# Notes from Research Administrators – Post Award Meeting, MaRCH 6, 2013

## Introduction

Welcome to the RAP meeting! Cindy Sagers is a professor in Biological Sciences and is serving as the Interim Association Vice Provost for Research and Economic Development. Dr. Sagers studies genetically modified food and how growing these crops affects native species. She is just back from a two-year term at the NSF and we are very glad she is willing to share her experiences with us.

## Topic

Program Officers are People II: Cindy Sagers was a Program Officer at the National Science Foundation from 2010-2012. There she learned the ins and outs of federal bureaucracy, the importance of coincidence, and when a phone call out-trumps an e-mail.

Presenters:

* Dr. Cynthia Sagers, Interim Association Vice Provost for Research and Economic Development

## Presentation Notes

Nearly half of the people are from the research community; 40% of the program officers at NSF are “rotaters”. This brings fresh ideas and people into NSF but it does mean that a PI will work with several program officers over the life of the grant. Campus currently has three professors serving as program officers.

Dr. Sagers worked in the Office of International Science (OISE) and Engineering and the Directorate for Biological Sciences (BIO). While in BIO, 7 out of 100 proposals were funded on the panel Dr. Sagers sat on last year but because of the large number of proposals to be reviewed, each of the proposals were reviewed for approximately six minutes. A panel has approximately 20 members. Each proposal is represented and discussed by two to three panelists and up to 6 other outside reviewers, then the full panel rates each proposal based on that six minutes.

#### Q&A

Question: What criteria are used to fund the proposals?

Answer: The National Science Board requires that the NSF reviews the proposals based on two criteria: Intellectual Merit and Broader Impact. Intellectual Merit includes six points and is evaluated by scientists based on the project is a good idea, is it a doable idea, and can the team put together do it. Broader Impacts really are what is the reach of the work, the reach of the new invention, the reach of the new project, the reach of the new idea. What are the practical applications of the work? How many students are you training? Are you bringing up the next generation of scientists with you? Is there outreach to the community? Broader impact is the informal science education that can go on from the project. There may be additional criteria within the solicitation – the instruction manual for how to apply for the grant.

Dr. Sagers is willing to come to departments to discuss review criteria with faculty.

#### Q&A

Question: Could you go into some detail about how the solicitation requirements figure in, such as the font size? PIs often claim that these details don’t matter, that the technical is the important.

Answer: Almost every rule is because someone has broken it. (Sometimes you also just have a picky program officer.) Some of it is nitpicky, but some of is to create a smoother job for the review panel. Bottom line is you want to be fully compliant with the solicitation. You may not have your proposal thrown out because of the details, but you can be.

The funding for NSF has been flat but the pool of proposals is increasing. There is an increasing proposal pressure on the different agencies.

#### Q&A

Question: How did you end up at NSF?

Answer: I asked. While visiting the Smithsonian, I was invited to a POETS session in the spider room and started a conversation with a program officer I recognized. Several years later, I was in a lull in graduate students and was in a good time in my research to see the world differently and learn a new skill so I contacted the program officer to find out how I could apply. Dr. Rankin wants and encourages staff to do a stint at NSF, NIH and other agencies.

Question: When proposals are going into NSF, is there anyone who reviews them before the review panel? Is there a gatekeeper?

Answer: There are two communities in NSF that handle proposals. Before the proposals are debated by the program officers, the proposals are vetted by compliance staff.

Question: Is Fastlane going to continue or will the NSF switch to another portal?

Answer: Reports are now being shifted to Research.gov; until Grants.gov is as good as Fastlane, Fastlane or another portal will be used by the NSF.

Question: When does a phone call out-trump an e-mail?

Answer: There is something about the sociology and psychology of an e-mail; sometimes if there is a misunderstanding it is best to iron things out in a phone call. If you are having difficulty understanding something in a solicitation or how a grant is run, it is perfectly okay to call. Don’t hesitate to communicate with the program officer.

Question: Is there a review staff on campus?

Answer: Yes, RSSP tries to review the proposals although we do not look at the technical, just the guidelines. There is also Hanover Grants, given enough time. Hanover will look over the content with a subject matter expert and will give feedback on that and how to address the solicitation. The drawback is at least 2-3 weeks for a review. Because there is a queue, larger grants may get priority over single researchers, but if there is room, smaller grants can be fit in. Also, if a PI has had a proposal rejected, it could be reviewed by Hanover when there is a break in the queue.

Question: What is the impact of the sequestration?

Answer: Aside from sequestration, Continuing Resolution is going into March – this is when Congress can’t decide on a budget. While on Continuing Resolution, an agency can only spend 80% of what they were budgeted last year. The issue of sequestration is a very his period and the policies RSSP is aware of have been posted on the VPRED website.

Question: What about grants that have already been funded?

Answer: That depends on the agency. With the NSF, the new awards will be reduced in order to continue funding the commitments already made. For other agencies, COGRE is suggesting that if a PI can encumber cash if they are in the position to do so. If the PI is going to spend the money anyway, encumber the funds. Note that these need to be appropriate expenditures for the project. Also note that when a cost center is set up, the money is not real until it has been spent in BASIS and passed along to the agency.

## Upcoming Topics

Next month: Becky Shoemaker will be discussing summer salaries.