AST “No-Deadline” Pilot

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Motivation for a Pilot Study

• Years of level budgets and increasing proposal pressure led to historically low success rates
  ➢ bottomed out in FY14: 1 in 7
  ➢ heavy workload on community and NSF when 6/7 declined!

• Many ideas to decrease workload and increase success rates

• Missing annual deadline could impose hardship on proposers

• Early results from elsewhere indicated deadlines might increase total number of proposals submitted

• Even though results were preliminary and context-dependent, pressure to experiment with “no-deadline” processes

• Is fewer proposals a good thing?
Design of SPG Pilot

• Need for “process” pilot more than social science experiment
  ➢ Omnibus AAG program on annual cycle; we don’t preallocate funding
  ➢ Spending authority coming later each year (lose Q1)
  ➢ Spending close out ~1 Aug (lose Q4)
  ➢ Community long accustomed to (pioneered) panel reviews & deadlines
  ➢ NSF reliance on review panels for comparative/competitive guidance
  ➢ Panel review requires threshold number of related proposals

• SPG solicitation 16-602 → 1 Oct 16 – 30 Sep 18
  ➢ Also modified AAG solicitation; SPG funded from AAG pool
  ➢ Clarified that proposals predominantly in support of NASA mission(s) would be returned without review – also decreased submissions
  ➢ Gray areas between SPG, AAG, AGS, NASA, etc.
  ➢ Kudos to Faith Vilas and Dave Boboltz and to our awesome staff!
Implementation Results and Lessons

• First year, nearly all came on by 11/15. 2nd year more spread out
• Early submissions met thresholds for topical panels. Later submissions reviewed in smaller, broader panels, often after long delay.
• Heavier reliance on ad hoc reviews
• PO and support staff workload increased and expanded throughout the year. Administrative efficiency decreased (economies of scale lost)
• Budget interleaved over 3 years with AAG program overall. Complex process to ensure solar and planetary program success rate benefits appropriately from decreased proposal pressure (but can’t measure this in real time)
• Proposers skeptical about uniform treatment over the year
• Panelists like smaller workload per panel, but rely more heavily on ad hoc input, and proposals must appeal to a broader audience
AST Concerns, Impacts, and Response

• As in other studies, proposal numbers go down at first. Not clear why or if they eventually return to normal.

• No change to quality of proposals noted by reviewers. Not clear that “missing proposals” are the ones that wouldn’t be funded anyway.

• Less efficient and higher NSF workload

• Smaller, more frequent panels. More ad hoc reviews. Less comparative advice – decrease quality of merit review?

• Planned all along as a 2-year process pilot. Continue to discuss our results and monitor larger pilots across NSF.