

How an Astronomer Became the First Director of The National Center for Atmospheric Research

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The US National Science Foundation created the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) as the nation's premier institution for atmospheric studies. Walter Roberts became its first director. Roberts, however, was neither a meteorologist nor atmospheric physicist. He was rather a solar astronomer and observatory administrator who had never done any research directly in meteorology. The question arises, how did a scientist with minimal background in atmospheric physics become the founding director of a major research institution for meteorology? This talk shows how Roberts negotiated between two disparate science disciplines—astronomy and meteorology—by exploiting a disciplinary borderland between these fields, the study of the sun-earth connection. Specifically, he was able to obtain cache in the meteorological community by his deep interest in sun-weather studies. It is interesting that Roberts came to these studies as an attempt to demonstrate the proposed practical (meteorological) applications of solar research in order to entice sponsorship from private donors. By navigating this solar-earth science borderland, and having the reputation as a successful scientific administrator, Roberts then quickly became a prime candidate to be NCAR's founding director. His experience illustrates that the existence of scientific borderlands such as the sun-earth connection can have important ramifications for the development of the disciplines involved.