

**NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION**

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OFFICE OF THE  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR

**DATE:** March 22, 2006  
**TO:** NSF ADs  
**FROM:** Deputy Director, NSF  
**SUBJECT:** NSF Working Group on the Impact of Proposal and Award Mechanisms

**Introduction:** Effective immediately, the Working Group on the Impact of Proposal and Award Management Mechanisms is established to recommend policies and best practices within NSF to improve the management of program announcements, solicitations, and unsolicited proposals, particularly with respect to community expectations vs. funds availability, while maintaining the robustness of the scientific and engineering community.

**Background:** In recent years, many NSF programs have experienced low and declining proposal success rates, resulting in increased workload, diminished S&E capacity, and program imbalances. A number of NSF organizations have attempted to manage workload and community expectations through variety of approaches, such as restricting the number of program solicitations and solicitation target dates, and limiting the number of proposal submissions. While these attempts are laudable, there are some concerns within the S&E community that such practices may sometimes have unintended consequences for the scientific community or for NSF.

**Charge:** The Working Group is responsible for recommending policies and best practices to improve NSF program announcement and solicitation processes in ways that achieve appropriate balances between proposal success rates, award sizes and award duration in the various types of awards that comprise the total NSF portfolio, with the emphasis on individual, investigator-initiated grants. In doing so, the group will address the following issues:

- What do the current and historical data indicate in terms of trends and problem areas? Are there unexplained or unanticipated imbalances; for example, between solicited and unsolicited proposals, new and experienced investigators, directorates and major disciplines, and special programs and standard disciplinary programs?

- What have been or would be anticipated to be the impacts of changing success rates, award amounts, or award durations on NSF and the S&E community? How is the workload and infrastructure affected? What S&E capacity/innovation is being lost or diminished? What is the effect of trade-offs between success rates, average award size, and award duration? How have perceptions affected NSF's relationship with the S&E community?
- What are the reasons for recent declines in success rates? Why has the number of proposal submitted to NSF substantially increased over the past few years? Is it possible to determine whether there have been impacts to NSF of budget reductions in the science programs of other Federal agencies?
- What has been the impact of NSF policies, strategies and practices to act on these issues? Have they worked? Are they administered in a reliable and equitable manner? Are there new approaches that should be tried?
- How can NSF data regarding success rates, award amounts, and award duration be disseminated more effectively? Should NSF establish standards for reporting data to the external community?

**Membership:** The membership of the working group is as follows:

Adnan Akay, ENG  
 Paul Herer, OD, (Exec. Secretary)  
 Suzi Iacono, CISE  
 Dan Litynski, EHR  
 Jacqueline Meszaros, SBE  
 Jarvis Moyers, GEO  
 Vernon Ross, BFA  
 Bill Rundell, MPS  
 Neil Swanberg, OPP  
 Rita Teutonico, BIO  
 Joanne Tornow, EHR/BIO (Chair)

**Operation:** The Working Group, including representative Program Officers and Division Directors from across the foundation, will meet regularly and establish a liaison with the Office of the Director. It will produce reports and presentations as needed to keep NSF senior staff and the NSB informed of its progress. Within six to twelve months, the working group will produce a final report and/or a series of reports that address the issues described above.

The success of the Working Group depends on the participation and assistance of the NSF staff. Staff members are encouraged to assist the Working Group as opportunity permits.



Kathie L. Olsen

cc: Adnan Akay, ENG  
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