

# Current Comments

## The Rockefeller University Council: Well-Placed Decision-Makers Adopt an Alma Mater to Promote Creative Philanthropy

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Four years ago, I commented on the practice by some universities of advertising themselves in order to attract students.<sup>1</sup> I had some fun with that essay by reprinting a few wildly satiric university ads which originally appeared in *Mad*, the humor magazine. But the point I made was that in this age of declining enrollments, it is not necessarily a bad thing for universities to publicize themselves or their curricula. Tastefully done, such publicity can help students make intelligent choices.

But attracting additional students is not the only reason a university might want publicity. I know of one that for several years now has systematically attempted to promote itself. Yet the school has all the students that it can handle. The Rockefeller University in New York City has always had a small enrollment. The entire university consists of about 100 pre-doctoral students, 225 post-doctoral investigators, and a faculty of about 225, of whom only 75 are tenured. An enlarged student body is not what this highly selective school wants from its self-promotion.

The problem for Rockefeller University is that it suffers a lack of visibility that is out of proportion to its considerable achievements in both education and research. Consider these facts. Since 1912, 16 faculty and alumni of the school have received Nobel prizes. Seven of those prizes were awarded since 1972. Six nobelists are still on the campus, including University President Joshua Lederberg. Four current faculty members have received the National

Medal of Science. And more than half of Rockefeller University's 58 full professors are members of the National Academy of Sciences.<sup>2</sup>

The quality of Rockefeller University alumni reflects the quality of the faculty. In 1974, the National Research Council published the results of a nationwide, qualitative evaluation of doctoral graduates in the biomedical sciences. The study included those who earned their PhDs between the years 1958 and 1972. The graduates were grouped by school and judged on the basis of their number of publications and their citation rates. The results showed that among doctoral graduates from the 128 institutions studied, those from Rockefeller University ranked first.<sup>3</sup>

All this may come as no surprise to those working within biomedicine. But if this is news to those outside of the field, they can hardly be blamed. While the low visibility of Rockefeller University may be caused by its small student body, the problem is aggravated by the limited academic scope of the university. It specializes in the biomedical sciences, with small research groups in the behavioral and physical sciences.

Whatever increase in recognition the university has received in recent years is at least partly due to the efforts of a group called the Rockefeller University Council. The council was formed in 1973 to improve public awareness of the university's activities and their impact upon people. Today, the council numbers 93 members. Most of them occupy

key positions in industry, finance, or government. I myself have been a council member since 1978. Each member serves as an ambassador-at-large on behalf of the university, promoting the school whenever an opportunity arises.

The Rockefeller University was founded in 1901 by John D. Rockefeller, Sr. Originally called the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, it was simply what its name implied—a research center. It offered no academic programs and awarded no degrees. In 1910, the Rockefeller Institute founded the first hospital in the US devoted exclusively to research. It wasn't until 1954 that the institute started its graduate program. It awarded its first degree in 1959. In 1965, the institute's name was changed to Rockefeller University.<sup>4</sup>

According to Barry Dress, who served as executive secretary of the Rockefeller Council from 1973 to 1978, the university was for a time content to pursue its work in relative obscurity.<sup>5</sup> Not until the early 1970s did the school begin to systematically promote itself to the outside world. The idea for forming the Rockefeller Council belonged to James Linen III, who is director of Time, Inc., and a longtime university trustee. From the start, Linen intended the council to, in the words of Dress, "seed the country and the world with influential decision-makers who are aware of us and what we do."<sup>5</sup>

Probably no other university has anything like the Rockefeller Council. Most universities don't need one. Larger schools often have a number of well-placed alumni in all walks of life. These alumni can help their alma maters in several ways. If they attain high positions in government, perhaps favorable policy decisions will result in the awarding of grants for "the old school." Or if they become captains of industry, they might donate large sums of money. If a school's alumni are numerous, their accumulated small contributions can add up to a significant sum. But the alumni

body of Rockefeller University is very small. Each year, only 18 to 20 students receive degrees from the school. Moreover, most of them pursue careers in science. They don't often reach positions of power. And given a scientist's salary, they cannot be big donors to the school.

The Rockefeller University Council compensates for the lack of an effective alumni body. Its current executive director is Mary Dean, who also serves on the school's development and public affairs staff. Present council members include the chief executives of such corporate giants as ALCOA, Westinghouse Electric, and the Campbell Soup Company, to name only a few. A proportion of the council membership consists of bank executives from several nations, including Robert McNamara, president of the World Bank. Vernon E. Jordan, executive director of the National Urban League, sits on the council, as do a US district judge and, until recently, a former US ambassador.<sup>6</sup>

The Rockefeller University Council has no firm membership criteria. In general, a candidate for membership must be substantial in his or her field and must be in a position to help the university. Nominations to the council originate with the university board of trustees, faculty, and other council members. People who are willing and able to help can even nominate themselves. Candidates' names are submitted to the nominating committee of the board of trustees for approval. Recently, the council has sought to increase the number of its overseas members. Consequently, prominent citizens from several nations, including Saudi Arabia, Japan, and a number of European nations, now sit on the council. Members serve three-year terms. These terms are renewable provided the member shows interest and attends a reasonable number of council meetings.<sup>5</sup>

Council meetings are held twice yearly and last for one day. The greatest part of a meeting consists of presentations,

usually by faculty members, of current research at the university. A discussion period follows each presentation. At the council meeting of June 7, 1979, members heard separate presentations on the structure and functioning of sperm and egg cells, the physiological role of the brain in reproductive behavior, issues concerning the use of animals in scientific research, and immunological aspects of several arthritic diseases. At a brief business session, the university's finances and future council agendas were discussed.

Why do people become council members? Presumably, they are motivated by simple altruism. Given the distinguished character of the council's roster, a cynic might conclude that council membership has a certain amount of snob appeal. But council members are expected to perform real services for the university. As Dress puts it, "We are not interested in simply having famous names associated with us. There is no 'laundry list,' no stationery with these names running down the sides."<sup>5</sup> Aside from improving the university's visibility among corporate and governmental decision-makers, the council has engaged in considerable fund-raising efforts. Unfortunately, the very name of the university implies that it gets all the support it needs from Rockefeller money past and present. But this is not true and has not been true for a generation. Rockefeller University has always relied heavily upon private contributions. Private donations account for a quarter of the university's operating budget. And since its formation, the Rockefeller University Council has arranged for gifts or grants of more than \$4 million.

A few years ago, I used the term "creative philanthropy" to describe how one might insure that his or her gift does the most good.<sup>7</sup> The members of Rockefeller University Council must surely be regarded among the creative philanthropists. The gift they give is their time and their interest. The good

that they do for their cause may be immeasurable. By spreading the word about the work of Rockefeller University, they help insure that the school will continue to attract the brightest minds as researchers and students.

That Rockefeller University is an institution worthy of philanthropy need not be debated. Whether it is more deserving of support than some other institution is a matter of individual choice. I happen to believe that my investment of time and money in this elite institution will have a multiple effect. Over the years, Rockefeller University scientists have made an incredible number of milestone contributions to biomedical research. It was they who first demonstrated that cancer in animals can be caused by a virus. And Rockefeller University scientists were the first to isolate and successfully test natural antibiotics. A method for preserving whole blood for use in transfusions is another product of research at Rockefeller University. The staff developed a highly effective vaccine against meningitis<sup>8-12</sup> and has recently made a real start toward a vaccine for malaria.<sup>13</sup>

These are only isolated examples. Using ISI<sup>®</sup>'s own files of citation data it is easy to document the impact of Rockefeller University. First of all, its own *Journal of Experimental Medicine* supplies that impact. The papers published by Rockefeller University scientists that appear in our numerous studies and *Citation Classics* are too numerous to list here. The Rockefeller University Council helps to make continued advances possible. In so doing its members perform a valuable service, not only to their adopted school, but to all of humankind.

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\*Reprinted in: **Garfield E.** *Essays of an information scientist.* Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1980. 3 vols.

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In Citation Classics, *Current Contents*<sup>®</sup>/*Agriculture, Biology & Environmental Sciences* (5):16, 4 February 1980, the citation for the classic by Bremner J M on "Inorganic forms of nitrogen" is not *Agronomy J.* but rather **Bremner J M.** *Inorganic forms of nitrogen.* (Black C A, Evans D D, White J L, Ensminger L E, Clark F E & Dinauer R C, eds.) *Methods of soil analysis. Part 2. Chemical and microbiological properties.* Madison, WI: American Society of Agronomy, 1965. p. 1179-237. The correct number of citations is 470.

The book is actually the ninth in a series of Agronomy monographs published by that society. References 1-5 in the Citation Classic should also be attributed to *Methods of soil analysis* rather than *Agronomy J.*

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