

CLOSEOUT FOR M-97090025

On 18 September 1997, a program director¹ brought a complainant's² concerns to OIG's attention. In a cover letter accompanying the complainant's revised renewal proposal³ and in a subsequent e-mail message to the program director, the complainant asserted that his original renewal proposal⁴ had been "handled in an unfair and very unsatisfactory manner" by individuals "who [were] not familiar with" the proposed field of study. The original renewal proposal requested support for work initiated under the complainant's earlier NSF award.⁵ Specifically, the complainant questioned how the opinion of one *ad hoc* reviewer, who had rated the original renewal proposal as "Poor," could have been used by a program manager, the subject,⁶ after that reviewer had written prejudicial comments about an ethnic group to which the complainant and his students belonged. The complainant claimed that the decline of his original renewal proposal was the consequence of an "inexperienced" program manager (the subject) and of some *ad hoc* reviewers who were unfamiliar with the field of study.

The complainant provided comments in his cover letter about the six *ad hoc* reviews of his original renewal proposal. With respect to the "Poor" review, he said that it was from someone who was "biased," as evidenced by the negative remarks in one paragraph about an ethnic group. Although the complainant acknowledged that the subject had written on the "Poor" review that "[t]he paragraph was not considered when making the decision," he expressed surprised that any part of the review had been used at all.

OIG interviewed the subject. She explained that when she arrived at NSF she reviewed the program's overall direction and was concerned about its emphasis in the field of study represented by the complainant's proposal. She said that the complainant's original renewal proposal was in the first group of proposals she handled. A short time before the subject made the decisions for this group of proposals, a Committee of Visitors' (COV) report issued its findings about the program. It concluded that the program over emphasized research represented by the complainant's field of study. It also stated that proposals in this particular field of study could legitimately request funding from other NSF programs.

The subject explained that the complainant's original renewal proposal was declined for the following reasons: 1) the substantive concerns expressed in the "Very Good" review, about which she agreed; 2) the COV's conclusion concerning the program's direction, about

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which she also agreed; and 3) the tight budget. She said that she did not consider the negative comments made by the *ad hoc* reviewer who rated the complainant's renewal proposal as "Poor."

The subject's diary note in the original renewal proposal jacket stated that: 1) she had told the complainant, a few weeks prior to the decision to decline his proposal, that it was borderline and the final decision was dependent on the budget; 2) after the decision was made to decline the complainant's proposal, she had discussed the ethnic comments in the "Poor" review with him, explaining that they did not bias her decision; and 3) she had encouraged the complainant to rewrite and resubmit the proposal to another program. In addition, she noted that the complainant had called another program director⁷ to discuss his options for funding because his earlier award was closed and he was concerned about support for his graduate students. She noted that the other program director told the complainant that he could request a reconsideration and that he could apply for supplemental funding to support his project. The complainant's application for supplemental funding was declined and he did not request a reconsideration. The complainant submitted his revised renewal proposal to another NSF program as the subject had recommended. OIG found no evidence that the subject had used the negative comments in the "Poor" review to make her decision to decline the original renewal proposal.

OIG reviewed the complainant's concerns about the evaluation of his original renewal proposal. Of the 10 proposals in the competition that included the complainant's original renewal proposal, 2 were renewal proposals, 1 was a conference proposal, and 7 were new proposals. Only one proposal, a new one, was funded from this group. OIG's review of the remaining *ad hoc* reviews for the original renewal proposal showed that three reviewers rated the complainant's proposal as "Excellent," and two others rated the proposal "Very Good" and "R," respectively. ("R" represented a split review: "Excellent" for the first half and "not fundable" for the second half of the proposal.) The complainant agreed with the "Excellent" reviews. He explained that the "Very Good" review was from someone who did not understand the science in the proposal. He described the "R" review as from someone who did not see the uniqueness of the second part of the proposal.

The revised renewal proposal, which was substantially similar to the original renewal proposal, was also declined. Of the four *ad hoc* reviews, two rated the revised renewal proposal "Good," one rated it "Very Good," and one rated it between "Good" and "Very Good." The reviewers described the revised renewal proposal as unfocused and containing portions that were out of date. The reviewer who had rated the original renewal proposal as "Poor" did not review the revised renewal proposal. OIG concluded there was no reason to suspect that the declination of the complainant's original renewal proposal had anything to do with either the subject's alleged lack of experience or some of the *ad hoc* reviewers'

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alleged lack of familiarity with the field of study, especially given that the revised renewal proposal, which was substantially similar to the original renewal proposal and managed by a different program and program officer, received less favorable reviews and was also declined.

This case is closed and no further action will be taken.

cc: Staff Scientist, AIG-Oversight, Legal, IG