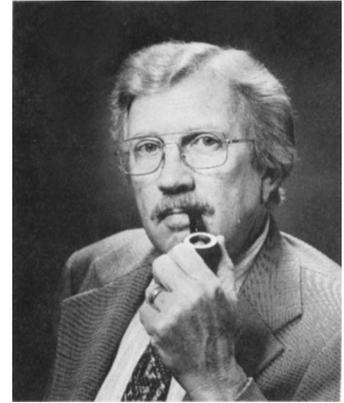


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The Competitive Grant Concept on Trial

The competitive grant program for agricultural research authorized in the 1977 Farm Act is having a difficult time getting off the ground. Its detractors are found in places where one would ordinarily expect to find supporters: within the scientific community itself, in the ranks of administrators of agricultural research organizations, in Congress, and in the USDA agency that administers the program. We need to analyze why these various groups resist a concept which is fundamental to the U.S. free enterprise system.

Competition is a way of life for Americans as, indeed, it is for the biological entities of our natural environment. It is a process which eliminates the weaker competitors, the less able, those less qualified. It is a process, in theory at least, which ultimately yields a champion and identifies the best.

If that is true, then it is difficult to understand why an agricultural research program designed to identify the most qualified research proposals is being viewed with so much skepticism.

Trouble with the competitive grant concept first surfaced when the executive branch of government proposed in its FY 1979 budget to fund the program at the expense of the regular Hatch program, which provides the basic support for state-based agricultural research. To expect support from scientists and administrators who have built a capability for research competence in their individual organizations with dependence on the continuing support from the Hatch program is unrealistic. Not only would some lose their existing funds, they would also lose their ability to compete on an equal basis with all others. Therefore, a violation of the basic requirement of fairness in competition was involved.

Some influential congressmen wish to control the precise way in which appropriated money will be invested. There is fear that if the decision as to where the money goes—and to whom—is left to the program

managers and their scientific advisors, some programs of esoteric interest and those proposed by favored colleagues will be the only ones receiving favorable consideration. This view is understandable among those who have dealt with political patronage. Scientific patronage is deplorable and has no place in a competitive grant system, but there is enough evidence of its occurrence in the past to raise skepticism in the critics of the system.

Consequently, a program which was carefully developed to provide a means of advancing research in the food and agricultural sciences is viewed by many as a threat to the continuing support of agricultural research, as a means of wresting control of research expenditures from Congress, and as a way to perpetuate the “buddy system” among favored scientists and support “irrelevant” research with public funds.

The solution rests with the scientific community and those who administer the research programs. There must be no threat to the continued maintenance of the scientific capability of this country's institutions; without this capability, the resources to pursue the shorter-term objectives of a grant system will be diminished and there will be less competition. This fact is now recognized in at least some quarters of the USDA and Congress.

Objectives of the competitive grant program must be clearly defined to avoid misunderstandings about relevance when individual projects, which seem to be esoteric, are supported. Projects that are irrelevant today may be and are likely to be highly relevant tomorrow.

Finally, scrupulous attention must be paid to avoiding scientific patronage or any semblance of it. Agriculture's competitive grant program is on trial. Its objectivity, fairness, and purpose are being questioned even before it is fully operative. We must establish its credibility quickly and convincingly. If we realize what is at stake, that should not be at all difficult.