NSF Directorate: Yes!

New Directorate for Psychology, and Other Behavioral and Social Sciences

WASHINGTON, DC — It’s finally going to happen. A directorate for psychology and other behavioral and social science disciplines is being formed by the National Science Foundation (NSF).

More than just a much-needed organizational change, the separate directorate represents a comeback from a decade ago when the behavioral and social sciences sustained enormous budget reductions. At that time, psychology and other disciplines were the targets of political prejudice in Congress and the White House.

Ten years later the situation has changed, and congressional support for psychology and other behavioral and social science disciplines is seen as pivotal in convincing NSF to divide the current Biological, Behavioral and Social Science (BBS) directorate.

The establishment of a separate directorate at NSF also represents a kind of “coming of age” for APS, according to Executive Director Alan Kraut, noting that APS initiated several actions in the

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Do Science Museum Exhibits Really Teach?

A New Program Is Designed to Find Out: Here’s an Invitation to Participate

Psychologists now have new opportunities to do research in the high-growth field of informal science education.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) is trying to help fill a research gap that grows wider each year. Science museums and centers have been multiplying and expanding their facilities dramatically. But few psychologists have ever focused on their educational effects.

Science museums in the United States now have aggregate attendance figures estimated at 40 to 50

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Vortex display at Reuben H. Fleet Science Center in San Diego, CA, entertains family members.
Deserve to Be Recognized

In addition to funding concerns, APS advocated for a separate directorate as a matter of self-determination.

"This issue has evolved to the point that even if the funding improved, the behavioral and social scientists in the field would continue to demand a separate directorate," Kraut told Representative Rick Boucher (D-VA), Chair of the House Science subcommittee with direct jurisdiction over NSF. "Nothing less would restore a good working relationship with NSF. We deserve to be recognized."

Earlier this year APS asked Boucher to continue in the vein of his predecessor, former Representative Doug Walgren (D-PA), by supporting the separate directorate.

Boucher personally requested Massey to establish the directorate, which finally tipped the balance in favor of the separate directorate.

APS’ Work With Congress Cited

Now that the agency has decided to form the directorate, the national science and higher education press reports indicate congressional influence was a major factor and many of those reports credit APS with leading the advocacy effort in Congress.

“Steady lobbying and working on congressional friends also helped bring about the change,” according to Science and Government Report. The influential Washington-based science periodical reported that APS, “a splinter of researchers from the practitioner-dominated American Psychological Association,” was in the “vanguard” of the movement.

A ‘Proud Godparent’

This view is echoed by Walgren who while in Congress was a leading supporter of behavioral science research. Although defeated in 1990 after 14 years in Congress, Walgren remained committed to a separate directorate, and volunteered his time to work with APS to convince Boucher that the directorate should be established.

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According to Walgren, who introduced the separate directorate bill along with Brown, "APS should consider itself a proud godparent" of the new directorate. "To my knowledge, APS is the origin of this movement towards a separate directorate. APS really created the legislation George Brown and I introduced, and that legislation gave critical momentum to the effort," he said.

Walgren, Brown, and Boucher all give credit to Massey, noting that the new head of NSF was more receptive to the separate directorate than his predecessor. This is confirmed by Kraut and APS President Gordon Bower who met with Massey last June, days before Massey brought the issue before the National Science Board. It is unlikely that the issue would have gotten so far under Massey's predecessor, engineer Erich Bloch.

Simon Said . . .

Walgren was chairing the hearing in which a Nobel Prize-winning psychologist announced his support for a separate directorate.

Herbert Simon, from Carnegie Mellon University, appeared before Walgren's subcommittee to recommend "the separation of the [BBS Directorate] into its two natural parts" so that social sciences can "participate in the highest levels of the organization, where allocation of funds are effectively made."

Commenting on the news that a directorate would be created, Simon said, "Over the long pull this is going to give behavioral and social sciences a channel to let people see what we are and what we can do. It is inevitable we will see improvements in funding."

Simon, who was the keynote speaker for APS' 1991 convention, also pointed out the importance of "the right of social and behavioral sciences to speak for themselves" rather than being "interpreted through others who, though well meaning, are not familiar with the disciplines."

"Having good people in there to run the directorate will make all the difference," he added.

Senator Kerry's Bill

Several APS-initiated steps taken in the Senate also contributed to the overall momentum of the effort. Earlier this year, Senator John Kerry (D-MA) introduced separate directorate legislation similar to the Walgren-Brown bill at the request of APS. Kerry is a member of the Senate Commerce, Science and Technology Committee, which has jurisdiction over NSF. "I'm encouraged that the NSF is taking this step toward solving the perennial funding problems that have plagued the behavioral and social sciences at the agency," Kerry said. "The country as a whole will certainly benefit from the advances in research that will be forthcoming in these areas."

"I also want to commend the American Psychological Society," Kerry said, "for its active role in bringing about this important change."

Enter the Appropriators

APS brought the separate directorate issue to the attention of the House and Senate Appropriations committees that have responsibility for the annual NSF budget.

Noting the Society's strong support of proposed funding increases for the NSF as a whole, APS at the same time pointed out in testimony before the House and Senate panels that behavioral and social science research would once again not be given an equitable share of those increases.

"This will continue to be the case as long as the current structure of the directorate that houses behavioral and social sciences remains," Kraut told congressional appropriators and asked them to support a separate directorate in order to "ensure that critical decisions about research and funding are being made by those most familiar with the science."

Kraut detailed NSF's resistance to changing the status quo at the agency, and said the time had come to make this a

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priority for Congress. House NSF Appropriations Subcommittee Chair Robert Traxler (D-MI) pronounced the concept “excellent” and promised to “see what we can do.”

Impact in the Senate

At the request of APS, Senator Daniel Inouye (D-HI), long-time psychology supporter and a member of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee with jurisdiction over the annual budget of NSF, authored a portion of the NSF’s FY 1991 bill asking the Foundation to “examine . . . recommendations that NSF create a separate directorate and increase funding for psychology, behavioral science, and social science” and report back to the Appropriations Committee in January, 1991.

In January, a task force established by BBS voted — with only a single dissention — to recommend the establishment of a separate directorate. However, it would be several months before a report containing this recommendation (described below) would be published.

Inouye, rather than letting the issue drop, pressured the agency to act on the task force’s recommendation, both in a January letter and later, in the FY 1992 Appropriations report for NSF when he sponsored language directing the Foundation to respond to the task force recommendation.

The Announcement

The announcement to establish a Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBES) directorate, was made on October 11, 1991, without fanfare, during a routine report to NSF’s National Science Board by Walter Massey, who became Director of NSF in September, 1990, just as the issue was achieving a critical mass. But despite the lack of fanfare, the announcement is reverberating through the behavioral and social science research community.

To many, this action is seen in the context of a darker point in recent history. In the early 1980’s, the Reagan Administration and some members of Congress, taking advantage of a general lack of awareness of behavioral science, were able to slash — or in some cases eliminate — funding for behavioral and social science research programs throughout the federal government by equating such research with social engineering.

Glass Ceiling

NSF’s programs in those disciplines have never recovered from setbacks experienced in that era even though the rest of NSF prospered by comparison. Funding for psychology research and other behavioral and social science disciplines ran into a glass ceiling of sorts, never rising in proportion to increases received by the directorate as a whole, and receiving more than their share of decreases.

For years, NSF maintained that Congress, not the agency, was responsible for the funding problems and that the BBS structure “protected” behavioral sciences from further cuts.

According to Kraut, it is typical that “NSF as an executive branch agency, tried to cast the blame on Congress.” But a closer look revealed “the critical funding decisions were being made not by Congress, but by agency officials,” he said, noting that in fact, behavioral and social science research enjoyed increased congressional support while NSF continued its pattern of second-class funding in those areas.

A Chip from the Old Bloch

The clearest statement of NSF’s position — also a clear illustration of the problem facing behavioral and social sciences within NSF — was made in March, 1990, by former NSF Director Erich Bloch, who told the House Science committee that NSF would not create a separate directorate because “organizational changes usually do not correct problems, either real ones or problems of perception.”

In reality, Bloch saw the behavioral and social sciences as subordinate to other areas of science and engineering. He tried to justify this position by euphemistically claiming that “the social and behavioral sciences should not be isolated either

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Senator John F. Kerry

[The Task Force came to the conclusion that the scope of the present directorate is far too broad to give sufficient attention to the social, economic and psychological sciences while still encompassing the full range of fields within the biological sciences.

NSF Task Force

Most gratifying was the emergence of voices from all sides acknowledging the substance and richness of research in the social, economic, and psychological sciences.

Nancy Cantor
Princeton University

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organizational or intellectually. They have too many interfaces with other sciences and engineering that represent real opportunities for scientific advances. It is through this interplay that the behavioral and social sciences can gain the recognition that is our ultimate goal,” Bloch told Congress.

Not Science Philosophy

Acknowledging the importance of interdisciplinary activities, Kraut nevertheless says that the behavioral and social sciences were included with biology programs for administrative reasons, and not for intellectual principles or reasons of science philosophy.

Consequently, the drive for a separate directorate was not “a case of scientific conflict, or a matter of ‘psychology against biology.’” But, he said, “we finally saw that behavioral science would always be at a disadvantage as long as the current structure continued. The BBS Directorate would always be known informally as the Biology Directorate, and would always be headed by a biologist.”

BBS Task Force

The concept of a separate directorate was significantly advanced this year by the favorable recommendation of an NSF Task Force. The Task Force, comprised of outside experts, was convened in September, 1990, to study the organizational structure of the BBS directorate as well as future directions in research.

The composition of the task force — 12 biologists and 8 behavioral/social scientists — was seen as a guarantee that a negative finding would be forthcoming regarding the separate directorate. Initially, it appeared that most of the biologists on the panel were leaning strongly in that direction. At the end, however, with virtual unanimity, the task force agreed there was no reason, scientific or otherwise, to keep behavioral and social sciences with the biology programs.

According to its report, aptly titled Adapting to the Future, “the Task Force came to the conclusion that the scope of the present directorate is far too broad to give sufficient attention to the social, economic and psychological sciences while still encompassing the full range of fields within the biological sciences.”

The turnaround that occurred has been attributed to the unified position of the behavioral and social science community, particularly as it was conveyed by the more than 50 organizations testifying during two days of hearings held by the task force. The solidarity of the behavioral science community was first in evidence at an APS-convened behavioral research summit in January, 1990, when representatives of over 65 organizations voted to make a separate directorate a priority.

APS Board Member Nancy Cantor of Princeton University was the only psychology representative to serve on the task force. Cantor, a social psychologist, was instrumental in persuading the task force to recommend in favor of a separate directorate. She says the research itself actually did the convincing.

“The diversity of research represented within the current BBS became very obvious,” she explained. “Most gratifying was the emergence of voices from all sides acknowledging the substance and richness of research in the social, economic, and psychological sciences,” she said, referring to the reaction of task force members many of whom were coming into contact with behavioral and social science research for the first time.

Cantor also said the task force gave “considerable thought” to interdisciplinary activities and noted the task force report contains a number of recommendations to protect fields that “fall at the inevitable ‘sticky edges’ between the behavioral and social sciences and biological sciences, as well as between these fields and sciences represented in other directorates.”

Moving Quickly

Now that the NSF has decided to form a separate directorate, the agency is moving very quickly. The new directorate will include existing behavioral and social science divisions, plus portions of the Directorate of Scientific, Technological and International Affairs (STIA), which is being “disestablished” as NSF says.

A search is underway for an Assistant Director of NSF to head the directorate.
Anatomy of a Directorate

For psychology and other behavioral and social science research disciplines, the early part of the last decade was a time of crisis triggered by deep cuts in National Science Foundation (NSF) funding and other federal programs on which these fields rely. Among other things, the cuts pointed up the lack of influence of these sciences in the political process. APS was established in late 1988 in part because many researchers believed the only way this situation could ever be improved was to have an organization in Washington devoted solely to concerns of scientific psychology.

Over the past two years, APS achieved results on NSF in Congress, including the introduction of legislation in the House and Senate and a commitment from the top congressional science policy leaders to support a separate directorate for behavioral and social sciences. Reports indicate that these were the critical factors in getting NSF, itself, to ultimately propose the change. Better to change from within than to have change forced upon you from without. But don’t just take our word for it. Take a look at the following chronology of events. Then congratulate yourself for being a member of the “Little Society That Could”... and, more to the point, did!

Summit Vote

January 28, 1990

At the APS-sponsored Summit of Scientific Psychological Societies, representatives of more than 65 behavioral science groups voted that establishing a separate directorate at NSF for behavioral and social science research would be a priority. The vote took place during a two-day meeting convened by APS to begin the process of developing a national behavioral science research agenda.

BBS Advisory Panel

March 1990

An ad hoc panel established by the Advisory Committee of the Biological, Behavioral and Social Sciences (BBS) directorate, raised numerous questions about the effectiveness of the existing BBS structure and recommended that NSF consider a separate directorate for the behavioral and social sciences. Earlier, in response to an inquiry from Panel Chair, psychologist Linda Smith, APS helped frame some of those issues.

“I hope your Task Force considers a qualitatively different strategy — one that recognizes that decision making at the upper levels of NSF is a political process,” wrote APS Executive Director Alan Kraut, “and that we cannot expect to be treated fairly in this political decision making until there is a behavioral or social scientist represented at the Assistant Director level — period. For me, our highest NSF priority should be a separate Directorate for Behavioral and Social Science.”

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the legislation, which was initiated by APS, was intended to remove the structural barriers that perpetuated the funding problems of behavioral and social science research at NSF.

**BBS Task Force**

*September 10, 1990*

As a partial response to the issues raised earlier by the *ad hoc* advisory subcommittee, BBS formed the “Task Force on Looking to the 21st Century” comprised of outside experts. Significantly, the group was initially convened as the “Task Force on the Structural Review of BBS,” but BBS changed the name of the panel of 12 biologists and 8 behavioral and social scientists by the time its first meeting was held in Washington. APS Board Member Nancy Cantor was the only psychology representative. Despite attempts to bury the separate directorate issue deep within the reconstituted task force’s mission, members decided during this first meeting that the separate directorate would be one of the main issues on their agenda.

A September 7, 1990 letter from Walgren and Brown preemptively asked NSF to ensure that the separate directorate was major focus of the task force’s studies. The letter, which was developed as an outgrowth of APS’ concerns about the task force, was influential in convincing the task force to study the issue more closely. BBS, apparently concerned about the potential impact of the letter, did not notify the task force that the letter had been received. However, a member of the panel distributed it during the discussion.

**First Directorate Bill**

*August 3, 1990*

H.R. 5543, the *Behavioral and Social Sciences Directorate Act of 1990*, was introduced by Representatives Doug Walgren (D-PA) and George E. Brown, Jr., (D-CA), both of whom had long histories in national science debates. Walgren and Brown said that factor behind the task force’s eventual position in favor of the separate directorate. APS testimony recommended that NSF establish a separate directorate incorporating existing NSF behavioral and social science research programs. Further, APS recommended that NSF implement the reorganization in ways that preserve a strong behavioral neuroscience enterprise as well as promote multidisciplinary and interdirectorate activities.

*January 14, 1991*

All but one member of the BBS Task Force voted in favor of the separate directorate. While the vote was taken publicly, the task force deferred issuing a written recommendation or any other announcement until its report was complete.

**The Pressure Continues**

*January 18, 1991*

Senator Inouye, responding to APS concerns that NSF would use the task force to defer action on the separate directorate, sent a letter to NSF. “I note that the Foundation appeared resistant to looking at its funding policies in these areas of research,” said Inouye who also indicated that he and the Committee were aware of the task force’s approval of the separate directorate and would be awaiting the panel’s report.

*February 13, 1991*

NSF’s resistance appeared intact in its reply to Inouye, which said that the task force was studying “all parts of the directorate,” and would “make recommendations that will allow NSF to continue intellectual development in all life sciences . . . .” The letter conspicuously did not mention the task force’s January decision.
The Final Months

March 13, 1991

Alan Kraut met with Representative Rick Boucher (D-VA), chair of the House Science subcommittee, to request his support of the separate directorate and to discuss the task force recommendation. In a subsequent letter, Kraut told Boucher “... unless continued appropriate pressure is forthcoming, NSF will not take on the main recommendation of a separate directorate. As one [NSF] higher-up told me, he gives the separate directorate about a 5% chance. And that epitomizes the problem! In the last year there has been interest in a separate directorate from both the House and Senate, two NSF-sponsored Task Forces have recommended it, over 60 organizations testified in favor of it, and still NSF officials are giving it about a 5% chance.”

FY 92 Appropriations

April-May, 1991

APS again presents testimony to the House and Senate Appropriations committees, asking for continued support of the separate directorate and informing the committees of the task force vote to approve a separate directorate.

In the FY 1992 Appropriations report for NSF (S. 102-107, dated July 11, 1991), the Senate directed NSF to respond to the task force recommendation and to notify the Appropriations Committee of its plans. Inserted under Senator Inouye’s sponsorship, the report language again was a direct outcome of APS efforts.

March 28, 1991

George Brown, Jr., who became Chair of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee in January, visits APS President James McGaugh at UC-Irvine. During a tour of the Center for the Neuroscience of Learning and Memory, where McGaugh is director, Brown reiterates his support for a separate directorate.

May 9, 1991

Senator John Kerry (D-MA), sitting on the Senate Science Committee introduced S. 1031, the Behavioral and Social Science Directorate Act of 1991, similar to the Walgren-Brown bill. The bill was developed in conjunction with APS. In his introductory statement, Kerry appeared to be sponsoring the bill in part because “... NSF has been slow in publishing the task force’s report and has taken absolutely no steps toward implementing their recommendation.”

June 17, 1991

Alan Kraut and APS President Gordon Bower met with the new NSF Director Walter Massey and discussed the separate directorate. Massey indicated he would discuss the issue with the National Science Board.

June 20, 1991

The National Science Board reviewed an unpublished executive summary of the task force and discussed the recommendation for a separate directorate. The Board decided to defer the issue to Massey.

June 27, 1991

As a follow up to an unanswered inquiry during the June 20th discussion, APS wrote to every member of the National Science Board to outline congressional activities and to clarify some of the issues underlying the separate directorate.

August, 1991

APS visited all members of the House Science subcommittee to garner support for the separate directorate, and received indications of support from virtually all offices.

August, 1991

Chairman Boucher decided to support a separate directorate and asked Massey to take action.

October 11, 1991

Massey announced the establishment of a separate directorate during his report to the National Science Board.
Congressional Pressure: The Players

Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), chair of the Senate NSF Appropriations subcommittee. Her subcommittee conveyed its support for a separate directorate for two years running.

Senator Daniel K. Inouye (D-HI), NSF Appropriations subcommittee. Had favorable separate-directorate language inserted in the NSF Appropriations report and independently conveyed his support to NSF.

Representative Rick Boucher (D-VA), chair of the House Science subcommittee on NSF. Conveyed his support for a separate directorate personally to NSF Director Massey. Said to be the final critical influence in Massey’s decision.

Walter Massey, NSF Director, announced the establishment of a separate directorate during his report to the National Science Board on October 11, 1991.

Representative George E. Brown, Jr., (D-CA), chair of the full House Science Committee. Introduced (with Doug Walgren) H.R. 5543, the Behavioral and Social Sciences Directorate Act of 1990. Thinks behavioral and social science research should “more than share” in proposed NSF budget increases.

Representative Doug Walgren (D-PA), past chair of the House Science subcommittee on NSF. Introduced (with George Brown) H.R. 5543, the Behavioral and Social Sciences Directorate Act of 1990. Continued to lobby for a separate directorate after he left Congress.

Senator John Kerry (D-MA), Senate Science Committee, introduced S. 1031, the Behavioral and Social Science Directorate Act of 1991, because NSF had not yet acted on the separate directorate.

Representative Robert Traxler (D-MI), chair of the House NSF Appropriations subcommittee. Called the idea of a separate directorate “excellent” and vowed to “see what we can do.”