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Science Policy Studies

The National Science Foundation has announced a program of grants for science policy and planning activities at state and local levels. The purposes are to help state and local governments become better partners in the growing number of federal-state or federal-local collaborative activities for technological development, resource utilization, pollution abatement, and other problems that have a scientific or technical component; to improve federal-state-local communication on science and technology policy issues; and to analyze data on scientific resources at state and local levels.

Since 1959 half the states and several large cities have created formal mechanisms for securing scientific and technological advice. The economic and other motivations are so strong that already 47 of the state governors have designated liaison officers to work with NSF in developing better knowledge of the uses of science and technology on the part of state and local governments. Proposals for studies under the new program may be submitted to NSF by state or local government units, universities, or nonprofit organizations, but preference will be given to proposals that call for collaboration between a unit of government and a university.

Announcement of this new program preceded by one day a three-day seminar in Washington, D.C., of the Science and Public Policy Studies Group. This informal organization was born at the 1966 AAAS meeting when several university representatives were invited to consider how AAAS might help the score or so of universities that could then be identified as having teaching and research programs on science and government or science and public policy. Eugene Skolnikoff offered to arrange a program and workshop at the 1967 meeting for such university representatives as were interested. Out of this beginning grew the Science and Public Policy Studies Group, which meets annually at AAAS meetings and which will probably hold other seminars similar to the Washington one of last month. The mailing list (which in such an informal organization is equivalent to the membership roster) now includes persons from 89 universities and from a number of government agencies.

The composition of that list makes it clear that the makers of science policy are being surrounded by a growing group of analysts, who, to a large extent, come from backgrounds different from those of the majority of the makers of science policy. Most of the "engineers" of science policy—the people who have helped government agencies to establish their own policies—have been physical or biological scientists or engineers. Most of the "scholars" of science policy—the academicians who conduct the university programs—come from the social sciences, political science, law, history or public affairs.

The distinction is not sharp. Several universities were represented at the Washington seminar by physicists. Don Price, Harvey Brooks, Alvin Weinberg, and a few others have been not only leading "engineers" but also thoughtful analysts of science policy. Yet the distinction is valid and follows the history of other relationships between the men who plan and direct business, governmental, or other practical affairs and the men who give most thought to analyzing the problems and processes involved.

The rapid growth of the Science and Public Policy Studies Group forecasts an expanding historical, descriptive, and analytical literature of science policy. The development of the new NSF program suggests that these studies will give increased attention to state and local science policies.—DAEL WOLFLE