



**National Science Foundation  
Advisory Committee for Business and Operations  
Executive Summary for Spring 2011 Meeting  
November 16-17, 2011**

This is the Executive Summary of the spring meeting of the Advisory Committee for Business and Operations held at the National Science Foundation on November 16-17, 2011.

**Finalized on: February 17, 2012**

Gloria Rogers, Dick Seligman  
Co-Chairs

**Committee members in attendance:**

James Barbret	Wayne State University
Jake Barkdoll	Consultant
Warren Buck	University of Washington, Bothell
Cecilia Conrad	CEOSE Liaison
Marti Dunne	New York University
Carson Eoyang	Naval Postgraduate School
Charlene Hayes	Johns Hopkins University
Greg Jackson	EDUCAUSE
Kathryn Newcomer	George Washington University
Gloria Rogers	ABET, Inc.
Katy Schmoll	University Corporation for Atmospheric Research
Dick Seligman	California Institute of Technology
Devon Streit	Department of Energy
E. Jennings Taylor	Faraday Technology
David Trinkle	UC Berkeley
Cynthia White	Belmont University

**Meeting commenced at 1:00 pm on November 16, 2011**

This report summarizes the discussions and recommendations of the NSF Business and Operations Advisory Committee (hereafter “the Committee”) that took place at the November 16 - 17, 2011 meeting. These items are reported in the order in which they appeared on the Committee’s agenda.

**Administration**

The November, 2012 meeting marked the completion of Gloria Rogers’ term as a member of the Advisory Committee, and, for the past year, as its Co-Chair. Her contributions to the Advisory Committee were recognized and acknowledged.

Beginning with the May 2012 meeting, Charlene Hayes, Vice President for Human Resources at the Johns Hopkins University, will assume the duties of Co-Chair.

## **Status of Prior Committee Recommendations**

Nine recommendations were made at the November 2010 Committee meeting. All have now been closed.

Eighteen recommendations were made at the May 2011 Committee meeting. Ten have been closed, seven are “In Progress,” and one is “Open.” Nearly all of the “In Progress” recommendations pertain to the Subcommittee on Information Technology (see discussion below on page 4). The recommendation concerning the development of a template for subcommittee reports is “Open,” and the recommendation concerning a review of the subcommittee structure and process, after this round of subcommittee work has been completed, will be undertaken following the May 2012 Committee meeting.

Detailed information on the recommendations and their status is contained in the charts that were included in the meeting book.

## **The NSF Strategic Plan for FY 2011 – 2016**

The major topic for this Committee meeting was a review of the NSF Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2011-2016 (hereafter referred to as “the Plan”). The primary focus of the review was on identifying best practices for implementation within BFA and OIRM.

An overview of the Plan was presented by Amy Northcutt and Marty Rubenstein. They expressed concerns with implementing the current strategic plan, given the difficulty to create and implement productive goals. They asked the Committee’s assistance on strategic planning processes: what actually worked, does it differ from organization to organization, what are unintended circumstances? How do you measure these goals and how do you engage the stakeholders?

A panel of discussants from the Committee followed. Panelists included Jake Barkdoll, Charlene Hayes, Kathy Newcomer, and Gloria Rogers.

- Mr. Barkdoll analyzed the current NSF Strategic Plan and noted 72 action items with various timeframes and natures (project versus process). He discussed a case study from a previous experience at the Food and Drug Administration.
- Ms. Hayes’ discussion focused on change management issues in the human resources organization (which she oversees) at Johns Hopkins University. This process involved creating a new strategic plan for the organization as well as associated action plans.
- Ms. Newcomer and Dr. Rogers raised several issues involved with building a performance-oriented organization based on their past and current experiences and expertise.

Following the panel discussion, Marty Rubenstein (Director, Office of Budget, Finance and Award Management “BFA”) and Amber Baum (BFA) made a presentation on a major component of the Plan, “Strategic Goal: Perform as a Model Organization.” Two goal owners within the Model Organization strategic goal, Claudia Postell (Director, Office of Diversity and

Inclusion) and Judy Sunley (Director, Division of Human Resource Management), discussed progress made on their goals as well as challenges they are facing at NSF.

A highly interactive discussion by the Committee followed. The result is a summary of recommendations by the Committee to Marty Rubenstein and Amy Northcutt concerning the Strategic Plan and ways in which the BFA and OIRM organizations can enhance their use and benefit from the strategic planning **process**.

Committee recommendations to enhance the usefulness of the NSF Strategic Plan:

**1. Actionable items:**

- a. Define process terms, -- develop common definitions for key terms such as “performance goal,” “strategic goal,” “target.”
- b. Prioritize performance goals/targets with timeframes --you can't do everything.
- c. Implement a “Leadership Communication Plan” --so that top leadership can demonstrate interest and commitment to the strategic planning **process** as a priority on an ongoing basis, i.e., keep leaders engaged.
- d. Engage more program staff and leadership throughout the Foundation in the design of the process, not just as an “afterthought;”--identify champions for each performance goal/target.
- e. Engage stakeholders in a broader communication and engagement strategy. There may be different stakeholders for each goal (those who have a vested interest in how well you perform).
- f. Develop an overall communication plan that is meaningful and accessible--all should at least be aware.
- g. Celebrate both success and improvement that demonstrate progress towards goal achievement.
- h. Frame performance goals in terms of outcomes instead of processes.
- i. Develop a strategic view about how evaluation is framed across the agency (starting from the Director level).
- j. Ensure the integration of the strategic plan into other planning activities such as budgeting, facility planning, performance reviews, etc.
- k. Evaluate for redundancy in the data collection process.

## 2. Overarching principles:

- a. The Strategic Plan should be a high level and “living” document.
- b. Start with issues that are the most meaningful to the organization.
- c. The Strategic Plan should not impede **strategic thinking**.
- d. Recognize the importance of valid, meaningful and limited data collection process.
- e. Caution that what and how you choose to measure may have unintended consequences.
- f. If you don't know what you are going to do with data to be collected, or if it is highly unlikely that the data will influence decision-making, don't collect it.
- g. Commit to defining “meaningful” measures.
- h. Don't promise too much.
- i. A Strategic Plan written for an external audience may diverge from the organization’s planning needs--may need both internal and external planning, goals, and measurement.
- j. As part of the strategic planning process, some data collected may be more useful for internal purposes than for sharing externally.
- k. Do not become a “slave” to the Plan; don’t hesitate to shift course when new information becomes available.

## 3. Other

- a. Systematically solicit feedback from the Advisory Committee.

### **Status of Business and Operations Subcommittees**

- **Information Technology.** Because of the departure of NSF’s Chief Information Officer, OIRM is assessing the proper time for convening the subcommittee.
- **Recompetition.** Mark Coles reported on the progress of the Recompetition Subcommittee. The Subcommittee met earlier this month and expects to have a draft report completed by December 31, 2011. The draft will be submitted to the Advisory Committee for review and comments. The final report will be delivered to the Advisory Committee by March 31, 2012.

Discussion of the report and its acceptance will be on the agenda for the May 2012 meeting of the Advisory Committee.

- **Business Systems Review (BSR).** Mark Coles also reported that the BSR subcommittee has been formed and expects to begin its work after the Thanksgiving Holiday. The final report to the Advisory Committee is planned for the May 2012 meeting.
- **Subcommittees Update.** Charisse Carney-Nunes updated the Committee on future plans relating to Subcommittees. Last year's recommendation to use more subcommittees has already been implemented. By the next meeting, the Committee would like to have drafted a template for subcommittee reports. The Committee will also share agreed-upon practices in key areas such as membership, parent Committee treatment of subcommittee reports, and communications between the subcommittee, the parent Committee and NSF. It was suggested that draft subcommittee reports go to the entire committee and not just the committee chairs.

### **Merit Review Working Group**

- Steve Meacham, Office of Integrative Activities, and co-chair of the Merit Review Working Group (MRWG), provided a status update on the activities of the Group. Jake Barkdoll participated in the discussion as a liaison from B&O to the Advisory Committee for the Merit Review Working Group.
- Dr. Suresh, NSF Director, has noted the build-up of pressures on the merit review process since arrival his at NSF. With those pressures, he saw opportunities including:
  - the rapid evolution of digital technologies over the last few years;
  - learning from the practices of other funding agencies, both in the U.S. and across other parts of the world; and
  - thinking boldly about possible means of enhancing the process.
- The MRWG is looking at a number of merit review process priorities including decreasing the work burden on program officers and reviewers, stimulating the funding of high-risk, game-changing science among others. The group has been charged to develop a program of pilot activities and a framework for their evaluation.
- Dr. Meacham emphasized that the focus of the MRWG is on the Merit Review **Process**, not on the Merit Review **Criteria**, on which the NSB is focusing.
- Dr. Meacham detailed a number of important trends in proposal submission to NSF, many of which concerned increasing numbers of proposals to NSF.
- The MRWG is looking at ways in which technology can help, and considering more widespread use of tools such as wikis and virtual panels. So far, experiments that have been done with virtual panels have proven more successful than expected. However, the primary drawback of technological solutions is that there tends to be an increased burden on NSF (particularly in the Agency Operations and Award Management (AO&AM) accounts).

Detailed notes capturing the Committee's response to the presentation were mailed to Dr. Meacham after the meeting. There was limited time for a full discussion with the Committee and it was suggested that the topic remain on the Committee's agenda for the Spring 2012 meeting.

### **BFA (Office of Budget, Finance and Award Management) Overview**

Marty Rubenstein, Director of BFA and Chief Financial Officer, presented information on activities pertinent to BFA.

- Office of Management and Budget released [four memos](#) impacting NSF:
  - [OMB M-11-32 Accelerating Payments to Small Businesses for Goods and Services](#)
  - [OMB M-11-34 Accelerating Spending of Remaining Funds from ARRA for Discretionary Grant Programs](#)
  - [OMB M-11-35 Eliminating Excess Conference Spending and Promoting Efficiency in Government](#)
  - [OMB M-12-01 Creation of the Council on Financial Assistance Reform \(COFAR\)](#)
- President Obama signed Executive Order 13589- Promoting Efficient Spending, which also impacts NSF in areas such as travel, information technology devices and printing.
- Other updates included: the status of the financial statement audit; FY 2012 & 2013 budgets; grant-by-grant financial tracking; and iTRAK (NSF's new core financial system).

### **OIRM (Office of Information and Resource Management) Overview**

Amy Northcutt, Acting Director of OIRM, presented information on activities in OIRM:

- Overall goal of OIRM is to maximize return on investment
  - Emphasize employee engagement- gets to productivity and employee satisfaction
  - Strengthen contract oversight
  - Examine NSF and OIRM processes to gain efficiencies
    - Currently looking at mobile devices, standardizing computing environment and light refreshments for overnight guests.

### **Acting and Interim Officials at NSF**

The committee continued its discussion, begun several meetings ago, on the extent to which senior positions at NSF are held by individuals with "interim" or "acting" appointments. The following motion was passed unanimously:

*The Advisory Committee reiterates its interest in the status of filling positions throughout NSF that are currently occupied by individuals in an "acting" or "interim" capacity. Specifically, the Advisory Committee requests a presentation at our next meeting that identifies the number of current*

*positions held by individuals with an “acting” or “interim” title, the length of time in that status, and the distribution of these positions across NSF. In addition, the Advisory Committee would like to hear observations by NSF staff regarding root causes, hiring challenges specific to NSF, and impacts on NSF, if any.*

### Closing Thoughts

The Committee is very pleased with the meeting format these last few meetings. At this meeting in particular, members of the Advisory Committee were actively interacting with NSF staff. A panel of Committee members was formed well in advance of the meeting to address an issue of importance and interest to both BFA and OIRM – the Strategic Plan. The panel’s discussion of this topic led to a highly engaged and interactive consideration of the Plan and ways in which it could be made more useful for BFA and OIRM. All of this demonstrated the value of having the BFA and OIRM leadership play a very active role in identifying topics for which Committee advice was desired and would be welcome.