

2008 Committee of Visitors Report for the Facilities
Programs of the Division of Ocean Sciences

RESPONSE

We thank the Committee of Visitors (COV) for recognizing and commenting on the performance of the experienced, dedicated and knowledgeable staff during a period of significant challenges. Your conclusion that the programs in the Integrative Programs Section are well managed and efficiently run is particularly heartening in light of those challenges. Soaring fuel and commodity costs have made it difficult to operate and maintain the academic research fleet vessels within the planned budgets. This has required continual review of the way we do business and has resulted in increased cooperation between the federal funding agencies and the operating institutions in terms of ship scheduling.

Findings and Recommendations

Maintaining and renewing the existing facilities. The COV recognized the importance of this component and found the proposals for acquisitions and upgrades are handled in a thorough and timely manner. They also noted NSF's use of technical expertise on UNOLS standing review committees, advisory groups and panels to help guide decisions. The COV specifically commended the IPS section for its handling of the deep-submergence upgrade and acquisition proposals and for utilizing advice from outside committees with scientific and engineering expertise. They stated some new technologies (gliders) are not sufficiently developed. The extent to which gliders will become major support facilities in the future will be dependent upon the degree they are included as essential tools in the science proposals. Numerous organizations are working with these new facilities and we expect to see continued development of glider technology and sensors in the future. This can occur through the standard science proposal process as well as specific efforts such as the accelerated program by the Office of Naval Research to transition gliders from research to operations.

Quality and vision of the staff. The Committee found the initiation of panel reviews for ship operations to be an important additional management tool in optimizing resources. In addition, they noted the value of using cooperative agreements, annual reports, group purchases and the MOSA for helping control costs. We agree with your assessment and have found these to be effective management tools.

Personnel/leadership transitions and maintenance of corporate knowledge. The COV commented on the skilled, dedicated and hard working IPS personnel who were able to keep the program running smoothly while also managing vacancies and transitions in several key positions. They noted the value and importance of maintaining detailed documentation in the e-jacket system to assist newly arriving personnel. We

believe we are now entering a period of more stabilized staffing levels which should be reflected in the knowledge levels of program officers on specific projects.

Corporate knowledge of IPS facilities staff. The COV acknowledged the very high standard of HOV safety maintained by certification under the Navy system and identified the shift to American Bureau of Shipping (ABS) certification for the new HOV as an area of concern. They noted the efforts of IPS in addressing this challenge and ensuring a safe and capable HOV will be available to the community in the future. **Action:** We will continue to work with WHOI, DESSC and the RHOV AOC on a smooth transition from Navy to ABS certification.

Proposal solicitation and review. The Committee was complimentary of NSF's handling of proposals and the use of outside panels, review committees and advisory groups to help guide decisions. The synchronization of cooperative agreement and grant periods was also noted as an important change to help facilitate comparisons between similar class ships and facilities. We agree the ability to compare costs across the fleet is valuable and will continue work to achieve this capability to the extent possible.

Funding balance between facilities and research. The challenge of achieving the optimum balance of funding levels between science and infrastructure was recognized by the COV. They commented that the coordination of science and facilities has been well carried out by NSF but needs to be maintained as a high priority. They also commented on the availability of UNOLS committees and other organizations to assist the IPS Program Officers in accomplishing this task. **Action:** We fully agree with the importance of achieving the right balance between science and infrastructure and will be using all the tools available to us at the IPS, OCE and GEO levels, including the efforts of Interagency Working Group on Facilities and the new Ocean Studies Board project looking at infrastructure issues.

Post-cruise assessments (PCA) and Communications. The COV stated PCAs are effective tools for use in monitoring the performance of ship operations however they noted the less than optimum submission rates from Captains, Chief Scientists and Marine Technicians. They stated the need to inform the community of the importance of the PCA and increase the compliance by PIs, Captains and Marine Technicians. **Action:** We will continue working with UNOLS to identify ways to improve the submission rate of PCAs and track actions taken in response to issues identified.

Instrumentation. The COV acknowledged NSF's leadership role in promoting standardization and uniformity of ship instrumentation. They identified the value of reaching a common level of instrumentation across a ship class in the fleet and commented on the active role taken by NSF in encouraging cooperative use of instrumentation between institutions. We thank the Committee for these positive comments.

NDSF recommendations. The COV recommends IPS consider the merits of applying the cooperative agreement approach to the 5-year NDSF proposal, similar to what was

done for the ship operations proposals. **Action:** We will consider and evaluate all available options for the next 5-year NDSF proposal review.

Response to Previous COV Report and Recommendations.

The COV supported and commented on the following recommendations made by the 2005 COV:

Considering Facilities Costs as Part of the Scientific Review process. The 2008 COV noted that NSF has addressed this issue and should continue to emphasize its importance to reviewers and panels. The Committee concurs with NSF that these questions should be debated by the community at large and that progress has been made on this issue. NSF considers this recommendation closed.

Maintaining an Open Process for Future Upgrades and Acquisitions. The 2008 COV stated they feel this recommendation has been well handled by NSF. NSF considers this recommendation closed but will continue applying these principles in the future.

Streamlining the Tracking of maintenance and upgrades of research vessels. The 2008 COV noted this has been well handled with completion of the new web-based electronic tracking system but still believes there is room for improvement. **Action:** NSF will remind IPS Program Officers to include documentation in e-jacket on the actions taken to address any identified problem areas and will keep this recommendation open.

Automating the Ship Scheduling Process. The 2008 COV stated the automated scheduling software is being tested in 2008. NSF will continue tracking the completion of this system and considers this recommendation closed.

Increasing Cost Effectiveness. The 2008 COV noted NSF is continuing to look for cost saving opportunities through bulk purchases. NSF considers this recommendation closed.

Balance of facilities vs. research. The 2008 COV found NSF is handling the balancing of these issues well. NSF considers this recommendation from the 2005 COV to be closed, but recognizes the continued importance of this topic as called out in the 2008 COV.

Inclusion of new facilities. The 2008 COV noted progress has been made in developing new platforms in the NDSF. NSF considers this recommendation closed.