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Principles of Funding (Draft)

NETWORK-WIDE RESPONSE FUNDING

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Draft 6-23-00

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Vision and Principles

The overall vision is that the National Sea Grant College Program can be responsive to our nations marine and Great Lakes needs via core-funded efforts.

The following principles have been followed in the development of a network-wide funding process that will allow the vision to be realized.

1. New SG dollars, obtained via funding initiatives or other means, should with time be folded into network wide core funding.
2. Core funding of individual Sea Grant College Programs (SGCP) should have a transparent and competitive means of growing.
3. Any increases in core funding via a modified NSI process should be better integrated into individual SGCP omnibus plans so as to maximize involvement of communications, extension, and education.
4. NSIs in the field relating to ocean, coastal and Great Lakes resources should be developed cooperatively by the Panel, the National Sea Grant College Program Office and the Sea Grant Institutes.

Background and Rationale

The two primary goals of this proposed process are (1) to provide an alternative to National Strategic Investments (NSIs) as a means of mobilizing the Sea Grant network to address issues that are of national concern, and (2) to grow the core of the Sea Grant programs. The proposed concept is based on recognition that the programs' core funding has been so seriously eroded over the past two decades that the programs are having great difficulty maintaining current activities, much less responding to emerging national needs.

At the same time we hope to improve the quality of the network's response to national needs. Currently, at the level of an individual program, responses to the NISS involve only one or two independent proposals that are generally unrelated to each other and are related to the program's omnibus plan only by accident. We believe that funding the responses through the core, would allow them to become integrated into the programs' omnibus plans. Thus integrated into the programs' omnibus proposals, we

believe that the network's response would be vastly improved, because responsive activity could then appropriately involve communications, extension, and education, not just research.

Clearly, funds for the proposed new process would need to come from the same sources that now support NSIs. That would reduce the number of NSIs or their scale. However, we are not proposing complete elimination of the NSIs. We recognize that they serve a purpose. On the other hand, we believe that some of the objectives of NSIs (e.g., building partnerships with other NOAA entities) would have been more effective had the funds been used to provide incentives and rewards to the programs through their core funding, as we propose below.

Procedure

The heart of this proposed approach is provision of both the incentive and the means for Sea Grant programs to respond to centrally identified network-wide or regional needs. Network-wide response funding might be as follows: The first step would be identification by the National Office of Sea Grant (NOSG) of an issue or issues (e.g., invasive species), or a desired programmatic practice (e.g., use of regional partnerships). Of course, we would hope that NOSG would employ an open and inclusive process to identify the needs, but the specifics of that process are outside the scope of this document. Having identified the response that they seek from the Sea Grant network, the NOSG would next make that response known to the 30 programs. What form the notification might take, and particularly what the timing should be are critical issues, but we are confident that those issues could be resolved if this new concept is itself accepted.

Although details are not given here, but we do want to emphasize two areas of concern. Our first is that lead-time for a network-wide response will need to be greater than has generally been the case for the NSIs. This new concept has its foundation and its strength in a reward system, and it will require time for the programs to respond. Secondly, there needs to be included a clear statement of the NOSG's expectations and their criteria for assessment of responses to nationally identified needs.. That is, the programs would obviously have to clearly understand how the NOSG will determine whether or not they are adequately responding to or proposing to respond to the expressed need.

Once a network-wide response has been solicited, we propose two different ways that each program might respond. To a certain extent the response is a matter of choice, but that choice is largely predetermined by whether or not they already have activity underway and included in their omnibus plan that they believe meets the expectations of the NOSG relative to the identified need. Initially, each program would need to choose one process or another, not both.

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1. Responding with Ongoing Activities: If programs have activities which they believe already constitute a response, i.e., that already fits the NOSG's stated criteria

for responsiveness, we propose that they would present the ongoing programs to an assessment process that the NOSG would use to verify the activity meets those criteria. If the assessment process verifies the criteria are being met, funds would be added to the program's core award. These would not be "merit" funds, but would become part of the program's core. However, like merit funds the amount available to any one program would be capped in such a way that it is possible for all programs to be successful. If the NOSG does not accept the ongoing activities as being responsive to the identified needs, the program would still have the option of pursuing increases to its core through the proposal process described below:

If the need a network-wide response is a continuing one (e.g., regional programming), future PAT visits would conduct follow-up evaluations and could adjust the program's merit award (not its core) based at least in part on the program's efforts and outcomes that address the need.

2. Responding by Proposing new Activities: If a program chooses not to submit ongoing work for assessment or if its ongoing work is determined by assessment to be unresponsive, then the program can propose new responsive activities. Proposed new funding to each program would be capped at an amount that would be equivalent to the "reward" added to programs' cores for already having responsive activities underway. That way and only in that way, the process could result in the funding of all of the proposals. Such proposals would be evaluated on the basis of established standards in a process that would need to be developed for that purpose. Although the evaluation would in some sense be competitive, it would be primarily a matter of determining whether or not the proposals are likely to effectively address the need. ***Successful proposals would be funded immediately. But those new funds would not be added to the programs' core until subsequent assessment, possibly a PAT visit, found that the proposed work had been successfully carried out. In other words, whichever process a program elected to use (either existing or proposed activities) funds would be added to the core only on the basis of performance.***

In addition to stimulating new activity, we feel that this second process (i.e., the proposal process) would help to level the playing field for the programs. Compared to smaller programs, large programs can obviously afford to have a wider variety of activities underway at any one time. Therefore, large programs have a higher probability of already having responsive work underway. If the only mechanism available for programs to receive additions to their core were based on ongoing activity, then it is probable that relatively large programs would get even larger, and the gap between large and small programs would grow wider. Further, although funding resulting from a successful proposal would not immediately be part of the core, the inclusion of the second process at least provides an opportunity for all programs to receive additional funding at about the same time.

The two processes outlined above are both intended to eventually add funding to each program's core award. At the same time, the processes would reward programs for responding to identified national needs. Particularly in situations where the nationally identified need involves a

situations where the nationally identified need involves a fundamental change in the program's practices (e.g., a need for better regional partnerships), future PAT visits could reinforce the reward and institutionalize the practice by including continued responsiveness to the need among the criteria used for programmatic assessment. On the other hand, any program that for whatever reason does not want to or cannot respond to the identified national need, could simply forgo the additional funding. We submit that, having declined to accept funds targeted for an nationally identified activity, the program should not be expected in future PAT visits to have increased its involvement in that activity, at least to the extent expected of programs that have accepted such funding. In other words, we are primarily proposing a process for rewarding programs for being responsive, not a process for punishing unresponsive programs.

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This page updated on: February 21, 2013