

NSF's Asynchronous Panels (Pilot)

CISE: Slides from Erwin Gianchandani

PHY: from slides shown Apr 4, 2013:

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CISE sought and received approval for a Pilot program using “Asynchronous” panels for proposal Merit Review

PHY subsequently received OD approval to run under this same Pilot Program

Asynchronous pilot overview

- Sought to explore the use of secure online message boards, open to reviewers over a specified period of time, for discussion of a set of proposals
- Mimicking an approach commonly used by the CS community for conferences
- “Asynchronous” discussion followed by a one-day panel meeting
- Pilot goals:
 - *increase the number of individuals who agree to serve*
 - *decrease the amount of unnecessary time spent in panels*
 - *reduce travel costs*

PHY's Goal:

To enable an extended period of discussion among Panelists

Implementation details (CISE):

- Used NSF's external Sharepoint website
- Prepared written guidance for panelists ahead of time
- Enabled asynchronous but “non-real-time” discussion:
 - A panelist submits a comment
 - The cognizant program officer reviews and (if appropriate) releases the comment
 - Other (non-conflicted) panelists read the released comment
- Panelists not compensated for asynchronous discussion component

MPS/PHY:

- Originally asked to use the Interactive Panel System (IPS)
- We were approved to use a dedicated, monitored, password-protected External Sharepoint website for the asynchronous parts of the panel process.

Summary of panels CISE:

- A total of 9 asynchronous panels were held in April-May, 2013
 - Generally small panels with 8-15 proposals and 5-7 panelists; each followed by a 1-day **virtual** panel
 - One panel was considerably larger (25 proposals and 12 panelists); this was followed by a 2-day **face-to-face** panel
- Panelists submitted their reviews in the IPS prior to accessing the discussion board
 - Most discussion boards had on the order of 15-25 comments

Summary of panels MPS/PHY:

A total of 3 asynchronous panels were held in January and February, 2013:

Particle Astrophysics (PA)

Asynchronous for 8 days before a **face-to-face** 3-day panel at NSF in January 2013

64 proposals, 15 panelists

Two for Plasma Physics

15 and 20 proposals; 8 panelists

Each lasted for about a week before a final **virtual** (teleconference) panel in February, 2013

High-level “takeaways” CISE:

- The smaller the panel, the easier it seemed for panelists to engage in discussion
- Important to emphasize the board was not for copying & pasting reviews
- Good mechanism for triage
- Seeding of comments and reminders by PDs had positive impact
- Sharepoint site was not configured in a way ideal for asynchronous discussion
- Moderation by PDs created additional work

MPS/PHY PD's Assessment:

- As a mechanism for increasing the discussion and collecting information before the face-to-face, the process worked exactly as we needed it to!
- The Sharepoint approval process was simple and effective
- Setting up the Sharepoint site with the correct COIs was very time consuming (for the IT folks), but it worked
- Any changes to the Sharepoint setup, whether to add proposals, change access when a conflict was revealed, etc. seemed to take an inordinate amount of time, and with a one week (Plasma) panel, time was of the essence.
- For PA, we were able to efficiently and thoroughly review all of the proposals in less than 3 full days.
- For Plasma, the two Asynchronous Virtual Panels ended successfully, with all the work being finished at the end of the final teleconference.

Selected comments from April CISE panelists:

- “The experience was positive and the outcome was fine.”
- “Great experience overall, although certainly a time-consuming endeavor!”
- “It seemed to work fine. Having two monitors set up on my desk was really important.”
- “The discussion board has [a] ... clunky and confusing user interface.”
- “The user interface is clunky and hard to use.”

For PHY/PA, we used the virtual panel survey, but the questions were not well matched to our panel. However, their comments were very useful in assessing the asynchronous process.

- Many panelists really liked the FastLane Interactive Panel system and expressed the wish that the Sharepoint process could/should have been done entirely through the single much more intuitive FastLane system.
- For PA, they would have preferred to have had earlier access to the Sharepoint site (compressed timescale)
- For the PA panel, the overall response to the asynchronous process was positive

Key results and paths forward

- Asynchronous pilot *did* help
 - Enabled panelists “to get to the point much faster”
- User interface could be improved
 - Other products within the CS community?
 - Comment field in IPS?
 - Integration between IPS and Sharepoint?
- Digesting the data
- Retained language in FY 14 Core solicitation to allow for continuing the pilot
- We were informed that modifications to the Interactive Panelist System might be forthcoming in April-May time frame
- Neither CISE nor MPS has plans to use the asynchronous panel until the IT component has been improved; however, we are very willing to try again in the future if the implementation in IPS happens