registering basic and applied research in the life, physical, social, and engineering sciences. If the decision is made to include certain other types of studies not currently registered with SIE, it is expected that other agencies will be approached and will register their research with SIE.

No mention was made by Wade of the explanation by various agencies as to why their data was not complete or more current. Most everyone would agree that more complete and timely reporting is essential if SIE is to achieve maximum effectiveness in helping both the research scientist and managers of research programs. Plans to improve the situation are currently under way. In explaining why the review was made, the GAO stated that SIE "can be an important source of information for coordinating Federal research." As the title of their report notes, they found its effectiveness "hampered by lack of complete current research information." The report further states that "Agencies and departments commenting on this report agreed that the Exchange would play a more important coordinating role if the agencies were required to provide the Exchange with information on their research projects." These statements along with the increasing demand for SIE services by both federal and nonfederal users alike, would tend to indicate that SIE is providing a useful service to many organizations both in and out of government and that the effectiveness of SIE, like that of most organizations, can be improved.

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The report on UNISIST and SIE needs clarification if the message of the General Accounting Office report "Effectiveness of Smithsonian Science Information Exchange Hampered by Lack of Complete, Current Research Information" is to be fairly presented.

Our message was that SIE did not have complete and current information on research projects because the agencies did not report all of their research projects to this repository. The reason for this is the lack of a requirement for agency reporting. Our point was that SIE could be made more effective if all agencies were required to submit complete and timely data on their research programs. However, since the Office of Management and Budget had not reached a decision as to the mission of SIE, we recommended that a study be made for that purpose.

The author quotes, out of context, several agency comments included in our report and makes it appear as though the agencies would be unwilling to cooperate with an improved SIE. Actually, the agencies which had not previously submitted complete and current data to SIE generally indicated that a requirement for submission would be desirable. Their comments simply reflect the inadequacy of SIE to meet their needs without this requirement. Also, our report shows that the alleged 91 percent decline in the use of SIE concerns requests for information on research projects associated with particular scientists, which amounts only to 5 percent of SIE's total output.

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It is not clear whether Nicholas Wade's report on UNISIST and SIE is intended to provide cold caution to proponents of UNISIST, to chide the federal agencies for their indifference to SIE's ability to provide project information, or merely to constitute an ironic observation on the traditional discrepancy between promise and performance. A comparability between UNISIST and SIE is implied, which does not, in my opinion, exist.

"Information" to the UNISIST delegates meant scientific concepts and data associated with the publication of the results of research. "Information" for SIE is data about ongoing research projects. While generalizations are dangerous, the publication system, as John Ziman (*1*) has informed us, is the proving ground of science and scientists; project information, on the other hand, is of primary value to the managers of research, be they industrial corporations or federal agencies.

Incidentally, the Office of Science and Technology no longer coordinates federal science information; responsibility for the Committee on Scientific and Technical Information (COSATI) of the Federal Council for Science and Technology was transferred to the National Science Foundation a year ago.

Finally, "informatics" is not yet a generally accepted term in the United States. Not to be confused with the French "informatique" (computer science), "informatics" is a term used in the Soviet Union, where it is defined as "a discipline belonging to the social sciences, which studies the structure and general characteristics of scientific information, and also general laws governing all scientific communication processes" (*2*).

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References

1. J. Ziman, *Public Knowledge* (Cambridge Univ. Press, London, 1968).
2. *Information . . . Prepared for the Fifth Session of the Central Committee to Study the Feasibility of a World Science Information System* (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, Moscow, 1970).

I regret my incorrect assumption that "federal agency requests for information on research by investigators," in which there was a 91 percent decline, described the totality of SIE's activities. The GAO report states, however, that in all of the several categories of services studied, there was a decline in use which "ranged from 20 to 91 percent."—N.W.

Federal Statistics

Philip Abelson's editorial of 24 March (p. 1315) correctly points up important limitations of federal statistics. More accurate, more prompt, and more relevant data are needed for economic and social policy formulation, private decision-making, government program guidance, and internal government management.

A vigorous effort to modernize the federal statistical system was initiated 3 years ago. The general strategy was to increase the overall budget for statistics and improve the organization of federal statistical activities. We have also set new statistical standards for the guidance of federal statistical agencies, and we have established rules for safeguarding the credibility of federal statistics.

In each of the past 3 years, the President's budget for principal statistical programs has been increased substantially. Funds requested for fiscal year 1973 represent an increase of more than 18 percent over estimated obligations for 1972, which, in turn, are about 16 percent above actual obligations for 1971. Top priority is given to proposals (i) to extend and improve basic data for the System of National Accounts, (ii) to improve accuracy and timeliness of current economic indicators, (iii) to organize a set of social indicators, and (iv) to develop data for state and local areas.

In 1971, the director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued guidelines for consolidating and streamlining statistical activities in four departments of government (Agriculture; Commerce; Health, Education, and Welfare; and Labor) that have major statistical components. The Department of Commerce has now completed its reorganization of statistical activities, and the Department of Labor is about to take final steps in their reorganization. Substantial progress has also been made in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and in the Department of Agriculture.

Measures to safeguard the credibility of federal statistics include the development of guidelines by OMB to improve the timeliness of economic indicators. As a result there has been a substantial speedup in the release of the indicators as well as other federal statistical reports. Guidelines have also been issued for striking a balance between accuracy and timeliness. Advance target dates for the release of about 120 principal indicators have now been published for almost 2 years. Also, in order to separate statistical reports from policy-oriented commentary, OMB has instituted a rule providing for a 1-hour separation between issuance of data by the statistical agencies in a written press release and release of commentary by Administration officials.

With respect to Abelson's suggestion that the government sponsor sample surveys of unemployment, the Current Population Survey, which is largely devoted to measuring employment and unemployment each month, is in fact a sample survey of more than 30 years standing. This survey covers, among others, scientists and engineers. On an annual average basis in 1971, an estimated 1,381,000 scientists and engineers were employed, while 41,000 or 2.9 percent were unemployed. For engineers alone, where we have quarterly data, the unemployment rate in the fourth quarter of 1971 was 2.7 percent, down from the high of 3.2 percent in the first quarter, but still relatively high compared with earlier levels. More detailed information from a special National Science Foundation survey of scientists and engineers in the National Register showed an unemployment rate of 2.6 percent for scientists and of 3.0 percent for engineers in the spring of 1971. A second round of this survey will be undertaken this summer.

OMB is charged with the responsibility for coordinating and improving the government's statistical system. We welcome statements of needs for data from prospective users and ideas for improved techniques and methodologies for collecting information and for preparing and disseminating estimates.

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Equal Opportunity at NIH

Gross's arguments (Letters, 19 May, p. 743) against affirmative recruitment of women to fill advisory jobs at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) would be persuasive if he were not starting from false premises. Although I know few of them personally, I would be surprised if senior staff members of NIH were any blinder to race, age, national origin, or sex than their contemporaries who are senior professors and department heads in major universities. Most of these gentlemen seem to be unaware of the insidious discrimination practiced against those who are less fortunate.

I share Gross's uneasiness about rigid quotas, but feel that without affirmative action those scientists who are outside of the mainstream because of race, na-