

NEWS OF THE INSTITUTE

Visiting scientists

The National Science Foundation has awarded AIP \$46 435 in support of the institute's visiting-scientists program for colleges during 1966-67. For the academic year just past, program head William W. Watson reports that 165 physicists from large departments made



WATSON

visits to colleges of all types. Impressions gathered from these visits point to two major problems plaguing small departments: dearth of physics majors and shortage of faculty.

The NSF grant for 1966-67, which will underwrite 250 campus days by visiting physics professors, was the largest sum given to any of the 20 organizations participating in the NSF visiting-scientists program. Besides the NSF funds, contributions to the program made by visited institutions will allow for considerably more than the 250 visit days provided by NSF.

During 1965-66, 261 college campuses in 45 states were visited under the program. (One "circuit rider," Vernet Eaton of Wesleyan, made a six-week trip in an equipment-laden station wagon to 19 colleges over a 5 000-mile route.) Included in the visiting-scientists project is a pilot program of consultants that has been operating since 1964. In the past year, 19 such consultants provided advice relating to research, curriculum and staffing to college departments on a continuing basis.

Two problems. Since the visiting physicist and the college physics chairman send in separate reports to AIP,

Watson has been able to gather a fair sampling of the current physics situation in the colleges. The commonest difficulty, shortage of physics majors, continues, although registration for introductory courses (preparing students for various scientific and technical disciplines) is at a normal level. But the decrease in the number of undergraduates majoring in physics has continued at an alarming rate in the last two years. Furthermore, this drop in absolute numbers has occurred while college enrollments have been rising and despite the increase in physicists' salaries to attractive levels.

Possible causes for the decrease, according to the visited institutions, are the shunning of a tough subject such as physics by the majority of students, the heightened attraction of such interdisciplinary fields as biophysics and geophysics and selective service policies that may turn a student away from a difficult subject in favor of higher grades elsewhere.

A second major problem expressed by the colleges and their visitors is that of staff shortages. Most college physics departments have staff vacancies this year. This has meant that in many a department teaching loads have been too high. Faculty members have little time for improving advanced laboratories and keeping abreast of new developments. This, in turn, means that the sophomore, faced with the necessity of deciding his major, does not see the kind of activity that would stimulate his interest in physics.

The coming academic year will be the tenth for the visiting-scientists program. During the past nine years, one or more visits have been paid to 550 different institutions by 350 visitors. From the many letters and discussions with visiting physicists and department heads, Watson finds ample evidence that this service has been of considerable help to physics departments and that it is particularly needed now, in this critical period. "And," he adds, "I do agree with those who are thinking we may have been making the study of physics too tough." □

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