

National Science Foundation

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Dear Colleagues,

It has been some time since I updated you on the progress of the Senior Review. As you will recall, we had set a target of 31 March for the completion of the review, so it is a good time to let you know where we stand and what our future plans are.

Before I get into that, however, I think it is important that I talk a little about the current budget climate, as I am certain many are asking why we need the Senior Review in the light of the Administration's determination to double the investment in the physical sciences at NSF, NIST, and DOE's Office of Science as part of the American Competitiveness Initiative (ACI). We in AST certainly applaud this stance and point with some excitement to the 7.7% increase in the AST budget in the FY2007 Request. It is important, however, to temper this enthusiasm with some budget realities:

- The FY2007 Request is just that, a request, with no money yet appropriated
- The doubling would take 10 years of sustained fiscal and scientific priority, spanning at least two administrations
- A careful reading of the ACI reveals that the total investment in NSF, NIST, and DOE Office of Science is targeted to double; there is no set distribution among them
- Within NSF, at no level up to that of the Director is the doubling being taken for granted

What this means is that, throughout NSF, we are mustering the best arguments we possibly can, setting clear priorities and acting on them, in order to help assure our continued participation in the increase, should it materialize. As I have stressed at all of our town meetings, our senior review is as important a planning and budgeting tool in a time of increasing budgets as it is when they are flat or declining.

Our share of the NSF appropriation is not an entitlement; we must support it with carefully determined priorities and defend it by showing the ability to make difficult choices for the good of the field.

So where are we in that process? The Committee closed its active dialogue with the rest of the community at the Town Meeting held in conjunction with the AAS meeting in Washington. As the Chair, Roger Blandford, was careful to stress, they will continue to consider input until the report is final (please see our web page for details on how to provide your views). Their deliberations began in earnest after that meeting and are, of necessity, being held in closed sessions.

The committee has been making good progress, wrestling with (as you can all imagine) some very weighty issues, important possible recommendations and their inevitably far-reaching consequences. I can assure you all that this is one of the fairest, most responsible, thoughtful, and concerned committees I have had the privilege of working with in the over 25 years I have been at NSF. They are serving the Foundation, and the community of which they are a part, in an exemplary way. They continue to deserve our sincere thanks and to be worthy of our complete trust.

As of this writing, it looks unlikely that they will meet the 31 March target for a complete report. They feel the need for at least one more meeting to assure themselves of complete, mutual understanding of their final recommendations and their consequences. We have stressed on every available occasion that the 31 March date was just a target; that if the committee felt it needed more time, it was free to take it. I know we all agree that this is too important to our field to rush the conclusions.

Once the final report is in our hands later this Spring, we will begin formulating an implementation plan. As I have said in the Town Meetings, we will discuss this plan with bodies like the Committee on Astronomy and Astrophysics (CAA) and the Astronomy and Astrophysics Advisory Committee (AAAC), with the community at our special session at the Calgary AAS meeting, and at another series of town meetings across the country.

In closing, I want to thank all of you for the support you have given to us and to Roger and the committee. Your participation at the town meetings, your thoughtful input through e-mails and letters to the committee, the expressions of support by our Committee of Visitors (COV), the CAA, the AAAC, and the AAS have made it clear that this is a community effort, the kind of effort that is necessary to make it a success. I remain convinced that this will both establish a healthy base on which to build a sustainable future and establish astronomy as a leader in planning for responsible progress at NSF.

Wayne

Message sent from aasmail on 27 March 2006