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NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION



Strategic Plan

NOVEMBER 1998

FOREWORD

In April 1998, we began developing our Mission and Vision statements, which are the crux of our Strategic Plan. We believe that our plan allows us to be both “independent” and “inclusive” so that we can continue to fulfill the mandate of the Inspector General Act as well as provide maximum assistance to the Foundation in its mission of enabling discovery and education in science and engineering. Our Strategic Plan is designed to complement the Foundation’s Strategic Plan and to enhance the quality of our work and its effect on the Foundation’s activities and programs. To develop our Strategic Plan, we concentrated on short- and long-term goals and strategies in three areas. We will focus on substantive matters; develop fair, accurate, and timely products; and create partnerships. In addition to meeting the reporting requirements of the Inspector General Act, we have begun to develop performance measures to assess the quality of our work, including the conduct of our reviews and the usefulness of our products to the agency.

Our Office’s overarching purpose is to foster positive changes for the Foundation and the science community it serves. In our view, strategic planning is an ongoing process in which we must respond continuously and flexibly to changes in our organization and our environment. We look forward to strengthening our partnerships with the Foundation’s management, the National Science Board, and the Congress. By working together, we can achieve the goals of the Strategic Plans established for the Foundation and our Office.

Philip L. Sunshine
Acting Inspector General

MISSION

To work together with the agency and its programs so that their goals are achieved efficiently and to detect and deter wrongdoing.

VISION

Although organizationally and operationally independent, we are part of the Foundation and choose to be inclusive.

We participate fully in the Foundation's efforts to be flexible and innovative while operating efficiently and with integrity.

We support the Foundation's mission of enabling discovery and education, and we recommend change in proportion to need and foreseeable benefit.

An Overview of Our Organization

To achieve the goals of our Strategic Plan, we determined where our organization stood when we began the planning process, decided where we would like to be in the future, and developed plans for how to arrive at our future destination. Two elements are integral to the successful achievement of our goals: (1) developing and maintaining a highly qualified staff and (2) ensuring that our processes are consistent with our goals and those of the Foundation.

Our Staff

To conduct effective audits, investigations, and inspections, we need an educated, knowledgeable, and motivated staff that understands the complexities of the Foundation's programs and activities. Our staff is composed of individuals with expertise in various scientific disciplines, accounting, criminal investigations, financial management, and law. We seek to create a work environment in which open communication, teamwork, and respect for different disciplinary perspectives give employees opportunities to innovate and grow, both personally and professionally. Our employees work independently and interdependently in two broad functional areas: efficiency and integrity.

Efficiency

By conducting audits and inspections, we review agency operations as well as grants, contracts, and cooperative agreements funded by the Foundation. We conduct financial audits to determine whether costs claimed by awardees are allowable, reasonable, and properly allocated. Our audits also seek to identify practices that may be modified so that funds can be used for other purposes that our customers consider more important. We are also responsible for auditing the Foundation's financial statements, including evaluations of internal controls and data processing systems.

Inspections are multi-disciplinary reviews of financial, administrative and programmatic operations that identify problems and also highlight what works well. Our inspections program is designed to assist managers at the Foundation and funded organizations improve operations and better achieve research and education goals.

An Overview of Our Organization

Integrity

We are responsible for investigating possible wrongdoing involving organizations or individuals who receive awards from, conduct business with, or work for the Foundation. In investigating these allegations we assess their seriousness and recommend proportionate action. When appropriate, the results of these investigations are referred to the Department of Justice or other prosecutorial authorities for criminal prosecution or civil litigation, or to the Foundation for administrative resolution.

Among our responsibilities are investigating allegations of misconduct in science, engineering, and education, such as falsification, fabrication, and plagiarism. Misconduct in science strikes at the core of the Foundation's mission, and it is a special concern for our Office. In investigating these allegations, we

- evaluate scientists' conduct according to the ethical standards of their professional communities' "accepted practices,"
- rely on the professional community at the Foundation and awardee institutions to articulate and evaluate these standards, and
- recommend findings of misconduct in science only for "serious deviations" from those standards.

An Overview of Our Organization

Our Process

We developed our strategic plan in an inclusive manner, seeking input from all OIG staff members. We discussed our processes with the National Science Board and the Foundation's senior management. These discussions covered OIG's goals, objectives, and strategies for developing, implementing, and supporting the Strategic Plan. Our staff is dedicated to providing effective and appropriate products and services to meet the needs of the Foundation and the Congress as well as keeping our customers informed about our activities.

Our Products

We are committed to deliver timely and high quality products and services to the Foundation, the Congress, and others upon request. We communicate the results of our reviews in audit, inspection, and investigation reports to awardees and program officials, and we brief senior Foundation officials and the Congress on priority issues and concerns.

Our Stakeholders and Our Customers

Our stakeholders and our customers are: the National Science Board, the Executive Branch of Government, the Congress, the U.S. taxpayers, the National Science Foundation, and the communities supported by the Foundation.

Core Values

Honesty

To act with integrity, to be trustworthy and straightforward, to be open about decisionmaking, and to be accountable for our decisions.

Accuracy

To ensure that our evaluations are thorough and free from errors and to state our findings and recommendations in ways that keep matters in proportion.

Timeliness

To develop and complete work products within a reasonable time that are useful to all interested parties and to minimize the disruption to individuals whose activities are under review.

Innovation

To search for new ways to meet our responsibilities.

Flexibility

To respond to each issue in accordance with its unique circumstances, while also treating similar issues consistently.

Cooperation

To work together as an office and with our colleagues in all communities to achieve our common goals.

Fairness

To represent the results of our audits, inspections, and investigations objectively and impartially.

Goodwill

To be respectful of people we encounter in the course of our work.



Focus on substantive matters and focus our audits and inspections prospectively.

Develop fair, accurate, and timely products.

Create partnerships that enable our customers to achieve their goals.

Overarching Strategies

The following strategies apply to both the efficiency and integrity areas of our office.

Focus on Substantive Matters

We will develop criteria and a process that enable us to:

- Focus our resources on items involving the greatest expenditures and risk (usually these are matters “external” to the Foundation);
- Discover serious wrongdoing or unethical activities while keeping the issue in proportion and protecting the privacy of the individuals; and
- Minimize the burden we place on our customers.

Develop Fair, Accurate, and Timely Products

- We first seek documentary evidence and then rely on oral testimony. We test the veracity of oral and written evidence.
- We integrate the disciplinary expertise necessary for each project and we recognize each person’s disciplinary strengths.
- We focus on our primary assignments and provide assistance to our colleagues to ensure the timely delivery of their products.

Overarching Strategies

Create Partnerships

- We are inclusive, but when we need to protect privacy and confidentiality, or ensure our independence, we do not share information and explain why.
- We develop models for best practices and, where appropriate, we strive to play a leadership role among federal agencies.
- We engage in outreach activities and participate in agency working groups to create ongoing, constructive dialogue with our stakeholders and our customers to improve processes and help reduce errors or irregularities.

Efficiency Strategy

Focus on Substantive Matters

- We emphasize helping the Foundation use funds more effectively in the future where it has prospective commitments. We do so by conducting preaward audits and reviews during major program transitions.
- Our auditors perform risk analyses to select entities for possible review, considering the dollar amount of an award, internal controls, prior audit coverage, and audit history. This includes an extensive desk review of proposal and award files. For those entities selected, our office then performs on-site surveys to determine whether there is a need for further review.
- We conduct proactive audit reviews where we believe that the individual internal control systems of an institution cannot adequately detect errors or irregularities.
- We recommend additional internal controls only when there is substantial justification that outweighs any increase in burden.
- We explain our recommendations primarily in terms of how they will improve effectiveness and efficiency. In examining compliance with government rules, we consider the purpose of those rules and use the purpose to interpret the letter of the rule flexibly.
- We engage in interdisciplinary, integrated reviews of awardee activities that address the full range of the Foundation's concerns. These efforts increase our sensitivity to the possibility that efforts to improve compliance in limited areas can occur at the expense of the Foundation's larger mission.

Efficiency Strategy

Develop Fair, Accurate, and Timely Products

- By examining underlying issues we seek to develop analyses that enable the Foundation's management and awardees to make improvements. It is important to us that improvements occur, not necessarily that our specific recommendations are adopted; we focus on achieving positive results, not on assessing blame for past performance or allocating credit for improvements.
- We share our findings orally with Foundation management and awardees soon after our site reviews, and we are responsive to their feedback. We write and publish our reports in time for managers to act on them. In developing findings and recommendations, we provide opportunities for input from and consider the views of all affected parties.

Create Partnerships

- We will develop a system of liaisons to Foundation divisions so that we can keep Foundation managers informed about OIG activities affecting them, understand what issues concern them, and learn what awardee oversight they would find most helpful.
- We will identify opportunities to coordinate OIG reviews with management's programmatic oversight. We expect to conduct increasing numbers of these joint reviews.
- In planning inspections and major financial reviews, we invite management to identify issues of special concern and endeavor to address those issues. We invite feedback from management on the issues.

Integrity Strategy

Focus on Substantive Matters

- We concentrate our investigative resources on the most serious cases, as measured by factors such as the amount of money at stake, the seriousness of the alleged ethical violations, and the strength of the evidence of abuse.
- We give highest priority to cases that will directly affect future Foundation activities, including cases in which we expect that formal action may be necessary to protect the integrity of federal funds and decision processes and allegations involving ongoing awards. We consider timeliness in such cases to be of paramount importance.
- We conduct forensic reviews to identify abuse in early stages or prevent future problems.
- Our misconduct regulation focuses on serious violations of the ethical standards that are important to the scientific community itself and that help it make discoveries and advance knowledge.

Integrity Strategy

Develop Fair, Accurate, and Timely Products

- Our investigative process will include review by impartial persons who have different disciplinary perspectives. For cases in which we recommend formal action, additional reviews by the Department of Justice or Foundation adjudicators help ensure that matters are kept in proportion and that over time similar cases are treated consistently.
- For complex matters, we discipline our thinking by doing written analyses.
- We protect the privacy of investigative subjects by conducting confidential reviews to prevent our investigative activities from inadvertently damaging reputations.
- By analyzing cases rigorously, we focus our information gathering activities and collect only information that is genuinely necessary. In this way, we minimize the burdens we place on those from whom we seek information.
- We will devote the necessary resources to resolve issues in a timely and fair manner.

Integrity Strategy

Create Partnerships

- We coordinate our work closely with attorneys at the Department of Justice.
- We work together with law enforcement offices at other federal agencies to address possible fraudulent activities affecting the Foundation as well as other federal agencies.
- We seek, when handling allegations of misconduct in science, to accommodate variations in the investigative procedures at awardee institutions. We require only that awardees follow fair and reasonable procedures and that they conduct thorough and accurate investigations.
- In forming judgments about alleged misconduct in science, we draw on the scientific expertise and familiarity with ethical practice of Foundation staff members and of scientists in the relevant professional community.
- We seek opportunities to inform our funded communities. For example, when handling cases, we explain our practices and procedures to affected parties, including subjects of investigation, complainants, Foundation officials, and officials at awardee institutions.

Performance Plan

(Objectives and Measures)

Focus on Substantive Matters: We are successful when our reviews promote continuous improvement.

At least 75 percent of our financial findings by dollar amount will involve using funds more effectively in the future rather than questioning past expenditures.

For FY 2000, we will implement a criteria-based program to set efficiency and integrity priorities.

Develop Fair, Accurate, and Timely Products: We are successful when our customers use our analyses to make improvements (not necessarily our recommended improvements).

At least 65 percent of our efficiency recommendations will be used by our customers to make improvements.

At least 80 percent of our integrity reports will be sustained by the adjudicator.

For FY 2000, we will implement goals and develop performance measures to ensure that cases are handled in a timely manner without sacrificing thoroughness.

Create Partnerships That Enable Our Customers To Achieve Their Goals:

We are successful when we create structures that facilitate constructive dialogue, innovation, and flexibility.

For FY 2000, we will implement an outreach and liaison program and develop a methodology to measure its success.

For FY 2000, we will create and implement several other significant structural mechanisms that will promote inclusivity, innovation, or flexibility.

By FY 2005, we will assume a leadership role, in partnership with our customers, on governmentwide issues and will be recognized as a model of best practice for an IG Office.

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