



UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT  
**M E M O R A N D U M**

**DIRECTORATE FOR MATHEMATICAL AND PHYSICAL SCIENCES**

**Date:** March 28, 2005  
**From:** Assistant Director, MPS  
**Subject:** **Response to the Division of Materials Research Committee of Visitors Report**  
**To:** MPS Advisory Committee

Please find attached the MPS response to the Committee of Visitors (COV) report from the 16-18 February 2005 COV review of the Division of Materials Research. The review was thorough and insightful, and the findings will be very helpful to me and to the Division of Materials Research in fulfilling our responsibilities to the scientific community and to the nation.

The Division of Materials Research drafted the attached response, and I concur with its content. I therefore adopt it as the official response of the MPS Directorate. I hope the full MPS Advisory Committee finds this COV review and the MPS response useful and acceptable.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. S. Turner".

Michael S. Turner  
Assistant Director

Attachment: Response to Division of Materials Research COV Report of 2005

# Division of Materials Research (DMR) Response to Findings and Recommendations of the Committee of Visitors

February 16-18, 2005

The Committee of Visitors (COV) met on February 16-18, 2005 at the National Science Foundation to assess the performance of DMR in two primary areas: (A) the integrity and efficiency of the processes related to proposal review; and (B) the quality of the results of DMR's investments in the form of outputs and outcomes that appear over time. The COV also explored the relationships between award decisions and program/NSF-wide goals in order to determine the likelihood that the portfolio will lead to the desired results in the future.

The committee's report consists of two parts as follows:

1. A summary of the COV's most important observations communicated to Professor Carl Lineberger, Chair, MPS Advisory Committee, by Dr. Horst Stormer, Chair, DMR Committee of Visitors, on March 6, 2005.
2. The compiled findings of the COV in the form of report templates for the three DMR Program Groups as follows:
  - a. Condensed Matter Physics, Polymers, Materials Theory, Solid State Chemistry
  - b. Metals, Ceramics, Electronic Materials
  - c. Centers, Facilities, Instrumentation, Special Programs

## **Response to the overall comments of the COV**

*We are pleased that the COV finds that "...DMR has assembled a portfolio of world-class materials-inspired research, which exemplifies scientific excellence and breadth" and that "Central to these advances is the investment of the Foundation and the Nation in developing and sustaining the scientific workforce." The COV finds that "DMR manages this complex, broad and successful scientific endeavor in an admirably efficient and innovative manner. DMR-funded programs provide the Nation with an exceptionally high return on its investment." We are also gratified that the COV commends the work of the DMR Program Directors, stating that "We were very impressed with the thoroughness and fairness of the reviewing process, the demonstrated technical expertise of the program managers, the level and breadth of the science, technology, and education supported by the program, and the high quality of the research results achieved..."*

*The COV endorses the past and current use of Division Reserve Funds to raise the average funding level and increase award duration. We will continue to use Reserve Funds judiciously to address NSF policy goals.*

*The COV noted the increased number and diversity of DMR Program Directors while expressing concern that workloads are still exceptionally high. We will continue efforts to increase the diversity and number of program directors. We plan to address the workload issue by increasing the focus on core DMR programs and reducing the number of special program solicitations in which DMR participates, while continuing to adjust the balance between program director and support staff positions in the Division for optimum*

effectiveness. DMR will also continue to be a leader in the testing and adoption of more efficient electronic business practices such as e-jacket, and will continue to evaluate the impact of these practices on workloads and the mix of staffing required. We also plan to introduce a fixed window for proposal submission to core programs in order to rationalize the workload and reduce the number of proposals submitted over most of the fiscal year.

*We concur strongly with the COV's statement that DMR-funded research "covers very fundamental aspects of matter and creates the basis for future technologies". The COV expresses concern about the relatively slow growth of the DMR budget compared with those of MPS and NSF as a whole. We will continue to make the strongest possible case to NSF management for adequate support of this critical area of science and engineering. The COV also urges that budget reductions should not disproportionately erode the fraction of individual investigator grants in the DMR funding spectrum, while stating that "...the group as a whole views the distribution of funds between these different sectors as roughly appropriate". In a difficult funding environment we will continue to carefully assess the balance among the various funding modes used across DMR (individual investigators, groups, centers, instrumentation, and user facilities), and we will adjust the balance of support if necessary.*

*The COV notes "an often heard concern in the DMR science community" about the relative funding level of the programs within DMR. The COV finds that "there have been no major disproportionate shifts in funding between programs over the past seven years". We will continue to monitor the relative funding levels among programs very carefully and adjust budgetary allocations if necessary. We will continue to use Division Reserve funds to assist Program Directors to support young faculty members, members of under-represented groups, high-risk research, and other activities, as needed. The COV expressed concern that NSF data on proposal success rates in core programs are not easy to interpret. However the COV notes "it is obvious that average acceptance rates have drastically decreased during the past two years". We will pay close attention to these concerns, and will endeavor to provide more easily interpretable data for the next COV review.*

## **Response to specific additional issues raised in the program group reports**

### **a. Program Group for Condensed Matter Physics, Polymers, Materials Theory, Solid State Chemistry**

A.1.3 Are reviews consistent with priorities and criteria stated in the program's solicitations, announcements, and guidelines?

The COV response to this question is "NO", stating that the broader impact criterion is not consistently addressed or weighted by the reviewers.

A.2.4 Discuss any issues the COV has identified with respect to the implementation of NSF's merit review criteria.

The COV comments that "Reviewers do not seem to have a uniform or consistent understanding of the boundaries delimiting "broad impact".

**Response:** DMR staff members emphasize the importance and scope of Criterion II strongly when charging panels. We will continue to place strong emphasis on this in panel meetings and in presentations at professional society meetings, site visits, and other venues. We have posted an alert to the importance and interpretation of Criterion II on the DMR web page in the form of a Dear Colleague Letter. Attention to and

understanding of Criterion II on the part of reviewers improved steadily over the period addressed by the COV, and we expect this trend will continue provided we give it appropriate attention.

**b. Program Group for Ceramics, Metals, Electronic Materials**

A.3.3 Did the program make appropriate use of reviewers to reflect balance among characteristics such as geography, type of institution, and under-represented groups? The COV responded YES to this question but commented that “more reviewers from industry would be beneficial”. There is a similar comment under A.3.5.

**Response:** The fraction of industrial reviewers increased from approximately 5% to 10% from FY 2001 to FY 2003, as noted elsewhere in the COV report, despite the fact that the number of active industrial researchers in materials-related industries in the US fell significantly over the same period. DMR will continue to make every effort to involve reviewers from industry to an appropriate extent.

C.1 Please comment on any program areas in need of improvement or gaps (if any) within program areas.

The COV noted that “The introduction of undergraduate students to research and the impact that NSF is having through its programs in this area are not sufficiently publicized.” and urged that “Approaches should be explored to encourage more complete reporting from PIs to capture the level of participation and outcomes/impacts of these programs”.

**Response:** We agree that undergraduate participation in research is a significant strength of NSF programs and DMR programs in particular, and should be well publicized. We emphasize the importance and outcomes of such efforts in staff presentations across the nation. The recommended DMR format for research and education highlights or “nuggets” reported by grantees now explicitly includes a section on educational achievements and we will pay particular attention to opportunities for publicizing these achievements.

**c. Program Group for Centers, Facilities, Instrumentation, Special Programs**

A.1.6 Is the documentation for recommendations complete, and does the program officer provide sufficient information and justification for her/his recommendation?

The COV responded “YES” to this question but commented that “Decisions on borderline cases when funds are too limited to support all recommended proposals are difficult for a PI to understand. The decision-making process in this situation needs to be communicated carefully...so that the reasons for borderline rejections are understood by the PIs.”

**Response:** DMR staff will continue to pay very close attention to the need for clear communication of the rationale for funding decisions to PIs, especially in the case of ‘borderline’ declinations.

A.4.2 Are awards appropriate in size and duration for the scope of the project?

The COV responded “YES” to this question. However, they suggested that DMR explore the use of small seed grants for new PIs. The COV also commented that the

National Facilities Program should try to develop more uniform and quantitative metrics for use in reports to NSF.

**Response:** The use of seed funding for new PIs is explicitly encouraged and implemented in the MRSEC program and this practice will be continued. Elsewhere in DMR seed funding is employed through the use of Small Grants for Exploratory Research. DMR concurs with the recommendation for use of uniform metrics for the User Facilities and is currently working on an interagency basis with the President's Office of Science and Technology Policy to accomplish this goal.

A.4.12 Does the program portfolio have appropriate participation of underrepresented groups?

The COV response to the is question is "Not there yet, but making good progress".

**Response:** DMR will continue to make the strongest possible efforts in concert with other MPS Divisions to foster increased participation by members of underrepresented groups, and to build on 'best practices' and current success wherever possible. For example a second round of competition for PREM awards (Partnerships for Research and Education in Materials) is planned for FY 2006. These awards are made to minority institutions to enable them to develop strong working links with currently funded DMR groups and centers at research-intensive institutions.

B.4 Providing "an agile, innovative organization that fulfils its mission through leadership in state-of-the-art business practices".

Following a series of positive comments, the COV states that "There's an apparent discontinuity in further engaging high school students who respond positively to the (Center) outreach efforts. What is the NSF or DMR funding for high-school internships?"

**Response:** Although the comment and question appear unrelated to the section in which they appear, they are pertinent to the management of DMR-funded Centers. In general these Centers are encouraged and supported appropriately to provide research experiences for selected high school students when such programs are proposed and positively reviewed. This is not a programmatic requirement for every Center, nor should it be, but the mechanisms are in place, with DMR funding support as needed, to provide the requisite continuity.

## **Acknowledgement**

We are very grateful to the COV members and to the COV Chair, Horst Stormer, for their dedication and hard work, and for providing us with substantive and very useful analysis and recommendations. Their report will enable DMR to better serve the Nation's materials research and education community.

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Thomas A. Weber  
Director  
Division of Materials Research