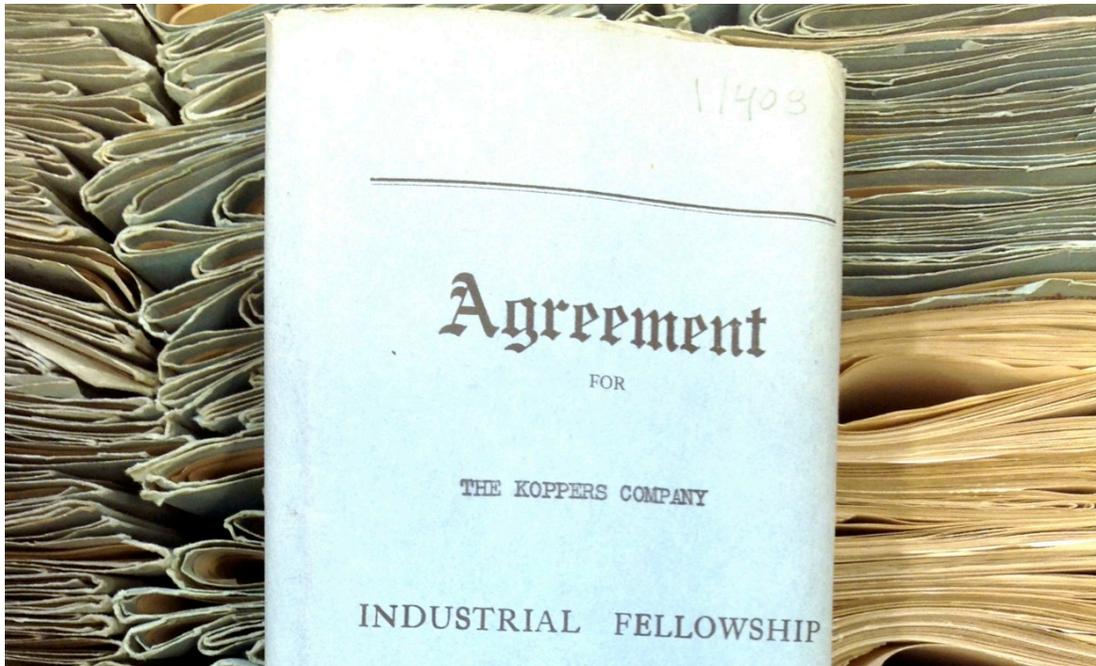


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“A Card for everything, Miss Whittle!”

*A maintainer’s approach to the organization of academic-industrial research  
at the Mellon Institute for Industrial Research*



To access the Mellon Institute fellowship agreements (or most other Mellon Institute records) today, you must order them at least week in advance at the Carnegie Mellon University Archives. They are delivered from the Iron Mountain off-site storage facility in cardboard file-boxes secured with fused plastic binding tape. Unlike the familiar ordered line of file folders that often greets an archival researcher, the fellowship agreements are stacked on end, packed together like an array of partially flattened scrolls. This series of dense beige spirals segmented from each other by the light blue covers that surround each bundle face you in a cryptic mass of coiled paperwork. As a contemporary researcher with the task of understanding the daily inner workings of the Mellon Institute for Industrial Research nearly a century later

through the documents that remain, the sight of these fellowship agreements can be a bit bewildering.

However, when the Mellon Institute was in operation, what is now a daunting array of agreement documents were part of a well known and highly sought after organizational system. Indeed, “any report or letter [could] be produced in a matter of minutes, no matter how many years ago it was written.” So said, Director Weidlein in 1956 as he marveled at the immediacy with which he was given a document from 1915.<sup>1</sup> This particular organizational innovation was the brainchild of Lois Whittle, who began as Secretary to the Director in 1910, when the headquarters were in the attic of Duncan’s home in Pittsburgh. During this modest “embryonic phase”<sup>2</sup> of what would become the Mellon Institute, Duncan and Whittle were the only employees in Pittsburgh.<sup>3</sup> Whittle continued to refine this system throughout her 45-year career at the Mellon Institute, later serving as General Office Manager. Whittle recalled first being faced with what she described as “a huge box of Kansas records in the middle of [Duncan’s] attic floor.”<sup>4</sup> Duncan’s only direction at the time, “a card Miss Whittle, a card for everything!” though strict, also came with as she put it, “immense latitude.”

Through the fellowship agreement document and the pre-digital organizational system developed by Lois Whittle during her 45-year career at the Mellon Institute of Industrial Research, I offer an entry point into the informational infrastructure of academic-industrial partnerships in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fellowship agreement document is itself an artifact of negotiation, collaboration, compromise, and knowledge products of applied science. These living documents served as a tangible convening point for the interests of science and business that were brought into productive balance a new through each particular research project. They help us to understand the production of knowledge at the then developing interface between academic and industrial research, as well as the organizational systems that kept these complex partnerships productive and also legible to their multiple constituencies.

With each year the research activity grew, challenging both the organizational and physical limits of the staff and facilities. Managing the logistics of a multiyear

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<sup>1</sup> Mellon Institute News Vol XIX no. 22 Thursday, March 1, 1956 Box 198 ff7114

<sup>2</sup> Lois Whittle to Rena Zeffer April 13, 1962 – Mellon Institute - CMU Archives Box 198 ff7114

<sup>3</sup> At this time the research projects were still being conducted at University of Kansas.

<sup>4</sup> Lois Whittle to Rena Zeffer, April 13, 1962 CMU Archives Box 198 ff7114

fellowship, its funds, sponsoring company or group, research fellows, their findings and equipment needs was a complex task. The system of indexing, multicolored file cards with typed and handwritten fields, progress reports and financial records organized by Whittle and her staff, became a critical piece of the functioning of the Mellon Institute as a center for “innovative” chemical research. Whittle, in response to numerous requests from outside the Institute, even published an article in the *Journal of Industrial Chemistry* in 1928 making her system available to other emerging laboratories. What can a filing system for managing research projects tell us about the way that science and technology is conceived, grows, is sustained or discarded, spins off, and perhaps even becomes obsolete? How does focus on the *maintenance* of academic-industrial research through the documentation, and organization of information, and the female administrative staff at the Mellon Institute change the questions that we ask of the histories of these institutions and research?