CHAPTER III:
NSF PROPOSAL PROCESSING AND REVIEW

Proposals received by the NSF Proposal Processing Unit are assigned to the appropriate NSF program for acknowledgement and, if they meet NSF requirements, for review. All proposals are carefully reviewed by a scientist, engineer, or educator serving as an NSF Program Officer, and usually by three to ten other persons outside NSF who are experts in the particular fields represented by the proposal. Proposers are invited to suggest names of persons they believe are especially well qualified to review the proposal and/or persons they would prefer not review the proposal. These suggestions may serve as one source in the reviewer selection process at the Program Officer's discretion. Program Officers may obtain comments from assembled review panels or from site visits before recommending final action on proposals. Senior NSF staff further review recommendations for awards.

A. REVIEW CRITERIA

The National Science Board approved revised criteria for evaluating proposals at its meeting on March 28, 1997 (NSB 97-72). The criteria are designed to be useful and relevant across NSF's many different programs, however, NSF will employ special criteria as required to highlight the specific objectives of certain programs and activities.

On September 20, 1999, the NSF Director issued Important Notice 125, *Merit Review Criteria*. This Important Notice reminds proposers of the importance of ensuring that, in addition to the criterion relating to intellectual merit, the criterion relating to broader impacts is considered and addressed in the preparation and review of proposals submitted to NSF. The Important Notice also indicates NSF's intent to continue to strengthen its internal processes to ensure that both criteria are appropriately addressed when making funding decisions.

The merit review criteria are listed below. Following each criterion are considerations that the reviewer may employ in the evaluation. These considerations are suggestions and not all will apply to any given proposal. While reviewers are expected to address **both** merit review criteria, each reviewer will be asked to address only those considerations that are relevant to the proposal and for which he/she is qualified to make judgments.

What is the intellectual merit of the proposed activity?

How important is the proposed activity to advancing knowledge and understanding within its own field or across different fields? How well qualified is the proposer (individual or team) to conduct the project? (If appropriate, the reviewer will comment on the quality of prior work.) To what extent does the proposed activity suggest and explore creative and original concepts? How well conceived and organized is the proposed activity? Is there sufficient access to resources?

What are the broader impacts of the proposed activity?

How well does the activity advance discovery and understanding while promoting teaching, training, and learning? How well does the proposed activity broaden the participation of underrepresented groups (e.g., gender, ethnicity, disability, geographic, etc.)? To what extent will it enhance the infrastructure for research and education, such as facilities, instrumentation, networks, and partnerships? Will the results be disseminated broadly to enhance scientific and technological understanding? What may be the benefits of the proposed activity to society?

PIs should address the following elements in their proposal to provide reviewers with the information necessary to respond fully to the above-described NSF merit review criteria. NSF staff will give these elements careful consideration in making funding decisions.

Integration of Research and Education

One of the principal strategies in support of NSF's goals is to foster integration of research and education through the programs, projects and activities it supports at academic and research institutions. These institutions provide abundant opportunities where individuals may concurrently assume responsibilities as researchers, educators, and students, and where all can engage in joint efforts that infuse education with the excitement of discovery and enrich research through the diversity of learning perspectives.

Integrating Diversity into NSF Programs, Projects, and Activities

Broadening opportunities and enabling the participation of all citizens — women and men, underrepresented minorities, and persons with disabilities — are essential to the health and vitality of science and engineering. NSF is committed to this principle of diversity and deems it central to the programs, projects, and activities it considers and supports.

B. ADMINISTRATIVE CORRECTIONS TO FASTLANE PROPOSALS

NSF recognizes that minor, non-content-related errors may occur in proposal development and that these errors may not be discovered until after the proposal submission to NSF. To enable organizations to correct such errors, FastLane provides a 60-minute "grace period," that begins immediately following proposal submission. This grace period does not extend the proposal deadline (e.g., if a proposal deadline is 5:00 p.m. proposer's local time, the proposal must be submitted by 5:00 p.m., and administrative corrections are allowed until 6:00 p.m., proposer's local time). During this grace period, authorized sponsored project office personnel are authorized to make administrative corrections to Cover Sheet and Budget data. These corrections do not include changes to identified PIs, co-PIs, or other senior project personnel. Access to the Administrative Corrections utility is via the Organizational Management module on the FastLane website at https://www.fastlane.nsf.gov through use of the "Submit Proposals to NSF" function.

C. REVISIONS TO PROPOSALS MADE DURING THE REVIEW PROCESS

In the event of a significant development (e.g., research findings, changed circumstances, unavailability of PI or other key personnel, etc.) that might materially affect the outcome of the review of a pending proposal, the proposer must contact the Program Officer to whom the proposal is assigned to discuss the issue. Submitting additional information must not be used as a means of circumventing page limitations or stated deadlines.

Before recommending whether or not NSF should support a particular project, the NSF Program Officer may, subject to certain constraints outlined below, engage in discussions with the proposing PIs.

Negotiating budgets generally involves discussing a lower or higher amount of total support for the proposed project. The NSF Program Officer may suggest reducing or eliminating costs for specific budget items that are clearly unnecessary or unreasonable for the activities to be undertaken, especially when the review process supports such changes; however, this would generally not include faculty salaries, salary rates, fringe benefits, or tuition. Note: indirect cost rates are not subject to negotiation. The NSF Program Officers may discuss with PIs the "bottom line" award amount, i.e., the total NSF funding that will be recommended for a project. NSF Program Officers may not renegotiate cost sharing or other institutional commitments.

When such discussions result in a budget reduction of 10% or more from the amount originally proposed, a corresponding reduction should be made in the scope of the project. Proposers must use the FastLane Revised Proposal Budget module to submit this information. In situations when the budget has been reduced by 10% or more and the NSF Program Officer, PI and organization, however, clearly agree that the project as proposed can be carried out at a lesser level of support from NSF with no expectation of any uncompensated organizational contribution beyond that formally reflected as cost sharing, the "impact" section of the Revised Proposal Budget module must be used to document that agreement.

 Note: A signed paper copy of the revised budget is not required to be submitted to NSF.

D. AWARD RECOMMENDATION

After scientific, technical and programmatic review and consideration of appropriate factors, the NSF Program Officer recommends to the cognizant Division Director whether the proposal should be declined or recommended for award. Normally, final programmatic approval is at the division level. Because of the large volume of proposals, this review and consideration process may take up to six months. Large or particularly complex proposals may require additional review and processing time. If the program recommendation is for an award and final division or other programmatic approval is obtained, then the recommendation goes to the Division of Grants and Agreements for review of business, financial and policy implications and the processing and issuance of a grant or other agreement. The Division of Grants and Agreements generally makes awards to academic institutions within 30 days after the program division makes its recommendation. Grants being made to organizations that have not received an NSF award within the preceding two years, or involving special situations (such as coordination with another Federal agency or a private funding source), cooperative agreements, and other unusual arrangements may require additional review and processing time.

Proposers are cautioned that only an appointed Grants Officer in the Division of Grants and Agreements may make commitments, obligations or awards on behalf of NSF or authorize the expenditure of funds. No commitment on the part of NSF or the Government should be inferred from technical or budgetary discussions with an NSF Program Officer. A PI or organization that makes financial or personnel commitments in the absence of a grant or cooperative agreement signed by the NSF Grants Officer does so at its own risk.

E. COPIES OF REVIEWS

When a decision has been made (whether an award or a declination), verbatim copies of reviews, excluding the names of the reviewers, and summaries of review panel deliberations, if any, are provided to the PI. Proposers also may request and obtain any other releasable material in NSF's file on their proposal. Everything in the file except information that directly identifies either reviewers or other pending or declined proposals is usually releasable to the proposer