

Who Finds the Job?

Recently we have entertained several distressing letters. They worry about underemployment and overrecruitment of physicists. They talk about a difficult job situation. They ask what the physicists' societies and the American Institute of Physics are doing to discover the facts and improve matters.

Two of these letters go somewhat further. One writer compares the physicists with the medical profession and asks rhetorically whether medical doctors would tolerate a situation in which competition prevented MD's from practicing. Another man speaks of physicists hard up for jobs and says, "These people are the responsibility of the physics community."

We know and appreciate the old joke of referring to the physics doctorate as "the union card." But we think the joke has gone too far when people start treating the label that way in all seriousness. Is it not somewhat ludicrous if a man educated at society's expense to the level of a PhD in physics turns then to society and says, "Now you owe me a job. I am your responsibility."? If the man who is educated to the highest level wants the help of society in getting himself a job, who will look after the ones in greater need? With the old, the sick, the poor and the underprivileged to look after, who can muster much worry about a dissatisfied PhD?

Suppose that the physicist looks around and finds that jobs labeled

"physicist" or those calling for his particular specialty are filled. Is he not equipped to do other jobs? The high schools need teachers. The Peace Corps wants volunteers. The poor people need advice. The underprivileged need help. It is hard to accept that in a world full of need a man educated in physics can do only what he has been doing and has no skills to offer where needs are greatest. In a time when national unemployment is at a record low, must we believe that physicists are less employable than the average man? Shall we believe that their physics education has done them more harm than good?

Perhaps graduate schools must take some responsibility for the existing situation. Have they convinced students that a job doing anything but research at a prestigious institution is no job at all? Perhaps they should return to the oldtime answer to applying graduate students: Physics is tough. It offers no rewards but the fun of doing it. If you want to work with us despite the drawbacks, we will let you do so.

Perhaps, too, the profession must increase concern for the usefulness of its training and for effective employment of its manpower. It might do so, though, at too high cost.

We deeply fear that what we call "the free world," that portion of society that bases its social organization on freedom, opportunity and enterprise, is gradually collapsing. Free-

dom, after all, belongs to those who have enough enterprise to take opportunities when they are available and to make opportunities when they are not. Authority and responsibility are two sides of one coin. The man who asks society to take responsibility for his employment must offer to society at the same time the authority to tell him what to do. Authoritarian societies do not, can not, offer freedom. Instead they offer to supply material needs at the expense of authority and planning.

Perhaps we are hopelessly romantic, but we feel that freedom and responsibility are the way of life most suitable for the physicist. Most physicists appear to feel the same way, and we suspect that those who want to put responsibility for their success on someone else are a minority.

We would like to see our universities and physicists offer the young person an opportunity to study. We would offer also the best data we can get about job opportunities and the best placement service we can establish to bring applicants and employers together. But the responsibility for finding a job we would like to leave to the physicist himself. An education, yes. Freely offered information and assistance, yes. But assumption on demand of responsibility for well educated persons who can not find jobs they like or needs to fill in a world of great need and high employment, emphatically no.

—R. Hobart Ellis Jr