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NSF's New Strategic Plan

BARTON REPERT

The National Science Foundation is developing its latest strategic plan, which offers veteran NSF-watchers a window into basic priorities and senior-level policymaking at the agency, and also provides an opportunity for input by the scientific community on the foundation's policies and programs.

Like other federal departments and agencies, NSF is required under provisions of the Government Performance and Results Act to develop a new strategic plan every three years. For this latest effort, the process started last December with a "Dear Colleague" letter, from NSF director Arden L. Bement Jr. and deputy director Kathie L. Olsen, soliciting input from the scientific community. After going through several drafts and receiving additional community comment, the new plan is expected to be voted on by the National Science Board in August before going to Congress and the Office of Management and Budget by the end of September.

According to Craig Robertson, senior adviser in the budget division at NSF, Olsen put together a strategic planning group cochaired by Robertson and Ann B. Carlson from the director's office. The 12-member planning group, which consists mainly of the foundation's deputy assistant directors, is responsible for drafting the strategic plan and for making sure that it is broadly representative across NSF's various programs and disciplines.

Robertson said the agency was "very satisfied" with initial comments, suggestions, and recommendations from the scientific community. Overall, NSF received more than 200 responses. About 59 percent were from individual professors or scientists, and the rest

were from scientific societies, other government agencies (including national laboratories), the corporate sector, and international groups.

"There were essentially five main themes in the public comment, and we've been working that into the next draft of the plan," Robertson said. "The biggest one that went across the board was the critical need to improve math and science education in this nation." The four others, he said, are the need to attract "the best and brightest" to study and perform research; to balance awards to individual investigators with development of world-class research infrastructure; to coordinate research efforts with other organizations; and to enhance consistency and transparency in the merit review process.

The new strategic plan is expected to embrace the American Competitiveness Initiative, which President George W. Bush unveiled in January in his State of the Union speech. That initiative, which includes NSF, doubles funding for physical sciences and engineering research. "Obviously we're going to take that into account in looking at what we can do over the next three to five years," Robertson said.

The plan is also anticipated to incorporate priorities spelled out by the National Science Board in its report *2020 Vision for the National Science Foundation*. These priorities include (a) maintaining the nation's eminence in transformative research, (b) sustaining a world-class workforce, and (c) building the nation's research capacity through investments in infrastructure.

Joel M. Widder, a former senior NSF official who now works as a government relations consultant, commented

that this will be the first strategic plan for Bement and Olsen. "In that sense it will be very interesting to see how it comes out, because it will have Arden's fingerprints on it, as opposed to previous NSF directors' fingerprints."

Asked to what extent such strategic plans are actually useful, rather than simply being bureaucratic exercises, Samuel M. Rankin III—chair of the Coalition for National Science Funding, a group of more than 100 professional societies and universities that support increased funding for NSF—responded that the document helps explain what NSF is planning and what the agency considers important. "So I think even though it's probably a cumbersome process, and one that could be classified as bureaucratic, it's probably one that's needed, in today's environment especially." According to Rankin, there is considerable competition for budget dollars, not only in science but across the federal budget. An agency without a clear vision could be at a disadvantage.

As to whether the new NSF strategic plan will carry weight with Congress, David Goldston, staff director of the House Science Committee, commented: "I guess what I'd say is it depends on how it's done. If it really wrestles with some specificity on questions of what the foundation will emphasize, how it will evaluate its programs, and so forth, then it can actually be useful. Essentially, the usefulness depends on the execution."

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