

The Support of Research of Individuals

The predominant current source of research funds for the universities is, of course, the federal government, acting to a major extent through the National Science Foundation. The support thus afforded, primarily to individuals, has been fair and very effective. It has been flexible and readily adapted to changing conditions, and it has been responsive to suggestions as to new avenues of research support. This has been especially notable in recent decisions to strengthen and enlarge the support of engineering research. Put concisely, the National Science Foundation has done an excellent job.

It is thus with some regret that one must view a recent action of the Presidents' Group of the Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges in which this group calls for "aid to institutions and to major units within institutions, rather than to individuals within institutions. . . ." It is certain that this distinguished group has considered this problem carefully, but one may disagree with their recommendation. It is possible that they seek in this way to undo the imbalance among sections of the country, but there are better ways than this to deal with that admittedly serious problem.

The support of individuals and their research involves the preparation by the individual of research proposals and the granting of funds for the best of them. This system has many advantages. The first is to the researcher himself. He is compelled to make a careful study of the literature, to arrange his thoughts, and to do a careful job of planning and organizing. Such exercises are worthwhile for anyone. Second, this system is advantageous for the research project itself. Research that is well planned is almost certain to be more fruitful than research that "just grewed." Third, this system is advantageous to the university in that a part of the careful planning involved will manifest itself in effective and economic use of instruments and apparatus. The costs of doing research are rising enormously, primarily because of the great use of expensive instruments. There is a real stimulus to using such equipment effectively if the grant applied for is to be kept within reasonable bounds. There is no such stimulus in a blanket gift.

Undoubtedly, the most important advantage of the individual grant system is the boost it can give to active younger men. A young man with a good idea can be recognized and rewarded under this system. This has been demonstrated repeatedly. The merits of his idea can be judged by detached experts; all too often such merit can be buried within his own institution.

It is also true that new fields as well as young men can be stimulated by the individual grant system. Indeed, the whole field of chemical engineering owes a considerable part of its growth to those active researchers who sought financial assistance outside their universities. In general, universities are among the most conservative institutions in the world. University administrations are under great pressures to "divvy up" equitably funds that come to them; such is not the best way to administer funds.

The best hope of stimulating bright young men and supporting promising new fields is the granting of funds to individuals as a consequence of that individual's careful planning of a program and execution of a proposal.

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