

editorial

Biting the helping hand

The Council of Engineering and Scientific Society Executives has just published a report that merits our attention. Entitled "Scientific & Engineering Learned Societies—A National Asset" (for copies write to CESSE, 2000 Florida Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009), the report does an excellent job of illuminating a fact that few are aware of—that the services performed by the country's learned societies represent a contribution to the nation of substantial value. The learned societies play a key role in the national research and development effort—that of identifying the new knowledge that emerges from research and making it available in a useful form to the scientific and technical community. Through their publication of primary and secondary journals and programs for professional meetings and continuing education, the learned societies, in the words of the report, "have created an extraordinary system for fostering inquiry and information exchange . . . [that has become] . . . the connective tissue of our nation's industrial, governmental and academic activities in science." It is unlikely that these essential functions in the research process could be accomplished as effectively through any other means. One could conjecture, for instance, that a government agency especially established to perform these services would, even if funded with hundreds of millions of dollars, fall far short of the accomplishments now provided gratis by the learned societies.

The learned societies also contribute services directly to the public, such as technical advice to public officials and policymakers and programs to aid public understanding of science and technology.

Given these facts about the important ways the learned societies contribute to the national interest, it is dismaying to find government agencies opposing or questioning the value of the societies' activities. A recent example of obstruction by the government was the attempts by two Federal departments (see April, pages 81 and 104) to restrict attendance at scientific meetings for political purposes. But by far the most troublesome and costly problems for the societies have been created by the Internal Revenue Service in its efforts over the past three or four years to challenge the tax-exempt status of a number of scientific and

engineering societies (AIP included). In the case of the physics organizations the IRS's challenges were rejected, but only after each organization involved had incurred substantial legal fees. As we go to press AIP's tax counsels are busy fending off still another attack from the local office of the IRS concerning alleged unrelated business income tax. And just this Spring AIP was notified for the second time in three years that the New York City Tax Commission was returning the AIP headquarters building to the city tax rolls based on its opinion that AIP no longer qualifies for an exemption as an educational and charitable institution.

Surely the IRS and other government agencies are too often involved in biting the helping hand—the learned societies that perform such crucial functions within the nation's research establishment. The solution is to make everyone more aware—both the public and Washington—of the nature and importance of these functions. To this end we urge that every physics department and research center obtain a copy of the new CESSE report, digest its contents and spread the word.

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