

A SPECIAL ISSUE: PHYSICS FOR THE **NON**SCIENCE MAJOR



Today about 75% of college students get their undergraduate degrees without taking a physics course at all. And this figure threatens to become larger as those campuses that still have a physics requirement for their nonscience majors are being accused of using physics as an artificial hurdle to sort out the sheep from the goats (in the way that Latin was once used). At the same time physicists are being impressed daily with the great need to have the public understand and be interested in physics. Gerald Holton of Harvard Project Physics does not overstate the case when, with others, he insists that one of the most urgent tasks facing the physics community is to invent courses and programs that will fully catch the attention of the nonscience student.

In this year's special issue on education we present reports from some of the people in the field who are taking up this challenge.

Bill Aldridge of Florissant Valley Community College is concerned that no one apparently knows what the objectives of nonspecialist courses should be. John M. Fowler and Richard West of the Commission on College Physics recognize the same lack and show how the Commission has been trying to define goals. Adolph Baker of Lowell Technological Institute points out that some of the nonphysicists are not merely bored with the subject but are actively hostile to it. He believes that a liberal-arts student—who is not “a sort of dumb physics major”—should be met on his own terms, in his own world.

An interest in science is best generated at an early age. Don Herbert, who was “Mr Wizard” on television for 14 years, has tried to get adults interested in science but finds their attitudes already set. Now he makes films, aimed at 9–13 year olds, for school use. Stanford University's physics department does its part, through a summer program, by helping local Mexican-American high-school students; they are introduced both to college life and to modern science by this one program.