

AN APPRAISAL OF POSTS AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EFFORT

by

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The bibliography appended to this summary report is the most tangible witness to the effectiveness and productivity of the POSTS program. It reflects a scope and quality that is in the best traditions of the Center, and I believe will be a source of gratification in response to any questions that might be posed about the value of the effort and of the investment that made it possible.

When POSTS was first proposed as a Center effort — a process in which I played some part together with many others — we may also have had a further range of expectations that have been met to varying degrees or in some cases rather poorly. Some of the ideological conflicts between the conception of organized group research on the one hand and the selection of individual scholars on the basis of isolated merit on the other have been compromised but never fully resolved. The Center has never understood its role to be that of a site of active, continued, focussed research on a given topic nor does it have the facilities to do this except to the most limited extent with respect to the planning or to the digestion of data already accumulated. Under the best of circumstances, the term of residence, one year, might be barely sufficient to enable a long-term interdisciplinary research project to get well started at an institution that was fully committed to its long tenure. The Center has provided an excellent opportunity for people from diverse backgrounds, geographic and academic situations, and academic interests to get to know one another and to provide useful mutual criticism. This process of mutual acquaintance and indoctrination already takes a significant part of the year.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in the administration of POSTS, from my own perspective, was the implication that such broad-ranging interdisciplinary efforts could and should get their principal initiative from the Center as the site of solicitation. Yes, over a 10 or 15 year period of time this might indeed be workable, but we soon found that the process of negotiation with respect to a particular time and subject which is already complicated and uncertain with individual fellows becomes inordinately compounded when groups must be assembled.

I believe that we were fortunate to be able to produce a limited number of such effective groups but indeed the main thrust and value of the POSTS operation has come, as is true of most of the work of the Center today, from the efforts of particular individuals.

In my own academic work at Stanford I have been involved in several major interdisciplinary projects and believe that they can be proudly for-

warded as excellent and successful examples of such coordination: for example, the Human Biology education effort; the DENDRAL/SUMEX computer Science and artificial intelligence research project, as well as my participation in the NASA Viking exploration of Mars. It is therefore manifest that such larger scale activities can be done, can be done profitably, and may be the only way to approach certain kinds of tasks. In translating that perception to the organization of policy oriented research efforts like POSTS, I would have to reflect at this time that the local management of the Center should play only a general, overall guiding role in the organization of such programs. They will succeed primarily in terms of the initiative and effort that will come from the self-selected and self-organized groups who have discovered a particular problem, and the pertinence of their own mutual collaboration as a way of attacking it.

In accord with that model, the Center could still play an important catalytic role in furthering such initiatives, could provide the most conducive environment imaginable for such groups to work and plan together (within the constraints of facilities for operational investigative work), and in critical selections, in refinement and in managing some part or all of the requisite funding for such efforts. However, such an undertaking would have to be given an assured lifetime of a number of years before it could be expected to mature as a stable and effective institution to complement the traditional orientation of the Center's work.

Given these problems, I view it as an extraordinary accomplishment that a significant part of the total output of successful POSTS' efforts stemmed from collaborative interdisciplinary programs. The fellows' reports on their experiences should offer an excellent sample of the range of uses and successes of the program as seen through the eyes of its principal constituency.