**CORE QUESTIONS and REPORT TEMPLATE**
**for**
**FY 2010 NSF COMMITTEE OF VISITOR (COV) REVIEWS**

**Guidance to NSF Staff:** This document includes the FY 2010 set of Core Questions and the COV Report Template for use by NSF staff when preparing and conducting COVs during FY 2010. Specific guidance for NSF staff describing the COV review process is described in Subchapter 300-Committee of Visitors Reviews (NSF Manual 1, Section VIII) that can be obtained at <www.inside.nsf.gov/od/oia/cov>.

NSF relies on the judgment of external experts to maintain high standards of program management, to provide advice for continuous improvement of NSF performance, and to ensure openness to the research and education community served by the Foundation. Committee of Visitor (COV) reviews provide NSF with external expert judgments in two areas: (1) assessments of the quality and integrity of program operations and program-level technical and managerial matters pertaining to proposal decisions; and (2) comments on how the results generated by awardees have contributed to the attainment of NSF's mission and strategic outcome goals.

Many of the Core Questions are derived from NSF performance goals and apply to the portfolio of activities represented in the program(s) under review. The program(s) under review may include several subactivities as well as NSF-wide activities. The directorate or division may instruct the COV to provide answers addressing a cluster or group of programs – a portfolio of activities integrated as a whole – or to provide answers specific to the subactivities of the program, with the latter requiring more time but providing more detailed information.

The Division or Directorate may choose to add questions relevant to the activities under review. NSF staff should work with the COV members in advance of the meeting to provide them with the report template, organized background materials, and to identify questions/goals that apply to the program(s) under review.

*ARRA Addendum*:  If awards funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) were made during the period of time under review by the COV, you will need to add guidance to the COV on review of these activities and some specific questions to the template that cover the ARRA award processes and the resulting portfolio of awards.  While the COV need not review all ARRA awards, there should be ARRA awards included as part of the sample of awards, and there should be materials that explicitly describe the ARRA portfolio and its characteristics.  The NSF Recovery Act Policies and Procedures can be found at:
http://infoshare.nsf.gov/showFile/3370/2009RecoveryPoliciesProcedures1009.pdf. The NSF Funding Priorities are found in Section III.

Suggested sources of information for COVs to consider are provided for each item.  As indicated, a resource for NSF staff preparing data for COVs is the Enterprise Information System (EIS) –Web COV module, which can be accessed by NSF staff only at http://budg-eis-01/eisportal/default.aspx. In addition, NSF staff preparing for the COV should consider other sources of information, as appropriate for the programs under review.

**Guidance to the COV:**   The COV report should provide a balanced assessment of NSF's performance in two primary areas:  (A) the integrity and efficiency of the **processes** related to proposal review; and (B) the quality of the **results** of NSF's investments that appear over time. The COV also explores the relationships between award decisions and program/NSF-wide goals in order to determine the likelihood that the portfolio will lead to the desired results in the future. Discussions

leading to answers for Part A of the Core Questions will require study of confidential material such as declined proposals and reviewer comments. *COV reports should not contain confidential material or specific information about declined proposals.* Discussions leading to answers for Part B of the Core Questions will involve study of non-confidential material such as results of NSF-funded projects. The reports generated by COVs are used in assessing agency progress in order to meet government-wide performance reporting requirements, and are made available to the public. Since material from COV reports is used in NSF performance reports, the COV report may be subject to an audit.

*ARRA Addendum*: Awards funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) were made during the period of time under review by the COV. We have included questions on the template that deal explicitly with this subset of the overall portfolio and the extent to which it met the objectives of the Act and the priorities articulated by the NSF Director. Key information regarding ARRA and NSF priorities as well as optional program-specific priorities will be provided to you.

*We encourage COV members to provide comments to NSF on how to improve in all areas, as well as suggestions for the COV process, format, and questions. For past COV reports, please see http://www.nsf.gov/od/oia/activities/cov/covs.jsp.*

# FY 2010 REPORT TEMPLATE FOR
# NSF COMMITTEES OF VISITORS (COVs)

The table below should be completed by program staff.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Date of COV:** | |
| **Program/Cluster/Section:** | |
| **Division:** | |
| **Directorate:** | |
| **Number of actions reviewed:**<br><br>**Awards:**<br><br>**Declinations:**<br><br>**Other:** | |
| **Total number of actions within Program/Cluster/Division during period under review:**<br><br> **Awards:**<br><br> **Declinations:**<br><br>**Other:** | |
| **Manner in which reviewed actions were selected:** | |

## PART A. INTEGRITY AND EFFICIENCY OF THE PROGRAM'S PROCESSES AND MANAGEMENT

Briefly discuss and provide comments for *each* relevant aspect of the program's review process and management. Comments should be based on a review of proposal actions (awards, declinations, and withdrawals) that were *completed within the past three fiscal years*. Provide comments for *each* program being reviewed and for those questions that are relevant to the program under review. Quantitative information may be required for some questions. Constructive comments noting areas in need of improvement are encouraged.

**A.1 Questions about the quality and effectiveness of the program's use of merit review process.** Provide comments in the space below the question. Discuss areas of concern in the space provided.

| QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF MERIT REVIEW PROCESS | YES, NO, DATA NOT AVAILABLE, or NOT APPLICABLE[1] |
|---|---|
| 1. Are the review methods (for example, panel, ad hoc, site visits) appropriate?<br><br>Comments: | |
| 2. Are both merit review criteria addressed<br><br>   a) In individual reviews?<br><br>   b) In panel summaries?<br><br>   c) In Program Officer review analyses?<br><br>Comments: | |

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[1] If "Not Applicable" please explain why in the "Comments" section.

| | |
|---|---|
| 3.  Do the individual reviewers provide substantive comments to explain their assessment of the proposals?<br><br>Comments: | |
| 4.  Do the panel summaries provide the rationale for the panel consensus (or reasons consensus was not reached)?<br><br>Comments: | |

5. Does the documentation in the jacket provide the rationale for the award/decline decision?

(Note: Documentation in jacket usually includes context statement, individual reviews, panel summary (if applicable), site visit reports (if applicable), program officer review analysis, and staff diary notes.)

During FY 2009, NSF permitted reversal of a declined decision for funding through ARRA for proposals declined after October 1, 2008. (NOTE: This question does not apply to programs for which the reversal decline option was not used.)

      i)      Were the reversals of the decision to decline based on both the high quality* of the reviews received on the initial submission and the lack of available funding at the time the origin was made?

          *Rated "Very Good or above" or the functional equivalent by review panels.

      ii)     Is documentation provided, including a revised Review Analysis, to support the award decisions?

Comments:

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6. Does the documentation to PI provide the rationale for the award/decline decision?

(Note: Documentation to PI usually includes context statement, individual reviews, panel summary (if applicable), site visit reports (if applicable), and, if not otherwise provided in the panel summary, an explanation from the program officer (written or telephoned with diary note in jacket) of the basis for a declination.)

Comments:

7. Is the time to decision appropriate?

Note: Time to Decision --NSF Annual Performance Goal: **For 70 percent of proposals, inform applicants about funding decisions within six months of proposal receipt or deadline or target date, whichever is later**. The date of Division Director concurrence is used in determining the time to decision. Once the Division Director concurs, applicants may be informed that their proposals have been declined or recommended for funding. The NSF-wide goal of 70 percent recognizes that the time to decision is appropriately greater than six months for some programs or some individual proposals.

Comments:

8. Additional Comments

   a) Additional comments on the quality and effectiveness of the program's use of merit review process.

   b) To what extent does the documentation in the jacket or otherwise available provide the rationale for use of ARRA funding?

**A.2 Questions concerning the selection of reviewers.** Provide comments in the space below the question. Discuss areas of concern in the space provided.

| SELECTION OF REVIEWERS | YES , NO, DATA NOT AVAILABLE, or NOT APPLICABLE[2] |
|---|---|
| 1. Did the program make use of reviewers having appropriate expertise and/or qualifications?<br><br>Comments: | |
| 2. Did the program use reviewers balanced with respect to characteristics such as geography, type of institution, and underrepresented groups?<br><br>Note: Demographic data is self reported, with only about 25% of reviewers reporting this information.<br><br>Comments: | |

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[2] If "Not Applicable" please explain why in the "Comments" section.

3.   Did the program recognize and resolve conflicts of interest when appropriate?

Comments:

4.  Additional comments on reviewer selection:

**A.3 Questions concerning the resulting portfolio of awards under review**.  Provide comments in the space below the question. Discuss areas of concern in the space provided.

| RESULTING PORTFOLIO OF AWARDS | APPROPRIATE, NOT APPROPRIATE[3], OR DATA NOT AVAILABLE |
|---|---|
| 1.  Overall quality of the research and/or education projects supported by the program.<br><br>Comments: | |
| 2. Does the program portfolio promote the integration of research and education?<br><br>Comments: | |

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[3] If "Not Appropriate" please explain why in the "Comments" section.

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|---|---|
| 3.  Are awards appropriate in size and duration for the scope of the projects?<br><br>Comments: | |
| 4. Does the overall program portfolio (including ARRA funded awards) have an appropriate balance of innovative/potentially transformative projects?<br><br>ARRA Specific Question: Does the ARRA funded portfolio have an appropriate balance of innovative/potentially transformative projects?<br><br>Comments: | |
| 5.  Does the program portfolio have an appropriate balance of:<br>  • Inter- and Multi- disciplinary projects?<br><br>Comments: | |

| | |
|---|---|
| 6. Does the program portfolio have an appropriate balance considering, for example, award size, single and multiple investigator awards, or other characteristics as appropriate for the program?<br><br>Comments: | |
| 7. Does the program portfolio have an appropriate balance of:<br>• Awards to new investigators?<br><br><br>ARRA Specific Question: Does the ARRA funded portfolio have an appropriate balance of awards to new investigators?<br><br><br>NOTE: A new investigator is defined as an individual who has not served as the PI or co-PI on any award from NSF (with the exception of doctoral dissertation awards, graduate or postdoctoral fellowships, research planning grants, or conferences, symposia & workshop grants.)<br><br><br>Comments: | |
| 8. Does the program portfolio have an appropriate balance of:<br>• Geographical distribution of Principal Investigators?<br><br>Comments: | |

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|---|---|
| 9. Does the program portfolio have an appropriate balance of:<br>   • Institutionnel types?<br><br>Comments: | |
| 10. Does the program portfolio have an appropriate balance:<br>   • Across disciplines and sub disciplines of the activity?<br><br>Comments: | |
| 11. Does the program portfolio have appropriate participation of underrepresented groups?<br><br>Comments: | |
| 12. Is the program relevant to national priorities, agency mission, relevant fields and other constituent needs? Include citations of relevant external reports.<br><br>Comments: | |

13.  Additional comments on the quality of the projects or the balance of the portfolio:


ARRA Specific Comments: Additional comments regarding the portfolio of ARRA awards addressing the NSF or program-specific priorities for ARRA funding?


**A.4  Management of the program under review**.  Please comment on:


1.  Management of the program.

Comments:


2.  Responsiveness of the program to emerging research and education opportunities.

Comments:


3.  Program planning and prioritization process (internal and external) that guided the development of the portfolio.

Comments:

4.  Responsiveness of program to previous COV comments and recommendations.

Comments:

5.  Additional comments on program management:

## PART B.  RESULTS OF NSF INVESTMENTS

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The NSF mission is to:
- promote the progress of science;
- advance national health, prosperity, and welfare; and
- secure the national defense.

To fulfill this mission, NSF has identified four strategic outcome goals: Discovery, Learning, Research Infrastructure, and Stewardship.  The COV should look carefully at and comment on (1) noteworthy achievements based on NSF awards; (2) ways in which funded projects have collectively affected progress toward NSF's mission and strategic outcome goals; and (3) expectations for future performance based on the current set of awards.

NSF investments produce results that appear over time.  Consequently, the COV review may include consideration of significant impacts and advances that have developed since the previous COV review and are demonstrably linked to NSF investments, regardless of when the investments were made.

To assist the COV, NSF staff will provide award "highlights" as well as information about the program and its award portfolio as it relates to the three outcome goals of Discovery, Learning, and Research Infrastructure.  The COV is not asked to review accomplishments under Stewardship, as that goal is represented by several annual performance goals and measures that are monitored by internal working groups that report to NSF senior management.


**B.  Please provide comments on the activity as it relates to NSF's Strategic Outcome Goals. Provide examples of outcomes ("highlights") as appropriate. Examples should reference the NSF award number, the Principal Investigator(s) names, and their institutions.**

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**B.1 OUTCOME GOAL for Discovery: "*Foster research that will advance the frontier of knowledge, emphasizing areas of greatest opportunity and potential benefit and establishing the nation as a global leader in fundamental and transformational science and engineering.*"**

Comments:

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**B.2 OUTCOME GOAL for Learning:** "*Cultivate a world-class, broadly inclusive science and engineering workforce, and expand the scientific literacy of all citizens.*"

Comments:

**B.3 OUTCOME GOAL for Research Infrastructure:** "*Build the nation's research capability through critical investments in advanced instrumentation, facilities, cyberinfrastructure and experimental tools.*"

Comments:

**PART C.  OTHER TOPICS**

**C.1.  Please comment on any program areas in need of improvement or gaps (if any) within program areas.**


**C.2.  Please provide comments as appropriate on the program's performance in meeting program-specific goals and objectives that are not covered by the above questions.**


**C.3.  Please identify agency-wide issues that should be addressed by NSF to help improve the program's performance.**


**C.4.  Please provide comments on any other issues the COV feels are relevant.**


**C.5.  NSF would appreciate your comments on how to improve the COV review process, format and report template.**


**SIGNATURE BLOCK:**


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For the [Replace with Name of COV]
[Name of Chair of COV]
Chair