Potential Barriers to Leveling Award Workload – "Myths & Facts"

Background/Purpose: In FY 2012, BFA convened an Award Workload Workgroup with representation from each of the Directorates and all levels of staff to address the perennial issue of award workload being compressed into the last quarter of the fiscal year. As a compendium to compilation of the suggestions for improvements to the NSF-wide calendar, improvements in operating procedures and IT enhancements, this document is intended to dispel some of the "myths and facts" surrounding the potential barriers to leveling out award workload.

Myths & Facts	Myth or Fact?	Explanation	Source
Budget-related Concerns			
Funds are available for obligation on a first come/first served basis when operating under a Continuing Resolution (CR)	Fact	Under a CR NSF is not allowed to **obligate** more than the CR authority provides. Although organizational operating funds are allocated at 80-90% of the prior year amount, as little as 1% of the prior year amount may be available for obligation under a CR. Since most offices commit funds rather than obligate them, committing awards and requisitions do not directly conflict with the CR authority. That said, it is possible that one organization may use more resources than another, which may lead to contention of CR-limited funds. AOAM and R&RA are the two most widely shared resources, and therefore the most constrained under a short CR, which is why the CFO requests that all offices restrain spending under a CR.	BFA/BD
No awards can be made under new programs while operating under a CR	Fact	A CR limits the purposes for which funds may be obligated by making amounts available subject to the same terms and conditions specified in the enacted appropriations acts from the prior fiscal year. The CR may also establish additional terms and conditions. Normally, you are not permitted to start new projects or activities. The definition of a new program is defined in NSF's request to Congress. For programs it is best to check with your Budget Program Analysis Branch (PAB) Analysts for clarification on what is defined as new or ongoing.	BFA/BD
Proposals cannot be recommended until budget is known	Myth	Consistent with the comments above about making awards during a CR, proposals can be recommended before the final budget is known. However, it may be prudent to recommend proposals at a rate that is commensurate with the rate for prior year recommendations. With the uncertainty in the federal budget, fully funding a particular solicitation or expanding initiatives may have to wait until the Current Plan amounts are approved and allocated to each organization. Although there may be a number of other coinciding issues that complicate the processing of proposals, priorities can be established to determine what proposals will be recommended first. The real issue seems to stem from funds not be distributed by the Directorate and/or Division Front Offices to the program level. Communicating a budget floor for the programs could be helpful in setting funding priorities so that some decisions can be made earlier (also see comments below under dwell time targets).	BFA/BD and Program Offices
Operating under a CR, you cannot make your "Time to Decision" (6-month dwell time) GPRA target of 70% of award decisions	Myth	NSF has met its "Time to Decision" (6-month dwell time) performance target of 70% of proposals received every year since 2002, with the exception of 2009 (due to ARRA). NSF continues to reach this goal even though CRs have impacted each fiscal year for varying lengths of time. The GPRA goal addresses all full proposals, so declines and small awards (e.g., workshop proposals) all count toward reaching the 70% performance target. Although many program directors will state that it is	BFA/BD

		impossible for them to meet the GPRA goal because they do not have enough information about their budgets, the fact is that almost no NSF programs have funding rates above 40% and most are considerably below that level. If program directors, for decisions made during a given fiscal year, were to process declinations for the "bottom 60%" of their proposals and recommend 10% of their proposals for award within six months (or 182 days to be exact), then the GPRA goal is met for the year. Proposals must be DD concurred (for decline or award) to be considered complete for dwell time purposes.	
Procedures & Process-related Concerns			
Actions cannot be "undone" once sent to DGA (after DD concur before award)	Myth	Any action can be undone once sent to DGA; however, the timing of such a request affects the remedies available. Of course, the preference is to catch issues before DGA makes the award. For example, if a Principal Investigator (PI) has indicated that he/she may be relocating to another institution, it is much easier to accomplish a pre-award transfer in the system. Once the award has been issued, any transfer request would have to be initiated by the awardee through FastLane. The program office simply needs to contact DGA and request that any pending award action be cancelled. Then program staff can email DFM to get the funds decommited. If intent is to simply fix something in the proposal record (not funding related), then decommitment may not be necessary.	DGA and DFM
Do not send anything to DGA in October	Myth - except for incoming interagency agreements	DGA encourages submission of actions in October, and some program offices routinely recommend proposals from their summer panels in October. This gives DGA a chance to get ahead on processing in the first quarter when there is less pressure from large volumes of actions. The only exception is incoming Interagency Agreements (IAAs). NSF discourages processing incoming IAA's until the NSF Cost Recovery Rate is set for the current fiscal year, which is usually done in late October or early November. Although NSF can accept an IAA using the prior fiscal year's rate, the agreement must be modified if the rate changes for the new fiscal year. As noted above, even under a CR, Program Offices can commit/DD-concur on proposals for award beginning October 1st. Operating plans are typically allocated up to 90% of their budget, although certain programs (e.g., MRI) can be restricted to committing less than 90% while others can commit more (e.g., Polar Programs, which have no year funds).	BFA/DGA
Lack of pressure to spend from DD's until late in fiscal year due to timing of the Critical Dates Bulletin	Part Myth & Part Fact	Some Directorates issue internal spend out deadlines shortly after release of the annual Critical Dates Bulletin that outlines internal spending deadlines for fiscal year closeout, which would be a best practice. Monthly reminders are then issued by BFA through the Weekly Wire as a reminder of upcoming critical dates for each month through September. Because the Critical Dates Bulletin is typically issued after the start of the third quarter, it could be assumed that is when the pressure to spend begins. Although issuing the Critical Dates Bulletin earlier in the fiscal year could call attention to spend out earlier, the deadline dates are still focused on year end activities. Program Offices should be planning ahead for spending targets throughout the fiscal year rather than just at closeout.	Program Offices and BFA/DGA
Paneled proposals must be awarded in same fiscal year	Myth	For programs that receive recurring budget allocations in successive fiscal years, proposals received within a given fiscal year can routinely be awarded in the next fiscal year using the current funds. These dates will drive when a panel could be hosted. Situations where this cannot be done or	Program Offices and BFA/DGA

		cannot easily be done should be rare – e.g., when NSF has created a funding opportunity of finite duration and no directorate, office or program has committed to making funds available for such proposals beyond the last year of that opportunity, and if Congress specifically appropriates funds for a designated program. In this situation, the funds must be obligated within their period of availability and arrangements to carry forward multi-year funds that are designated for a specific program may be possible.	
Co-funding issues in eJacket can hold up whole process	Fact, but could be a Myth	While it is true that all organizations contributing funds must electronically sign the eJacket before the proposal can be sent to DGA, no one person should hold up a proposal. The required signatures from both the managing and co-funding organizations are the Program Officer, Financial Reviewer, and Division Director. These roles can be performed by multiple individuals within a division. It is within program's power to turn this into a myth by ensuring sufficient delegated signing authority coverage and consistent processing procedures across divisions/directorates.	OIRM/DIS
Resource Issues			
Limited funding for eJacket updates	Fact	eJacket funding comes out of a bucket of money called "Legacy Mission Applications". This funding is shared with all mission applications except FAS and Research.gov. Last year, after infrastructure and mandatory changes were budgeted, very little was left over to improve the customer experience outside of improved reliability and performance related to infrastructure upgrades. In FY12, the majority of mission application changes not infrastructure-related were to support iTRAK (Service Enablement), to change from grant pooling to grant-by-grant (Award Cash Management Service), and to implement Policy-related changes (Project Outcome Report Enforcement). With the exception of the improved Budget and Co-Funding modules released in October of 2011, no application improvements have been made outside of defect fixes. The Capital Planning and Investment Control (CPIC) process, as mandated by the Clinger-Cohen Act, requires agencies to use a disciplined process to acquire, use, maintain and dispose of information technology (IT). CPIC is chaired by the Chief Information Officer (CIO) and meets monthly. Members of the NSF CPIC include the Deputy AD's. CPIC determines and prioritizes IT investments. Program Offices should support the Business Applications by advocating for a separate funding line for eJacket. Program should also work with the CIO and CPIC to prioritize funding for eJacket enhancements as ranked by the Business Applications Requirements Review Board, including **support for modernizing the award system** to integrate seamless processing tools and end-to-end award management in eJacket.	OIRM/DIS
Lack of space on-site for panels	Fact	This is a significant issue during high panel season and for very large panels. While significantly dependent upon the time of year, NSF does have less available space during the height of panel season – October, November, and February through May Leveling workload may assist with addressing this issue by spreading panels throughout the year.	OIRM/DAS