CHAPTER 6

SCIENTIFIC SUPPORT ROLES
Associates, Technicians, and Assistants

Being in science but not of science; the indispensable research associate; the necessary laboratory technician/technologist; the research assistant; why so many women?

The discussion in this book thus far has focused on women as professionals, as degree-bearing practitioners of the complex art of doing good science. We decided early on and quite arbitrarily that necessary qualifications of a scientist were (1) the possession of an advanced degree in one of the many technical specialties—in the “hard” or “soft” sciences—and (2) employment in a position that makes use of that background. This seemed at the time to be a logical decision, and it has carried us this far. But periodically in the discourse we have encountered another large category of women in science—those in supporting roles, making specialized contributions to the success of projects (and project leaders), but usually doing so at a “subprofessional” level, often
without benefit of advanced degrees. So it seems necessary, midway in this examination of women in science, to give some visibility to all of those in roles that do much to make science function: the research associates, the laboratory technicians, and the laboratory assistants in numerous categories.

There is a problem, though, with this or any attempt to insert people into neat pigeonholes, even if only for discussion purposes. They just don't all fit. The range of supporting activities in science is too broad—all the way from a highly trained degree-bearing research laboratory supervisor to a competent public relations/proposal-drafting specialist, to a skilled laboratory technician or technologist, to a part-time aide who spends evening hours entering experimental data into sophisticated instruments. But a start has to be made, and we propose to isolate and discuss a few major categories: (1) the research associate with one or more advanced degrees, (2) the laboratory technician/technologist, and (3) the research assistant or aide.

THE RESEARCH ASSOCIATE

Of all the women in supporting roles, the research associate is the most difficult to characterize adequately. Often employed in jobs with marginal professional status and no tenure, despite possession of one or more advanced degrees, such women present varied histories. Some are perennial support staff members (and often former graduate students) for authority figures; they may feel fulfilled by the continuing contact with a mentor, or they may be just reluctant to assume the role of independent investigator, or they may not have been able to find an acceptable position