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Information for contributors appears on pages 35–37 of the 4 January 1991 issue. Editorial correspondence, including requests for permission to reprint and reprint orders, should be sent to 1333 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005. Telephone: 202-326-6500. **Advertising correspondence** should be sent to Tenth Floor, 1515 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. Telephone 212-730-1050 or WU Telex 968082 SCHERAGO, or FAX 212-382-3725. **Subscription/Member Benefits Questions:** 202-326-6417. **Science:** 202-326-6500. **Other AAAS Programs:** 202-326-6400.

Gordon Research Conferences

Following a long-standing tradition, *Science* is publishing the 1991 summer program for the Gordon Research Conferences (GRC) in this issue. The event is noteworthy because 1991 marks GRC's 60th anniversary.

The Gordon Research Conferences are internationally known and respected. Over the years they have touched the lives of a great many scientists at every stage of their careers. GRC's cumulative contribution to communication and the advancement of science is enormous. Nonetheless, not many scientists know of the close historical ties to AAAS—the conferences were once known as the Gordon Research Conferences of the AAAS—nor do they know about GRC's namesake.

In 1931, Neil E. Gordon, who was a well-established professor of chemistry at Johns Hopkins University, thought that the size and character of scientific meetings was preventing, rather than promoting, communication. Thus, for six successive years, Gordon organized a series of novel summer research conferences. Based on this experience, Gordon devised the format that now characterizes GRC. In 1938, Gordon, chairman of AAAS's chemistry section, persuaded AAAS to continue his conferences on a permanent basis under AAAS auspices. In 1948, one year before Gordon's death, the conferences were officially named the Gordon Research Conferences, and in 1956 GRC was incorporated as a nonprofit organization independent of, but still "participating with," AAAS.

Gordon's model has withstood the test of time; GRC's format today is virtually unchanged from what Gordon proposed to AAAS in 1938. Conferences take place in an informal setting and last 5 days, from Monday through noon on Friday. Participants must live on site. Scheduled sessions occur in the morning and in the evening after dinner. Afternoons are "free" for recreational activities, or, as usually happens, lively ad hoc debates among small groups of participants. Attendance is limited to about 100 participants who have similar interests but different backgrounds—there always has been an emphasis on mixing industrial and academic scientists. While GRC management provides supporting infrastructure, each conference is under the autonomous control of its chairman. At the conclusion of each conference, the conferees themselves decide whether a future GRC would be valuable and, if so, they elect a chairman to be responsible for organizing the meeting.

One unusual GRC feature—but perhaps the most significant one—is that conferences are "off the record." No information presented, whether during scheduled or informal sessions, can be used without permission of the presenter. Moreover, no publications or proceedings are prepared, and tape recording or photography of slides is prohibited.

Finally, there is the tradition that conferences be moderately priced, yet they must be self-supporting. The key to holding down costs was a "discovery" in 1946 that New Hampshire has a number of private schools, in bucolic settings, with room-and-board facilities that are unused in the summer. GRC has been able to negotiate mutually beneficial arrangements with 11 such sites (one in Rhode Island) that host more than 100 separate summer conferences. The fee for 1991 is \$350, which covers all meeting expenses for the four and one-half days (five nights). The fee also includes a contribution to a "special fund" that conference chairmen use to support speakers, graduate students, and the like. It is a tribute to GRC management that the 1991 fee is 20% less, in constant dollars, than it was in 1970!

The unique format of the conferences and their reputation ensure that they represent the frontiers of science. Thus, perusing the program in *Science* is an excellent way to identify the cutting-edge in areas as diverse as catalysis and cosmology. And because being invited to speak is an honor, the list of speakers is a good indication of some of the top practitioners.

Gordon's concept has proved so sound that, beyond growth in the number of conferences, GRC has changed little during its 60-year history. For that reason, two recent changes by GRC are noteworthy. First, a decision has been made to hold some conferences outside the United States. The first two were held in Volterra, Italy, this past September. Some modest expansion to other regions is planned for the future.

The other new direction is in education. The rationale is that GRC, with its credibility in the scientific community, could play a significant role in bringing together scientists and educators, to the benefit of each, with the common goal of improving education. The first conference, a kind of summit meeting, is in the early planning stages by GRC, with a target date of the summer of 1992.—RICHARD S. NICHOLSON