

NSF Reflections

First Psychologist to Direct NSF's Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences Program Looks Back on his Time in Office

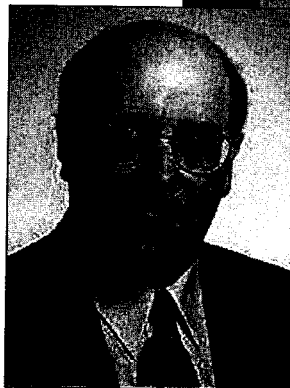
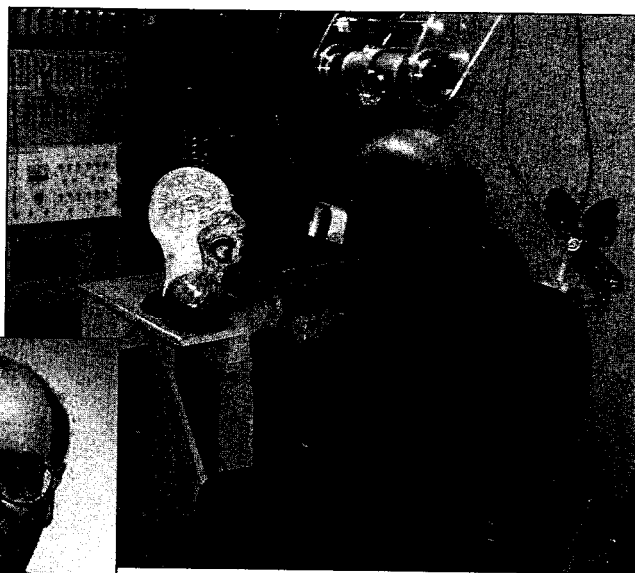
By Phil Rubin

In 1999 I had the unique opportunity to serve as the director of the division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences at the National Science Foundation. BCS is one of two research divisions in the Social, Behavioral and Economic sciences directorate, the other being the division of Social and Economic Sciences. BCS is comprised of a wide variety of programs, including physical and cultural anthropology, archaeology, geography, environmental social and behavioral sciences, child development, psychology, linguistics, and cognitive neuroscience. I was only the second Division Director of BCS, and the first psychologist.

Prior to becoming the director at BCS, I spent 30 years in New Haven at Haskins Laboratories and Yale University, where I was a research scientist and an administrator. Haskins is a private, non-profit research institute focusing primarily on speech, language, and reading, and the biological basis of each. Its funding comes mainly from the National Institutes of Health. Throughout these years, I did research in psycholinguistics, cognitive science, and the computational simulation of complex physiological systems, particularly the human vocal tract. For many years I have also been a research affiliate in the department of psychology at Yale University and adjunct professor in the department of surgery, otolaryngology at the Yale University school of medicine. Over time my interests shifted from research to administration, and I ended up serving as vice president and chief operating officer at Haskins Laboratories.

I chose to have my appointment at the NSF be through the Intergovernmental Personnel Act, thereby making me a rotator as opposed to a permanent employee. Although initially I had planned to stay for one year, I remained at the NSF for over three years. During this time I lived both in Connecticut and Arlington, Virginia, and commuted back and forth every week. Although I had the opportunity to stay at the NSF for an additional year, I decided to leave in October 2003, in order to be at home during my daughter's senior year of high school and help out with her college search.

My time spent at the NSF was very hectic and very rewarding. Extensive restructuring occurred within the BCS division, directed at the development of several new initiatives, including human origins, a new cognitive neuroscience



Rubin

During his 30 years as chief operating officer and vice president of Haskins Laboratory at Yale University, Rubin (left) has spent much time in the speech physiology research room (above).

program, and the Children's Research Initiative. In addition, NSF engaged in extensive planning relating to the new Science of Learning Centers and the emerging Human and Social Dynamics priority area. Our goal was to promote and support the highest quality science. We accomplished this by enhancing the core disciplinary areas and nurturing large-scale social science by providing larger awards of longer duration and increased opportunities for supporting emerging interdisciplinary activities.

When considering such pervasive initiatives, it is essential to base their development on broad input from the community. Once a program has been developed, it is equally important to get the message out to many groups as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, structural and funding considerations often make it very difficult for organizations such as NSF and NIH to effectively disseminate information about existing and emerging funding opportunities. This can be quite frustrating and is often very difficult to explain to those who have not served in government or who are not well informed regarding its intricacies and exigencies. Professional societies often play a critical role in assisting federal agencies in publicizing new funding opportunities.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of professional societies and related organizations, such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Psychological Society, the American Psychological Association, the National Academies, the Consortium of Social Science Associations, and the Federation of Behavioral, Psychological, and Cognitive Sciences. These groups, and particularly key individuals in them, serve as the front-line in the battle to raise the profile of the psychological and other behavioral and social sciences and the importance of these areas to the well-being and safety of our nation. These organizations spend countless hours communicating with policy makers, interfacing with the community, and serving the public good. I urge all psychologists to support these organizations and spread the word as broadly as possible.

I would be remiss if I did not recognize certain individuals at these organizations with whom I had the opportunity to work. They include: at APS — Alan Kraut and Andrew

Kessler; at APA — Richard McCarty (now at Vanderbilt), Philip Zimbardo, Kurt Salzinger, Norman Anderson, Geoffrey Mumford, Merry Bullock, Heather Kelly, and Susan Brandon (now at the Office of Science and Technology Policy); at COSSA — Howard Silver and Angela Sharpe; and at FBPCS, Barbara Wanchisen and Jill Egeth. I apologize to the many others whom I have not mentioned.

It is also very important for individual scientists to play as active a role as possible. If individuals and groups in our community hope to receive federal funding they need to communicate as clearly and as simply as possible the nature of their work and the importance of this work to the nation. In the case of basic research this is particularly important, because the long-term benefits are not always immediately apparent. There is fierce competition across all federal agencies for funds, with many crucial, competing priorities. In addition, there is equally fierce competition across the various sciences for the scarce resources that are available. There is

an important need for psychologists to eloquently articulate a vision for the importance of their work. If you don't do it, your colleagues in the other sciences will and will more likely reap the benefits in terms of increased funding for their work, even though if it holds no greater importance.

In addition to learning a lot about science, politics, policy, and government, I came away feeling that most important were the people I met. Often the supposed "bureaucrats" in Washington are actually charming, brilliant people who work long hours with incredible dedication because they care about what they are doing and hope they can make a change. In particular, the program officers and AAAS fellows at the NSF are the individuals who have the vision and experience needed to make things happen. I would like to single out and thank some of these individuals, both past and present, which whom I had the great opportunity to work. I hope in some small way I made their jobs easier. They include: Joe Young, Steven Breckler, Rodney Cocking, Peg Barratt, Lawrence Parsons, Guy Van Orden, Lynne Bernstein, Amber Story, Paul Chapin, Cathy Ball, Cecile McKee, Joan

Maling, Mark Weiss, John Yellen, Stuart Plattner, Tom Baerwald, Richard Aspinall, Gregory Chu, Regina Vidaver, and Deborah Olster.

I encourage all who have not already done so to consider finding the time in your busy careers to serve your discipline and nation by meeting with policy makers — particularly at a local level — to discuss the importance of your work. Perhaps you might even consider coming to Washington to work at an agency such as NSF, NIH, the Department of Education, OSTP, etc., or at one of the professional societies, as an AAAS fellow, or in some other capacity. Serving in this way sensitizes you to policy issues and enhances your research and educational roles by broadening your perspective regarding the wide variety of activities that comprise our discipline. You will make new friends, you will learn many things, and you will see the world in new ways. You will come away a better, if not slightly more exhausted person. Now is the perfect time for you to assist in communicating the importance of the behavioral and cognitive sciences to the other sciences and to our nation's well-being. ♦