

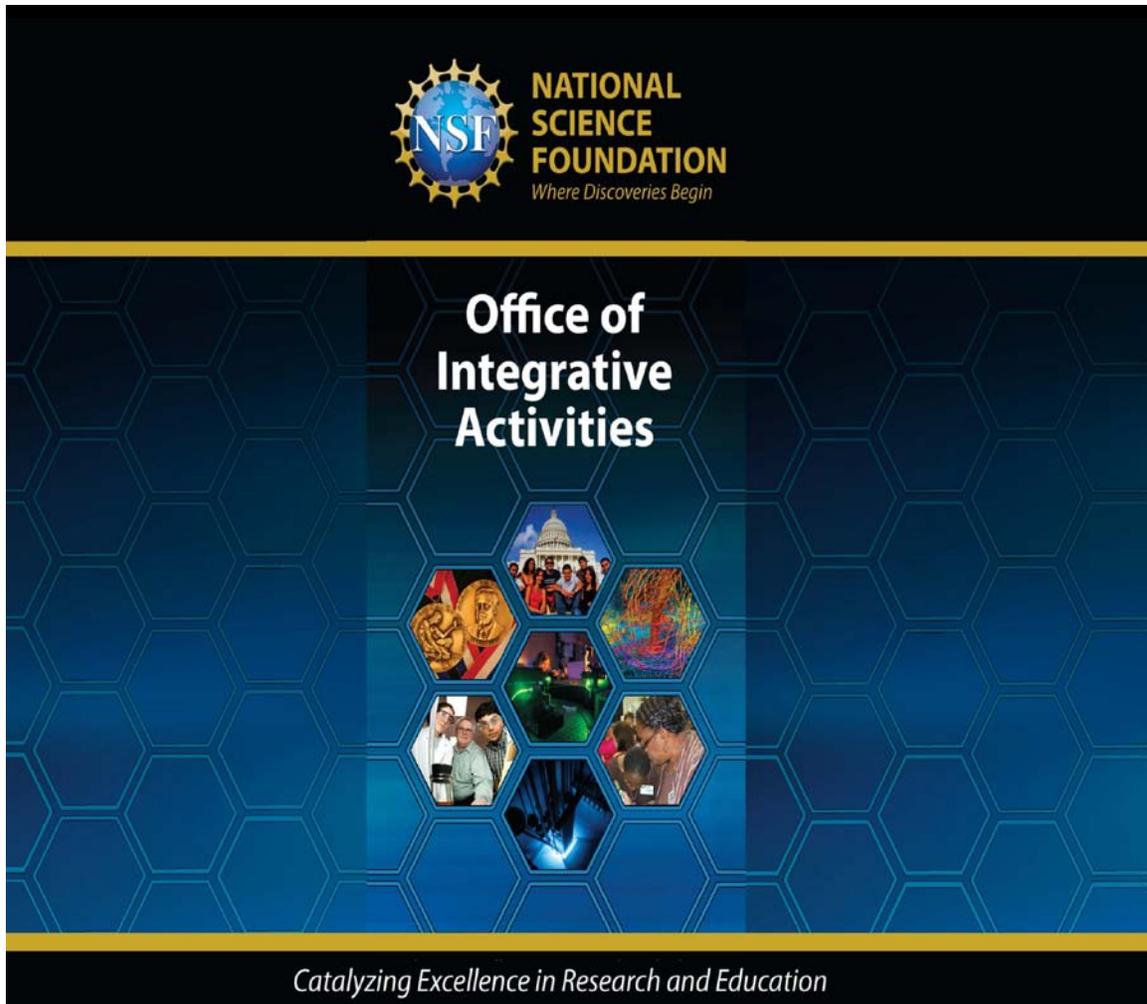
# “If a Tree Falls...”

Remarks at the EPSCoR National Conference

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Good afternoon everyone.

It's a pleasure to be here to meet with you. I want to say a few things about the need for publicity – good publicity – about the EPSCoR program and your efforts -- although some people even say there's no such thing as

bad publicity. I'm probably going to preach to the choir to some extent, but here goes.

I'm sorry to say I had to miss the first part of your EPSCoR National Conference yesterday, although I'm delighted to see you are hearing from many of the leaders at NSF - as well as some first-rate movers and shakers from the EPSCoR jurisdictions and beyond. And you'll hear more this afternoon and tomorrow -- including a lunchtime session with NSF Director Dr. Arden Bement -- with plenty of opportunities to get your own ideas out on the table for discussion. As you know, one important recommendation of the EPSCoR-2020 workshop was to raise the visibility of the EPSCoR program throughout NSF and strengthen its interactions with the various Directorates and Offices across the Foundation. I think you can see we are succeeding, with credit due to Henry Blount and his entire team.

I have been on the road for most of the past month, and I'll be leaving again tomorrow, attending site visits in the final phase of NSF's competition for new Science and Technology Centers. I can tell you that I have seen some impressive proposals for research on all kinds of topics, for integrating research and education, for transferring the knowledge gained to industry and to government policy-makers and others, for enhancing diversity in the scientific enterprise, and for developing scientific and engineering research capacity – whether that means physical capacity, cyberinfrastructure, or human capacity.

Now, I expect all that sounds quite familiar to this audience! I see comparable vision and aspirations, a comparable quality of research and overall effort, in the EPSCoR states and jurisdictions I have had the privilege of visiting over the past couple of years. And thanks to the bridges you are building between the NSF EPSCoR support and the science and technology plans and development plans of your states, I see a very healthy emphasis on the broader impacts and outcomes of NSF support.

So what does this have to do with trees falling in forests?

I'm referring of course to Bishop George Berkeley. In Berkeley's "Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge", published just about 200 years ago in the year 1710, you can find the following:

**“But, say you, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them.”**

The philosophical question is whether there’s a difference between what something is, and what it appears to be. The good Bishop’s answer was clear: **“To be is to be perceived”**. The tree falling in the forest doesn’t make a sound -- it only makes pressure waves.

So my theme here is getting the word out about your achievements. If a tree falls – or grows – in your particular scientific and engineering forest, let’s hear about it. The NSF Office of Legislative and Public Affairs is making a big effort to get the word out – to the science and education community, to policy-makers, to voters, to the general public – about the achievements of NSF awardees and particularly about the IMPACT those achievements are having on all of us – and potentially on our children and grandchildren.

But NSF can’t do it alone. First, you have to let us know what’s happening in your neck of the woods! Get “your folks” in touch with “our folks”. You know who “we” are: Henry Blount and his team – Simona Gilbert, Denise Barnes, Arlene Garrison, John Hall, Maija Kukla, Uma Venkateswaran – Sheila Tyndall, Pat Ferguson, and our IT guru Joseph Schweitzer. Take a look at the NSF EPSCoR web page, and take a look at your own EPSCoR web page, for example – are the news items up to date? Are your activities well represented and clearly described? Does what you see take your breath away, or is it just “OK” or more of the same?

Pick up the phone, send us an email, keep us on our toes. Capture that sense of excitement and impact. Tell us, and tell the world, about those achievements, those people, those events that are pushing the envelope, that are exciting and transformative.

I noticed a quote, and an implicit challenge, from Secretary of Energy Steven Chu in the American Physical Society newsletter this month. Dr. Chu said this:

**“What the U.S. and China do over the next decade will determine the fate of the world.”**

We all know that the EPSCoR program as a whole, and your EPSCoR efforts individually, locally, and nationally, can have an enormous impact on the health of science and engineering research and education in your state and in the nation. The NSF effort is tiny in national terms, but through your efforts this modest investment brings a whole lot of leverage to the table. It's no exaggeration to say that over the next decade, your efforts will help to determine the direction of the nation and maybe, even – if Steve Chu is correct – the fate of the world.

I was at a site visit review recently where the principal investigator was asked to respond to the criticism that **what she proposed was simply too ambitious**. I liked her response, which in turn was a quote from John F. Kennedy when he faced considerable skepticism back in 1961 about his vision of putting a human being on the moon by the end of that decade. President Kennedy said:

**“We choose to go to the moon...(we choose to do these things)...not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one that we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win...”**

I think this speaks very appropriately for EPSCoR, and for all your efforts under the EPSCoR banner as well.

Thank you!