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An Executive Summary by a Panel of the
NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
for the National Science Foundation

Office of Polar Programs Organizational Assessment: Executive Summary of Findings and Recommendations

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The views expressed in this report are those of the Panel. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Academy as an institution.

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Executive Summary

Since its creation in the early 1960s, the US National Science Foundation (NSF) Office of Polar Programs' (OPP) mission and strategic importance have grown significantly. As the primary supporter of scientific research in the polar regions, OPP initiates and manages funding for basic research and operational support for activities in the Arctic and Antarctica. OPP facilitates access to the polar regions, advances research and education, and works with the US military and other federal agencies to provide the necessary logistical support for research.

In the Arctic, NSF coordinates research planning as directed by the Arctic Research and Policy Act of 1984, and the NSF director chairs the Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee (IARPC). In the Antarctic, NSF manages all US activities as a single, integrated program in accordance with Presidential Memorandum 6646. Additionally, through the US Antarctic Program (USAP), NSF supports leadership by the US Department of State in the governance of the continent and Southern Ocean under the aegis of the Antarctic Treaty System. Finally, OPP has been a leader in creating new opportunities in both polar regions through national and international partnerships.

Although OPP faces challenges similar to other parts of NSF, it is distinct in several key aspects, including the complexity of polar logistics and the fact that programmatic decisions have an immediate and direct impact on the safety, efficiency, and working environments of the people participating in Arctic and Antarctic field programs. To conduct polar research, OPP's staff must work across countries, treaties and agreements, and scientific disciplines, while also engaging with polar research communities, Arctic stakeholders (including its residents), and various interagency partners. Additionally, OPP plays a multifaceted role in the international community, involving policy implementation, international collaboration, research support, and logistical management in both polar regions.

It is against this backdrop that NSF contracted with the National Academy of Public Administration (Academy) to conduct a comprehensive assessment of OPP to examine existing organizational and operational structures and to explore opportunities to improve mission delivery. The impetus for this study stems from NSF leaders' desire to position OPP for continuing mission success and to address ongoing challenges related to internal communication and engagement with NSF and non-NSF entities.

The Academy's study was guided by four core research objectives: evaluating internal program structure; enhancing leadership capabilities; exploring organizational culture and employee engagement; and examining OPP's organizational position within NSF and with externally facing stakeholders. The study duration was April 1, 2024 to March 31, 2025.

The Academy assembled a six-member Panel of Fellows to direct this study. The Panel included former NSF officials and experts with extensive expertise and experience in leadership competencies, organizational alignment, organizational culture, change management, employee and stakeholder engagement, and grants management. The Panel's recommendations, below, are based on study findings and are organized according to research theme.

Organizational Alignment and Stakeholder Engagement

1.1 NSF should reposition OPP within the NSF Office of the Director or as a standalone directorate. Doing so would streamline OPP decision-making with NSF organizational units and external stakeholders and support OPP's vast scope and functions, which differ from those of other divisions.

1.2 NSF should elevate OPP's personnel titles and positions to be commensurate with those of NSF directorates. Title parity with internal and external counterparts will reduce barriers to collaboration and firmly empower decision-makers.

1.3 NSF should reestablish the OPP Advisory Committee to better inform polar research priorities and resource allocation and improve intra-agency communication. It also should consider requesting that the National Science Board reinstate the Polar Issues Subcommittee. Implementation of this recommendation is dependent on OPP realignment within OD or as an independent directorate.

1.4 The NSF executive leadership team should include the OPP director to facilitate direct communication on OPP's needs and the development of strategies to address priority polar issues–regardless of OPP's organizational placement in the agency.

OPP Internal Program Structures

2.1 OPP leaders should establish and institutionalize an integrated, long-term polar strategic plan and an annual implementation plan to improve communication, information sharing, and decision-making alignment.

2.2 NSF and OPP leaders should establish more structured and transparent two-way communication and information flow between OPP and NSF leaders and ensure staff understand communication processes.

2.3 Within OPP, the leadership team should build upon current efforts to implement structured and transparent two-way communication and information sharing.

2.4 The section head of the Arctic Sciences Section, with OPP leaders, should initiate a reorganization to develop internal teams. This effort should include exploring options for spreading the workload, such as changing how existing positions are utilized and creating new supervisory positions.

Organizational Culture and Employee Engagement

3.1 OPP leadership should establish standard operating procedures for recurring actions and clear reporting lines for incident response communication within OPP that are well understood by all parties.

3.2 The OPP leadership team should implement mechanisms to improve preservation of institutional knowledge within OPP.

Leadership Capabilities and Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs)

4.1 NSF should seek to permanently fill the OPP director position with a leader who possesses experience managing a complex operational and stakeholder environment.

Findings and Recommendations

1. OPP Organizational Alignment within NSF, GEO, and with External Stakeholders

Findings

Finding 1.1: OPP's US government-wide role as steward of Antarctic and Arctic policy, research, and infrastructure and logistics distinguishes it from other NSF directorates and offices. OPP has a significant budget and a staff that actively manages two large polar support contracts and oversees the daily work of contractors who facilitate operations onsite, including direct responsibility for rapid and effective responses to urgent matters of health and safety in life-threating polar conditions. This is unlike other directorate subcomponents within the NSF organizational hierarchy. The office also is responsible for planning and developing new infrastructure projects and ensuring existing facilities are equipped to support research in remote areas and extreme conditions. Furthermore, OPP staff have responsibilities not found elsewhere in NSF, in polar environmental policy and permitting and, particularly in the Arctic, building relationships with multiple stakeholders, including with the increasingly important Arctic Indigenous communities.[1]

Finding 1.2: OPP's current location within NSF limits its ability to achieve its mission and coordinate with NSF directorates. OPP does not participate in NSF's executive leadership team meetings, diminishing its involvement in NSF's enterprise planning activities and its ability to manage the polar programs, and making it more challenging to convey program requirements for responding to life-threatening situations. It also lost access to dedicated advisory bodies when OPP was moved under GEO in 2012. Although OPP Advisory Committee members were invited to join the GEO Advisory Committee and elements of its charter were integrated with a revised GEO Advisory Committee charter, the lack of focus on polar issues has diminished advisory input to OPP on scientific and other issues. OPP's current placement has reduced its visibility and access to NSF senior leaders, making it more challenging to convey complex issues, priorities, and external stakeholder needs vertically in NSF. It is also not the most efficient arrangement for facilitating horizontal coordination and communication between OPP and NSF directorate leaders. Other NSF directorates act appropriately within the current structure to communicate with their peer directorate (GEO) before engaging OPP at the division-level when direct communication with OPP could be more efficient.

Finding 1.3: OPP's current placement in GEO limits its ability to communicate and align with external partners and stakeholders. OPP must engage with federal and other partners at a senior and strategic level, especially in planning processes, to represent US research interests in the Antarctic and Arctic. High turnover in the OPP director position has reduced OPP's visibility and leadership in the international arena. While OPP's realignment under GEO did not decrease the number of OPP senior leadership positions, it did result in the reduction of

[1] "Supporting Tribal Nations in STEM," National Science Foundation, accessed 13 February 2025, https://www.nsf.gov/about/tribal-engagement.

their titles and authority.[2] This created internal and external peerage mismatches. Direct communication is essential for OPP's ability to articulate issues around utilizing resources shared with federal partners and polar research programs while aligning stakeholders' support around Arctic and Antarctic research projects and initiatives. These issues are particularly important in light of the increasingly complex dynamics concerning international relations and Indigenous communities in the Arctic, in addition to the critical and longstanding characteristics of work in the Antarctic.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1.1: NSF should reposition OPP within the NSF Office of the Director or as a standalone directorate. By doing so, OPP will streamline decision making with NSF organizational units and external stakeholders and support OPP's vast scope and functions that differ from those of other divisions. This recommendation is based on Findings 1.1–1.3, that OPP's scope and functions differ from those of other divisions, and that its placement within GEO hinders its ability to coordinate directly with other NSF organizational units and external stakeholders to leverage governmental resources. This recommendation is a high priority for implementation given its impact on many of the different OPP functions listed in Finding 1.3. Elevating OPP to a directorate or an office within OD may require moderate incremental expenditures to scale up or administer more functions with greater autonomy. Both options' attributes are likely to improve peerage and increase OPP's mission performance in terms of key aspects, including, but not limited to, supporting unique research capabilities, incident reporting, and matters of life safety.

Recommendation 1.2: NSF should elevate OPP's personnel titles and positions to be commensurate with those of NSF directorates. Title parity with internal and external counterparts will reduce barriers to collaboration and firmly empower decision makers. This recommendation addresses Findings 1.1 and 1.3, that OPP staff are not viewed as peers of the outside stakeholders with whom they must work, and that OPP's scope and responsibilities may often exceed those of other NSF offices or divisions. The responsibilities of the OPP director and section heads align best with those of the assistant director and division director positions within NSF. Implementing this recommendation could also reduce the staff and partner learning curve about OPP's distinctive role and structure.

Recommendation 1.3: NSF should reestablish the OPP Advisory Committee to better inform polar research priorities and resource allocation and improve intra-agency communication. It should also consider requesting that the National Science Board reinstate the Polar Issues Subcommittee. Implementation of this recommendation is dependent on OPP realignment within OD or as an independent directorate. This recommendation addresses limitations on OPP's ability to receive focused input from outside advisors and inform agency-level strategies for polar research and resource allocation, identified in Finding 1.2. It would fill the gap created by the absence of both bodies and provide a valuable advisory function for NSF leaders regarding priority issues and general knowledge on polar topics. Strengthening vertical communication between the top of NSF and OPP will improve NSF's

[2] Randy Showstack, "NSF Advisory Committee Examines Realignment Plan," *Eos*, 93, no.43 (2012): 427, https://doi.org/10.1029/2012EO430003.

efforts to project its strategic vision. The OPP Advisory Committee could play a role in helping OPP implement government-wide, and congressional and NSF priorities. It could bring the requisite consistency of attention and guidance to bear on OPP's unique, continent-wide logistics, infrastructure, and enterprise risk management responsibilities. Dedicated polar advisory functions also would improve horizontal communication within NSF by tapping into the expertise of other directorates, as is often needed due to the interdisciplinary nature of OPP's work. The OPP Advisory Committee could serve as a vehicle for adding knowledge and perspectives for decisionmakers on developing aspects of the polar work from changing international relations issues to Indigenous knowledge and engagement. Implementing this recommendation is unlikely to be a significant administrative burden. While OPP will be participating in more meetings, the additional staff time required will be marginal and likely offset by expedited decision-making and subsequent action.

Recommendation 1.4: The NSF executive leadership team should include the OPP director to facilitate direct communication on OPP's needs and the development of strategies to address priority polar issues–regardless of OPP's organizational placement in the agency. OPP is a highly visible program, both domestically and internationally. Ensuring OPP can support its mission mandates in the Arctic and Antarctic requires large investments in scientific infrastructure and logistics, in addition to funding for the unique science that can be performed only in the polar regions. With the large fluctuations in the cost of supplies, fuel, and construction, OPP leaders need to be able to communicate directly with NSF leaders on their needs and challenges to efficiently and safely support polar work and address the rapidly changing nature and context of that work.

2. Evaluation of Internal Program Structure

Findings

Finding 2.1: OPP lacks an ongoing strategic planning process to support and unify its polar missions. OPP lacks a joint strategic planning process that includes the Arctic and Antarctic missions. The lack of an officewide strategic plan and alignment between polar research and science support leads to difficult competition and inefficient investment in logistics and facilities.

Finding 2.2: There is information asymmetry <u>within</u> OPP due to a historical lack of collaborative programmatic planning, and <u>between</u> OPP and NSF leaders due to a lack of direct communication and OPP involvement in NSF's enterprise planning. Information asymmetry occurs within OPP due to the historical lack of collaborative programmatic planning at the OPP leadership level. The process historically minimized or excluded direct input from the OPP section heads, leading to difficulties in balancing funding for grants and science support functions. Additionally, the reasoning for the budget allocations for Arctic versus Antarctic and logistics versus science is unclear to stakeholders, making it difficult for them to understand and align with OPP's priorities. OPP's internal planning and budget development process would benefit from enhanced strategic planning and communication.

Information asymmetry between OPP and NSF leaders is caused by a lack of direct communication and involvement of OPP in NSF's enterprise planning. Because OPP leaders are not directly included in discussions regarding enterprise planning, it makes it difficult for OPP to directly work with NSF leaders to support their mandates in the Arctic and Antarctic, particularly given the rapidly changing conditions and stakeholder complexities in those settings.

Finding 2.3: OPP's organizational structure is suitable to support and execute the Arctic and Antarctic missions, but communication and coordination could be improved. The alignment of research and logistics staff within the Arctic and Antarctic sections is complementary and effective. The separation of Arctic and Antarctic logistics can create barriers to communication. However, staff are leading ongoing efforts to improve sharing of information and best practices between the sections.

Finding 2.4: Especially in season, individual staff workload is intense, and for leaders it is exacerbated by their large span of control. Interviewees across OPP describe the workload as heavy and constant, leading to frequent overtime and staff running on a 24/7 mentality. For staff working both in the US and the poles, there are stressors that can make the job more taxing. Staff stationed in the Arctic are in remote areas and have limited access to various resources. Those in Antarctica are working in extremely remote areas while responsible for hundreds of researchers, military personnel, and contractors. There is also the added personal challenge of being away from home and not being able to access traditional support networks.

OPP staff in the US work around the clock during the research seasons to ensure researchers and remote staff have the support they need to execute their projects. The staff who work on the ice in Antarctica are supporting an Antarctic base and directing day-to-day operations. With the time changes and high activity season, staff are consistently under pressure to ensure researchers can accomplish their work safely in remote and dangerous environments. The intensity of the work can cause burnout, which could potentially affect performance in life-threatening polar environments. In addition to the high workload, some section heads manage a large number of direct reports, potentially limiting their ability to provide support to staff. AIL's restructuring partially addressed the workload and span of control issues, but more structural changes are needed, which may include additional staff and supervisory positions or a reduction in programmatic scope.

Finding 2.5: The incident reporting process (reporting, response, and resolution) is not clearly defined and documented. The incident reporting process has undefined escalation protocols and unclear responsibilities, leading to inconsistent reporting and a lack of proper tracking and feedback through resolution. Without clear reporting guidelines, OPP staff may underreport or overreport incidents. Underreporting incidents may cause GEO and OD leaders to feel blindsided by an incident, while overreporting can bury important incidents.

Finding 2.6: Decision-making authorities are not defined and documented up NSF's chain of command. When a decision is elevated out of OPP, the decision-making authorities are not well-defined and can impede time-sensitive decisions and cause confusion about which leaders or staff can make final, binding decisions.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be completed regardless of organizational location within NSF. Some recommendations may be affected by a change in organizational placement.

Recommendation 2.1: OPP leaders should establish and institutionalize an integrated, long-term polar strategic plan and an annual implementation plan to improve communication, information sharing, and decision-making alignment. Institutionalizing a strategic planning process is intended to encourage communication and coordination across the OPP leadership team. The planning discussions should, at a minimum, include the OPP director, the executive officer, and the section heads—or equivalent positions should OPP become a directorate. As both poles become increasingly importance to US interests, the OPP director can use this strategic planning process to continue fostering collaboration and communication between OPP sections to break down organizational silos. The process should also inform budget development and performance discussions to ensure the OPP director can most effectively manage resources to support the mission and the work of OPP overall.

Recommendation 2.2: NSF and OPP leaders should establish more structured and transparent two-way communication and information flow between OPP and NSF leaders and ensure staff understand the process.

2.2.1 Establish and document standard operating procedures (SOPs) for communication and information flow.

> OPP and NSF leaders need to define timely communication and identify responsible parties regarding communication up and out of OPP. Establishing and documenting these SOPs will provide direction to OPP on who needs to be communicated with regarding which issues and topics, along with who needs to be notified for awareness. Once the communication SOPs are documented, NSF and OPP leaders need to educate staff members to ensure they understand the SOPs. Staff members should also have access to the documentation to ensure awareness and facilitate knowledge management.

2.2.2 Establish and document incident response communication SOPs.

> OPP and NSF leaders need to define what an incident is, which emergencies need to be communicated to whom, and when. There also needs to be an agreement on how high up the chain within NSF incident response communications should go and how to effectively keep all parties informed and actively updated as the incident progresses and is ultimately resolved. Once incident response SOPs are established, they should be documented and communicated and disseminated to all staff.

Recommendation 2.3: Within OPP, the leadership team should build upon current efforts to implement structured and transparent two-way communication and information sharing. The OPP leadership team needs to continue to improve communication among OPP staff members to align them with the vision and long-term plan for OPP. In addition to top-down and bottom-up communication, OPP leaders should continue to support and facilitate information sharing between the sections at all levels to drive strategic integration. Greater communication can improve staff collaboration and reduce the tension between Arctic and Antarctic programs and between scientific research and science support across OPP.

Recommendation 2.4: The section head of the Arctic Sciences Section, with OPP leaders, should initiate a reorganization to develop internal teams. This effort should include exploring options for spreading the workload, such as changing how existing positions are utilized and creating new supervisory positions. The ARC section head has nineteen direct reports with no intermediate supervisors. The section has two primary functions: awarding and overseeing grants and facilitating science support in the Arctic region. OPP should utilize the division of functions to develop internal teams and consider converting nonsupervisory positions into supervisory positions to oversee those teams. The ARC section head should consider the process AIL used to restructure as an example to guide ARC's restructuring.

3. OPP Culture and Employee Engagement

Findings

Finding 3.1: OPP has a highly skilled and dedicated workforce that is committed to supporting NSF research and US interests in the poles. OPP staff are aware of the importance of their work not only for polar science research but also for greater US interests in the polar regions. OPP's organizational culture is dedicated and focused on prioritizing mission goals. However, the lack of a unifying OPP polar mission has led to and deepened organizational silos and limited communications between the Antarctic (AIL, ANT) and Arctic (ARC) sections. A unifying mission serves as a mechanism to create a programmatic perspective alongside a broader organization-wide strategy.

Finding 3.2: Employee morale has been negatively impacted by the pressures brought on by constraints in staff and resources, leadership changes, and unexpected challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Limited knowledge management and communication challenges have led to employees not feeling supported or empowered to be decision-makers, creating a reactive management culture. Leadership changes, and associated periods of vacancy, have led to confusion on priorities within OPP, which has impacted OPP's operational efficiency and the ability to prioritize issues across OPP's broad portfolio.

Finding 3.3: There are few mechanisms to preserve institutional knowledge within OPP. Lack of established processes and procedures for recurring actions, as well as lack of succession planning impacts OPP's long-term strategic direction and vision. Resource constraints and heavy staff workloads create single points of failure that affect OPP's effectiveness and limit its ability to effectively engage with external stakeholders.

Recommendations

Recommendation 3.1: OPP leadership should establish standard operating procedures for recurring actions and clear reporting lines for incident response communication within OPP that are well understood by all parties. Following the steps outlined in Recommendation 2.2, OPP leaders should ensure that information flow and incident response communication procedures are established and understood by OPP staff at all levels.

Clarifying reporting lines, as well as processes and procedures, will help address operational efficiency gaps and contribute to staff empowerment.

Recommendation 3.2: The OPP leadership team should implement mechanisms to improve preservation of institutional knowledge within OPP. Preserving the technical and operational knowledge needed to run polar logistics operations is important given the complexity of conducting work in the poles. OPP should document information about OPP's portfolio of partners and stakeholders to reduce the learning curve for its future leaders and staff in external engagement. Particularly in relation to Indigenous engagement, OPP should utilize feedback presented by Indigenous stakeholders to develop and execute a strategy that builds on existing programs and further fosters a long-term, two-way relationship with these important communities. There are opportunities to build on existing OPP practices to better retain institutional knowledge, such as capturing employee "on-ice" experiences and knowledge for US Antarctic Program staff that are sent to Antarctica, and interviewing program directors and managers on best practices and lessons learned from conducting research in the Arctic with Indigenous stakeholders.

4. Leadership Capabilities and KSAs

Findings

Finding 4.1 Strong leadership skills are a key qualification for the director's role. Experience in polar regions and a science background are not requirements but convey credibility. The OPP director needs to possess the following critical leadership qualities to succeed:

- Proven track record in organizational leadership and the ability to effectively lead and engage staff in a large multifunctional organization
- Ability to manage and enhance integration between science and logistics planning
- Expertise in navigating complex situations, weighing various options, and making timely informed decisions that align with the organizational goals of OPP and NSF
- A clear vision for polar research and operations through development of strategic planning in the organization
- Effective advocacy and representation of US polar interests domestically and abroad to secure resources necessary to advance polar research
- Ability to create a culture and environment that fosters collaboration across different disciplines within OPP organizational units and across NSF
- Strong communication and people skills and the ability to build trust and effective relationships within NSF and with external stakeholders

Finding 4.2: It is critical for the OPP director to demonstrate a strong ability to work effectively in an international, cross-cultural, and multisectoral political environment and to build and maintain internal, interagency, international, and multisector partnerships. Recognizing the political and international dimensions of OPP's mission, it is essential for the OPP director to be perceived and presented as the primary ambassador for OPP with the ability to credibly convey the importance and direction of OPP's

work to a variety of stakeholders. The OPP director should have a proven demonstration of the competencies required to build connectivity and collaboration across NSF directorates and to navigate the federal interagency landscape and communicate effectively with high-level government officials, Congress members, and military personnel. The director must work effectively across boundaries and partner with an array of nongovernmental stakeholders, such as nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, and private sector companies. To effectively navigate the complex challenges facing OPP, the director must possess political acumen and diplomacy skills, and understand national and international politics, Indigenous concerns, and military strategies for the polar regions, as well as have the ability to effectively engage with international stakeholders.

Finding 4.3: It is important to distinguish between the roles and responsibilities of the OPP director and those of other members of the leadership team.

The alignment of OPP within NSF as a directorate or an office within OD will inform the allocation of responsibilities to and the degree of importance of OPP's director.

Leadership KSAs stem from the institutional roles that senior leaders are expected to play. There is a range of roles and responsibilities that need to be managed by the leadership team, and it is important to distinguish between the roles and responsibilities of the director and those of the other members of the leadership team. Additionally, the roles and responsibilities of the director are an important consideration in identifying the requisite leadership KSAs and mandatory technical qualifications.

Many interviewees noted the need to create a deputy director position to focus on day-to-day operations, allowing the director to concentrate on strategic direction and external partnerships. The deputy director must have excellent management skills, be experienced in overseeing daily operational activities, and have the ability to effectively manage the staff and budget. In 2024, OPP filled the vacant executive officer position, who essentially serves as OPP's deputy director, overseeing cross office initiatives, managing travel and training funding, developing a strategic staffing plan, and managing the cross functional communication team.

Finding 4.4: The current alignment of OPP within NSF and confusion about the scope of decision-making authority of the director may impact OPP's ability to recruit and retain high-quality candidates. The current organizational location of OPP may deter the best candidates from applying for the OPP director position and contribute to retention challenges. Higher visibility and direct reporting lines to NSF leaders would make the position more attractive to experienced and skilled leaders, likely increasing the pool of quality applicants.

Recommendation

Recommendation 4.1: NSF should seek to permanently fill the OPP director position with a leader who possesses experience managing a complex operational and stakeholder environment. NSF should recruit for the director position both internally and externally, with the recruitment strategy and outreach reflecting the core capabilities identified in finding 4.3. The necessary skillsets are unaffected by realignment of OPP within OD or as an independent directorate. However, if OPP were repositioned as a directorate, the position would

likely be more attractive to competitive candidates, which would improve the quality of the applicant pool. The operational capabilities of the polar facilities drive the success of the overall program; thus, the director must —first and foremost—ensure the maintenance and outfitting of those facilities. In addition, the director must be empowered to make binding decisions regarding time-sensitive operational issues concerning life safety or resource protection and deployment. To fulfill the role effectively, the OPP director requires substantial institutional knowledge and strong relationships with internal and external partners. In addition, the frequent turnover in the OPP director position in recent years has impacted OPP's ability to maintain partnerships and develop a long-term vision and strategy. Therefore, the OPP director should not be staffed with a rotator. Stable and continued leadership can unify organizational silos and address staff morale by creating a unified organizational culture and vision.