



Testimony of

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on

Is NSF Properly Managing Its Rotating Staff?

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Madam Chairwoman, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss rotator programs, particularly Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) assignments, at the National Science Foundation.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) supports fundamental research at the frontiers of knowledge across all fields of science and engineering. NSF serves the national interest as stated by NSF's mission to promote the progress of science; to advance the national health, prosperity and welfare; to secure the national defense; and for other purposes; and we do so through our investment in a portfolio of more than 42,000 active awards. Through the merit review of over 50,000 proposals each year, NSF seeks to create and exploit new concepts in science and engineering and provide global leadership in research and education. This requires NSF to create an ever-changing vision for the future directions of science, engineering, and education and provide the resources to make vision into reality. The vision and skills needed to carry out the agency's work are constantly changing, and the challenge for NSF is to blend constant change with continuity in our approach to managing agency processes and interacting with stakeholders.

NSF provides the opportunity for scientists, engineers, and educators to join the Foundation as temporary program directors, advisors, and leaders. These "rotators" provide input during the merit review process of proposals; help influence new directions in the fields of science, engineering, and education; support cutting-edge interdisciplinary research; and participate in the oversight of major research facilities. Rotators bring fresh perspectives from across the country and across the fields of science and engineering. Because NSF supports fundamental research at the frontiers of science, NSF relies on the synergy of federal employees and rotators for a constant infusion of

new knowledge into the broad understanding of science, and a structure of systematic and rigorous merit review.

A mix of federal employees and rotators, some of whom are IPAs, is essential to NSF. Experienced federal employees complement the immediacy of the rotators' scientific perspectives with their knowledge of long-term trends and provide consistent management and oversight of the Foundation's processes. They are the historical memory of the agency, and the repository of effective business practices.

Rotators can come to NSF under multiple mechanisms. The largest numbers come on Intergovernmental Personnel Act assignments, or IPAs. NSF facilitates IPA assignments through grants to their institution as a reimbursement for salary and benefits. NSF requests that institutions share at least 15 percent of salary and benefit costs for incoming IPA assignments, recognizing that the IPAs home institution benefits from the experience and expertise the IPA gains at NSF. Actual cost sharing depends on a variety of circumstances at the home institution, including the range of the IPA's contributions and functions. Most IPAs choose to continue their research and student advising, often on their own time, working evenings and weekends to meet the needs of students and research collaborators.

The scientific community sees serving as a rotator at NSF as a public service. Rotators are held accountable for many activities, including pre-award and post-award merit review and oversight responsibilities. The opportunity to serve, while expanding the rotator's scientific perspectives, can come with significant financial cost, disruption of the rotator's personal life, and loss of continuity with the home institution. Therefore it is important that NSF hold accountable those in IPA assignments, but also to avoid negative impacts on the faculty member who chooses to engage in public service.

While rotators perform their responsibilities at NSF, they are not allowed to handle any NSF matters related to their home institution, and are subject to NSF's conflicts of interest, performance, training, and conduct policies. All rotators, whether federal employees or IPAs, are subject to criminal conflict of interest statutes (statutes) as well as the Government-wide Standards of Ethical Conduct of Employees of the Executive Branch (regulations) which prohibit them from participating in NSF proposals and awards affecting themselves and their home institutions. To bolster awareness of and compliance with these statutes and regulations, IPAs, like their federal colleagues, including other rotators, file financial disclosure reports and are subject to mandatory conflict of interest training. IPAs, like federal employees who make award recommendations, must file financial disclosure reports. Failure to file may result in disciplinary action (those required to file public reports are subject to statutory fines for failure to do so). Conflicts checks are part of the ethics program to avoid situations wherein rotators make decisions about their own research awards or those of their home institution. NSF ethics officials counsel rotators and permanent employees to avoid even the appearance of conflicts, and recusal from matters is a common mechanism to prevent even an appearance of impropriety.

NSF leaders have benefited from Office of Inspector General (OIG) reports on opportunities for improvements to the NSF IPA program. For example, a March 2010 OIG report criticized NSF for not including IPAs in the agency's formal performance management system, even though IPAs function in the same capacity as Federal employees. NSF responded by taking action to incorporate all IPAs, including those operating at and below the executive level, into the agency's formal performance management system, and the OIG recommendation was satisfied the very next year. The change ensures that IPAs are held accountable to the agency and to taxpayers.

Likewise, IPAs receive training in conflicts of interest, merit review, management, award oversight, and other responsibilities that they may undertake at NSF. Additionally, our Office of Inspector General was helpful in pointing out the need to standardize and systematize the training and mentoring programs for all NSF staff, including IPAs.

This systematic approach to accountability is also manifest in NSF's Independent Research and Development (IRD) program, which permits and supports individuals, including rotators, to maintain involvement with their professional research during their NSF service. All participants in the IR/D program must have their IR/D plans approved in advance (typically annually) by their NSF supervisor and NSF human resources and legal staffs. In response to a September 2010 OIG Management Implications Report that identified internal control issues with the program, NSF formed a task group to formulate program changes. In March 2012, OIG auditors reviewed the task group's recommendations and suggested additional internal controls. NSF agreed with the OIG and put these controls into place.

Madam Chairwoman and Mr. Chairman, bringing scientists, engineers, and educators from the community to join with NSF's permanent staff contributes to NSF's mission of advancing the progress of science and its strategic goals of transforming the scientific frontier and addressing national needs. Effectively used, such talent can challenge preconceived ideas about the importance of specific areas of science and help NSF cross the boundaries of disciplines. The rotator programs at NSF, including IPA assignments, are essential elements in achieving of NSF's mission. With the support of the Inspector General and Congress, the Foundation will continue to enhance these programs to best serve science and technology in the national interest.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I would be pleased to answer your questions.