Transparency, Accountability and Portfolios

ENG AC
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NSF: Steward of Public Funds and Trust

• Long-standing Core NSF Value: Dedication to Excellence
  – Optimally invest the resources entrusted to us
  – NSF is committed to the principles underlying open government including transparency
  – Achieve management excellence through accountability

• Particularly important in time of fiscal constraints and increased public interest in federal investments, to
  – Demonstrate that NSF investments aligned with Strategic Mission of advancing the progress of science;
  – Make investments that lead to results and resources that are useful to society
A Little History

• ADs have been discussing how to present and justify decisions about awards for some time.

• Office of the Director established internal Transparency & Accountability Working Group (TAWG) ~ 1/1/14

• TAWG charged to assess how the Foundation is currently handling portfolios, communication, training, evaluation and other topics related to transparency and accountability;

• Seek input on these activities from staff at all levels and across the Foundation.
Abstract and Title

- Public Face of NSF’s Investments
  - Clarify that the abstract and title are NSF documents

- Reorganize structure of abstract
  - Non-technical explanation:
    - Project's significance and importance
    - Serves as a public justification for NSF funding.
    - Understandable to an educated reader who is not a scientist or engineer
  - Technical description:
    - States the goals and scope of activities, research methods and potential contributions
    - May be a modified version of the project summary
Context of Our Decisions

• Decisions are not made without a context
• Context can provide justification for award actions
• Program Director charged by policy with developing a balanced portfolio*
• But what is a portfolio at NSF? And how do we think about balancing it?
A definition

- A portfolio can be defined as a collection of activities that are linked together via a logical connection.
- Connection may be:
  - thematic intellectual/scientific connection
    - disciplinary, interdisciplinary, methodological etc.
  - cross-cut intellectual questions by contributing to another goal, e.g.:
    - broadening participation, enhancing research experiences for undergraduates, providing for international collaborations, etc.
Portfolios: Further

- Portfolios can be characterized in terms of:
  - disciplinary fields (archaeology, sociology)
  - intellectual frontier (complexity theory)
  - actual awards at a given time—a snapshot
  - aspirational goals—a view of an imagined future
- Can and should be hierarchical:
  - program → division → directorate → NSF
- Uses:
  - Strategic planning at each level
  - Resource distribution
    - Financial
    - Human resources
  - Context for decision and institutional memory
How to think about...

• Directorate portfolios
   – Developing
   – Communicating
   – Utilizing
   – Investing
     • People
     • Dollars
   – Evaluating