

# Support for Academy's Research Programs

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## Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Awards Grant for Science Project

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation has awarded the Academy a grant to bring together leading scientists and engineers, former public officials, policy experts, ethicists, industry executives, and others from outside the scientific community to discuss how scientists can better understand and appreciate the public's response to various aspects of their work.

Considerable attention has been focused on strengthening public education about science and technology. The communication gap between scientists and the lay public, however, remains wide, and in some quarters is growing. The two strategies that are generally offered to help close this gap are 1) raising public understanding of science by improving science education, communication, and literacy at all levels, and 2) enhancing scientists' ability to communicate the significance of their work to the general public. Both strategies are necessary and important.

The focus on science education and better communication, however, overlooks an essential dimension of the problem: the scientists' obligation to understand the broader social and cultural context in which their work is received and to accept that sometimes the public's concerns about science stem not from ignorance but from legitimate worries.

Public attitudes about science and technology are complex, informed by a variety of sources and influenced by diverse ethical, religious, and cultural values. In certain areas – for example, global warming, biomedical research, or research on dangerous pathogens – scientific progress and public policy concerns may come into conflict.

Through a series of roundtable discussions, the Academy's new study will focus on the public's attitudes about a number of issues, such as the unintended social consequences of scientific and technological advances; the short- and long-term safety of the work; and the broader ethical, religious, and social implications. Through this effort, the Academy hopes to foster a sustained and more effective dialogue between scientists and the public.

"Science communication is commonly perceived to flow in only one direction, from scientists to the public," said Neal Lane, Academy Fellow and Cochair of the Initiative for Science, Engineering, and Technology. "But if scientists can listen to the public's concerns about their work, and if they have a better understanding of the public's unease about science and technology, the social contract upon which their work depends will be strengthened. We hope this Academy project will foster needed dialogue between scientists and the public."

Fellows interested in working on this topic are encouraged to contact Academy CEO Leslie Berlowitz and Program Officer Katie Donnelly.

Fellows advising on this project include Charles Vest (National Academy of Engineering), Neal Lane (Rice University), Hunter Rawlings (Cornell University), Paul Nurse (Rockefeller University), Alan Alda (New York City), Greg Papadopoulos (Sun Microsystems), Ralph Gomory (Alfred P. Sloan Foundation), and Alan Leshner (American Association for the Advancement of Sciences).

This study is part of the Academy's Initiative on Science, Engineering, and Technology, which examines, in broad terms, how the world of science, engineering, and technology is changing; how to help the public understand those changes; and how we as a society can better adapt to those changes. More information about the Initiative on Science, Engineering, and Technology is available on the Academy's website at <http://www.amacad.org/projects/initSciTech.aspx>. ■

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# Teagle Foundation Supports Data Collection in the Humanities

With a grant from the Teagle Foundation, the Academy will advance work this fall on The Humanities Departmental Survey – The Template Project, an Academy effort to gather new information from college and university humanities departments. The data collected will become part of the Humanities Indicators Project – an ongoing effort to compile and categorize existing data in the humanities.

In awarding the grant, Teagle Foundation President and Academy Fellow W. Robert Connor noted that this project will address a “crucial need for data collection in the humanities.” Humanities scholars, foundations, and educational policymakers lack important information about roughly one-third of the disciplines that form the core of a liberal arts education. The absence of basic empirical data has become a particularly urgent problem now, when new economic, curricular, and ideological pressures threaten support for the humanities.

The Template Project is a collaborative effort to collect, compare, and analyze data from humanities departments across several aca-

demical disciplines, including history, modern languages and literature, art history, religion, and linguistics. Working with national humanities organizations and disciplinary associations, such as the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association, project participants have developed a survey instrument designed to bring consistency to already existing data collection efforts in the humanities.

Arnita Jones, Executive Director of the American Historical Association, summed up the project’s importance to humanities disciplines: “With this project, the Academy has provided the humanities community an opportunity to . . . work cooperatively toward shared goals in the realm of data collection. Once the value of the departmental survey data is demonstrated, I feel certain that other disciplinary associations will be eager to participate. Its long-term implications are significant.”

The survey is designed to gather data, including the number and nature of faculty in each humanities discipline (tenured versus adjunct; full-time versus part-time); the form gradu-

ate teaching takes (e.g., seminars, independent study); the distribution of teaching loads (undergraduate versus graduate); the number of majors and minors; jobs secured by graduates; and other areas of concern that can be used to produce indicators of the health of the humanities in higher education. The survey will be administered this academic year.

The Statistical Research Center, which conducts similar surveys within physics, astronomy, and allied fields, will administer the survey and compile the data. The data will be analyzed by the American Political Science Association, along with data collected independently in 2006 from political science departments. Results will be made available electronically.

The Template Project is part of a larger Humanities and Culture Initiative receiving financial support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Walter B. Hewlett, the William R. Hewlett Trust, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Sara Lee Corporation. More information about the project is available on the Academy’s website at <http://www.amacad.org/projects/indicators.aspx>. ■