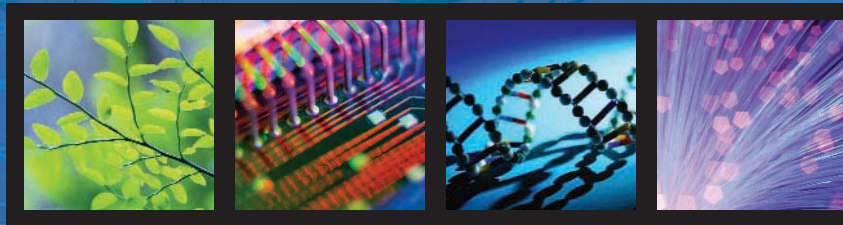


THE NATIONAL

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THE COMMITTEE PROCESS

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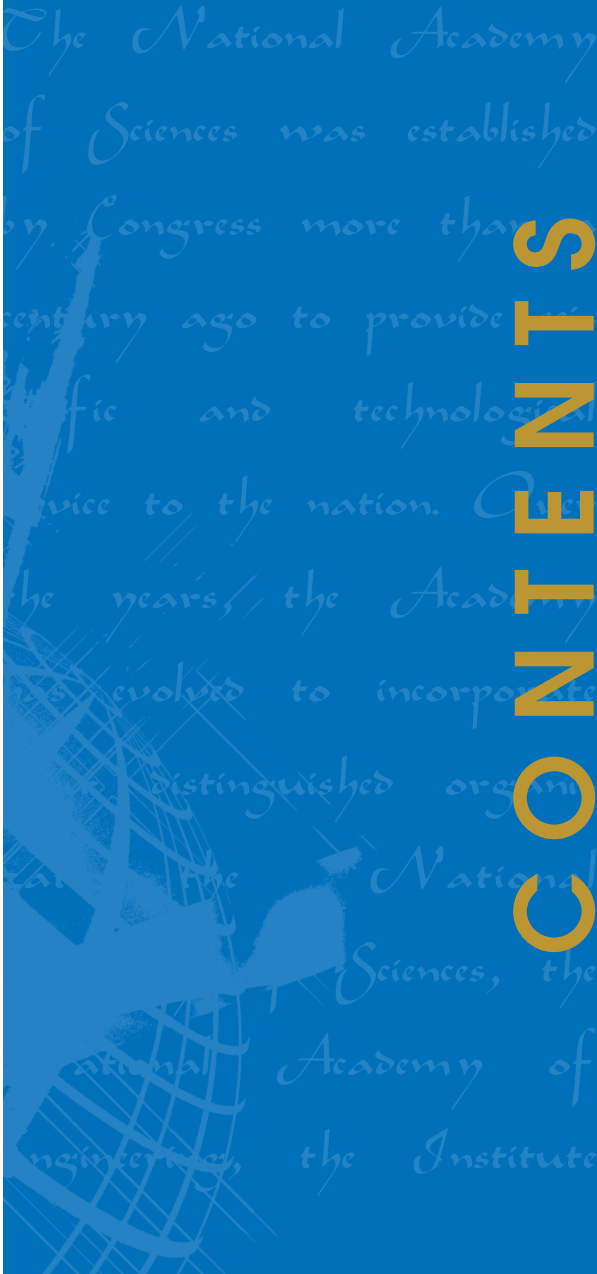
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National Academy of Sciences
National Academy of Engineering
Institute of Medicine
National Research Council

THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES
Advisers to the Nation on Science, Engineering, and Medicine



ABOUT THIS UNIQUE INSTITUTION 2

THE STUDY PROCESS 5

Committee Selection	6
Bias and Conflict of Interest	6
Committee Deliberations	7
Studies of Risk Assessment	8
Institutional Oversight	8
Writing the Report	9
Role of Staff	9
Report Review	10
Confidentiality	10
Public Access	12

DISSEMINATION 14

Congressional Outreach	14
Academies' News Office	15
National Academies Press	15
Communications Initiative	16
Academies' Web Site	16

USEFUL REFERENCES 17

SO YOU'VE BEEN

ASKED TO SERVE



You have been invited to work on a project at the National Academies and may be wondering exactly what your role is as a committee member. This document is a brief introduction to the institution and is designed to give you a sense of the committee process. No two projects are alike, of course, and people's experiences vary. But general policies and procedures have been developed to ensure that the time you spend as a volunteer in service to the nation is productive and rewarding.

THE NATIONAL
ACADEMIES



2

ABOUT THIS UNIQUE INSTITUTION

The National Academy of Sciences was established by Congress more than a century ago to provide scientific and technological advice to the nation. Over the years, the Academy has evolved to incorporate four distinguished organizations — the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, the Institute of Medicine, and the National Research Council. Known collectively as the National Academies, they perform an unparalleled public service by bringing together experts in all areas of scientific and technological endeavor. These experts serve as volunteers to address critical national issues and give unbiased advice to the federal government and the public. Most of this advice is provided either by the National Research Council — the chief operating arm of the Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Engineering — or by the Institute of Medicine, which operates under the charter of the National Academy of Sciences and according to Research Council rules.

THE NATIONAL
ACADEMIES

The National Academies provide science and technology advice in several different forms: written reports reflecting the consensus reached by an expert study committee; symposia and convocations engaging large audiences in discussion of national issues; proceedings from conferences and workshops; or “white papers” on policy issues of special interest. Each project is conducted or overseen by a committee serving pro bono, whose members are selected for their expertise on the subject.

This booklet focuses primarily on the study committee process, in which a committee of approximately 10 to 20 members with a diverse range of expertise and perspectives is convened to address a particular question or set of questions. Study committees have been assembled, for example, to address various aspects of the AIDS crisis, to consider the use of forensics techniques in the courts, and to offer policy advice on setting priorities for federal funding of research and development. Before a committee meets, one of the volunteer experts is appointed to serve as the committee chair, and a member of the Academies’ staff is assigned as the study director.

Each committee investigates the many facets of the problem described in its statement of task and develops a report of its findings, conclusions, and recommendations, based on the available scientific evidence. This report is subjected to rigorous review by a second group of independent experts anonymous to the committee. After revisions are made by the committee to satisfy the institution’s review process, the report is transmitted to the agency or organization that sponsored the study, and then released to the public. Names and affiliations of principal reviewers are made public when the report is released.

The National Academies and their operations are distinctive in several ways:

- Committee members serve without compensation, except for reimbursement of expenses.
- Most projects originate from requests made by outside sponsors such as Congress, federal agencies, and foundations. However, volunteer members of the institution’s boards also develop ideas for studies that subsequently are funded by external sources. In addition, the Academies have been building their own endowments through private contributions so that they can address important issues of science and policy without government or foundation support.

- The institution has no research laboratories. In reaching conclusions and recommendations, study committees hear invited testimony and evaluate published research from the relevant scientific literature, as part of an educational process designed to enable the committee to reach consensus. The resulting reports often present a novel synthesis of ideas unique to the committee; these reports are highly regarded by the sponsoring agencies and the public for their thorough analysis and carefully supported recommendations. The reputation of the institution for objectivity, integrity, independence, and competence is one of its most valuable assets. For this reason, procedures designed to ensure excellence apply to each study undertaken.
- The National Academies do not compete in response to federal requests for proposals. Their one-of-a-kind service, not duplicated by other organizations, was reaffirmed in a January 1993 executive order from President Bush.
- The Academies are not subject to the Federal Advisory Committee Act in the way government agencies are; neither are they subject to the Freedom of Information Act. However, the Federal Advisory Committee Act Amendments of 1997 (Public Law 105-153) require the Academies to provide opportunities for public access and involvement in the study process. Those requirements are discussed in the *Public Access* section of this booklet.



JD TALASEK

THE STUDY PROCESS

5

The core of the institution's work consists of studies usually of six months to two years in duration and performed under contract to a sponsor or set of sponsors. Each study is conducted by a committee selected expressly for that purpose. The committee meets at intervals to consider its scope of work, to review the relevant scientific evidence, and to develop its findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Once the report has been outlined by the committee, various sections often are written by individual members. The writing process is guided by the committee chair and aided by the committee staff, in particular by the study director.

The charge to the committee — developed before committee members are selected — is the formal statement of the questions to be addressed by the study. This statement defines the study's scope and issues to be examined. If a committee finds in the course of its work that this description is inadequate, the charge can be formally modified through petition to the Executive Committee of the National Research Council's Governing Board. Such petitions are carefully examined; a committee that is well-balanced for one purpose may not be appropriately constructed for a modified task.

COMMITTEE SELECTION

The search for candidates for committee membership is initiated by staff with input and oversight from the relevant boards. In defining the areas of expertise that should be represented on a committee and identifying individuals qualified to serve, the staff reviews scholarly literature and consults widely with the institution's members and volunteers, knowledgeable authorities, and professional associations. Sponsors may offer suggestions but do not select committee members.

Committee members are chosen on the basis of their knowledge and experience in the various aspects of the topic to be investigated, and after careful review are appointed by the chair of the National Research Council, who also is the president of the National Academy of Sciences. The names, affiliations, and short biographies of committee members are posted for public comment in the "Current Projects" area of the institution's Web site at <national-academies.org>.

BIAS AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Committee members serve as individuals, not as representatives of organizations or interest groups. Each person is selected on the basis of his or her expertise and good judgment, and is expected to contribute accordingly to the study.

The credibility of a report can be called into question if the committee that produced it is perceived to be biased. Potential sources of bias and conflict of interest are significant issues that are taken into consideration in the selection of committee members and are re-examined periodically throughout the study process.

Recognizing that each individual who is knowledgeable about a subject brings his or her own biases and experiences to any study effort, the institution has adopted specific procedures to achieve appropriate balance in the committee membership and to avoid conflicts of interest. At the time of appointment, each committee member is required to list all professional, consulting, and financial connections, as well as to describe pertinent intellectual positions and public statements by filling out a confidential form, "Background Information and Confidential Conflict of Interest Disclosure." The committee appointment is not finalized until the institution completes a review of information regarding potential conflicts of interest and bias.

As part of the process of becoming acquainted with each other and with the task before them, committee members discuss this information in closed session at the beginning of their first meeting and annually thereafter. The information also is reviewed by officials of the institution, and if a potential conflict becomes apparent, the committee member may be asked to resign. In exceptional circumstances, an individual may continue to serve on the committee if the conflict of interest is promptly and publicly disclosed, and the National Academies have determined that the conflict is unavoidable. To fulfill its legal requirement for such public disclosure, the institution posts on its Web site a brief statement describing the unavoidable conflict. When a question of balance arises, the usual procedure is to add members to the committee to achieve the appropriate balance.

COMMITTEE DELIBERATIONS

A successful report is the result of a dynamic group process, requiring that committee members be open to new ideas and innovative solutions, and be willing to learn from one another.

Committees are expected to be evenhanded and to examine all evidence dispassionately. Although all interested parties should be heard and their views given serious and respectful consideration, one of the committee's primary roles is to separate fact from opinion, analysis from advocacy. Scientific standards are essential in evaluating all arguments and alternatives.

Most committees eventually issue a unanimous report of their conclusions. Members of committees should strive for consensus, but not at the cost of substantially weakening their analyses and conclusions. It may be more valuable in the long run to explain the rationale behind areas of disagreement than to issue unanimous conclusions that are so limited that they fail to contribute to a better understanding of the issue.



PAUL KENNEDY

STUDIES OF RISK ASSESSMENT

Studies involving the assessment of risk are among the most difficult and potentially controversial. Government agencies and others engaged in the management of hazardous conditions and substances often are faced with making policy decisions in the absence of conclusive scientific evidence. Many Research Council and Institute of Medicine studies dealing with risk are requested by federal agencies seeking specific answers on which to base important policy decisions. In studies involving incomplete or inconclusive data, the collective experience and reasoned judgment of committee members become crucial factors in developing conclusions and recommendations.

It is critical for each committee working on a study of risk assessment to distinguish clearly between conclusions based on scientific evidence and those based on informed judgment. In cases in which scientific proof is incomplete, special care is needed to explain how the committee arrived at its conclusions. Moreover, the assumptions used should be explicitly identified and justified. A conscientious effort to be clear in writing the report will help to avoid the potential for misinterpretation when the report is published.

The institution has developed guidelines for committees charged with conducting risk-related projects (available on the Academies' intranet site, the AcademyNet). These guidelines emphasize the special care that must be taken in assembling the committee, orienting new committee members, conducting bias discussions, managing the consensus process, handling any minority opinions, and writing the report.

INSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT

Every study is subject to oversight, from initial approval to public release of a final report. Whether a study is requested by a government agency or a private organization, or is initiated within the institution itself, the study proposal first must be approved by the Executive Committee of the Research Council's Governing Board. This group carefully examines the proposal and considers such factors as the importance and timeliness of the question, whether there is an adequate base of scientific knowledge to support the study, the intended audience, the likely impact of the report, and the competence of the institution to take on the task.

Oversight is provided throughout the duration of a study by the various supervisory entities within the Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, as well as by the committee chair and the staff member serving as study director. Their responsibilities are to ensure that the

committee focuses on its stated tasks, that measures of quality control are enforced, and that the study proceeds on schedule and within budget. Sponsors do not engage in oversight of the studies.

WRITING THE REPORT

Completing the consensus-building process and writing a report that clearly presents the committee's findings, conclusions, and recommendations may be the most challenging, yet rewarding aspects of serving on a study committee. The report may well become an important reference for those who formulate public policy. For this reason, the value of a carefully prepared report cannot be overstated.

Although each committee may go about the drafting of its report differently, every report is the collective product of a group process. A committee member often will draft a chapter or portion of the report, but the "author of record" is the entire committee, and the responsibility for authorship lies with the committee as well. Individual authorship generally is not credited; the report and all copyrights become the property of the National Academy of Sciences.

ROLE OF STAFF

Each committee is assisted in its work by highly qualified staff members who facilitate the work of the committee during the conduct of the study. When committee and staff form a close professional partnership, the experience can be exhilarating for everyone involved.

Staff help to create the objective atmosphere in which the committee's deliberations take place. In addition, staff are responsible for ensuring that institutional procedures and practices are followed throughout the study, and that the study stays on schedule and within budget.

Staff members assist with many aspects of assembling the report, including researching, writing, integrating portions written by others, and ensuring consistent style and format. However, the conclusions and recommendations are those of the committee. Staff do not insert their personal conclusions or recommendations into the report.

REPORT REVIEW

Like all good science, reports should be based on fact and rigorous analysis. All of the institution's reports — whether products of studies, summaries of workshop proceedings, or abbreviated documents — must undergo an independent review by anonymous experts who were not involved in the report's preparation.

Report review is an integral and constructive part of the study process. It is the final opportunity for committees to test their reasoning, conclusions, and recommendations before release of the report to the public.

The Report Review Committee (RRC) ensures that an independent review has been conducted, and that:

- the report addresses the approved study charge and does not go beyond it;
- the findings are supported by the evidence and arguments presented;
- the exposition and organization are effective; and
- the tone of the report is impartial, and sensitive policy issues are treated with appropriate care.

The report may not be transmitted to the sponsor or released to the public until review has been completed to the satisfaction of the Report Review Committee. Details of the quality standards followed by reviewers can be found in the RRC document *Guidelines for Review: Consensus Reports*. Once the report is released, names and affiliations of principal reviewers are made public.

CONFIDENTIALITY

During more than a century of service, the institution has earned a reputation for providing independent, expert advice. Procedures and practices have evolved that protect committees from outside pressures and thereby safeguard the credibility and integrity of their work.

Committee meetings, particularly as the committee gathers information, are usually open to interested individuals and the news media. However, meetings are closed when the committee is deliberating to develop its findings and during discussion of financial and personnel matters. Closed meetings are not open to the public or to any person who is not a committee member or an official, agent, or employee of the Academies.

Reports are the product of the institution, not of the committee alone. Committee deliberations, drafts of the report in progress, and tentative conclusions all are confidential until a completed report passes through review and receives sign-off by the Report Review Committee and by the major unit responsible for the study. Committee members are expected to reject any requests for early briefings or media interviews on the committee's findings, and to treat committee deliberations and draft products as confidential.

A cardinal rule to keep in mind: Until the review process has been satisfactorily completed, the document is not an official report of the National Academies. Conclusions and recommendations can change up to the final sign-off; premature briefings for sponsors or others outside the institution may lock committees into a position not fully supported by the evidence. Early briefings also damage the final report by subjecting the committee to the accusation that it permitted the sponsor to preview and approve the conclusions and recommendations — a serious charge that undermines the independence and integrity of both the committee and the institution. In such cases, the hard work of the committee can be discredited, diminishing the report's value to the sponsor and to the nation.

Until the report is publicly released, committee members should limit public comment to the following:

- the scope of the project and what the committee has been asked to do;
- the name of the sponsor and estimated cost of the study, if known; and
- the makeup of the committee, including names and affiliations of committee members.



GREG HADLEY

This and other relevant information can be found on the institution's Web site at <national-academies.org> and in its public access files. These files, which include items such as materials presented to the committee in data-gathering meetings open to the public, are available for public review.

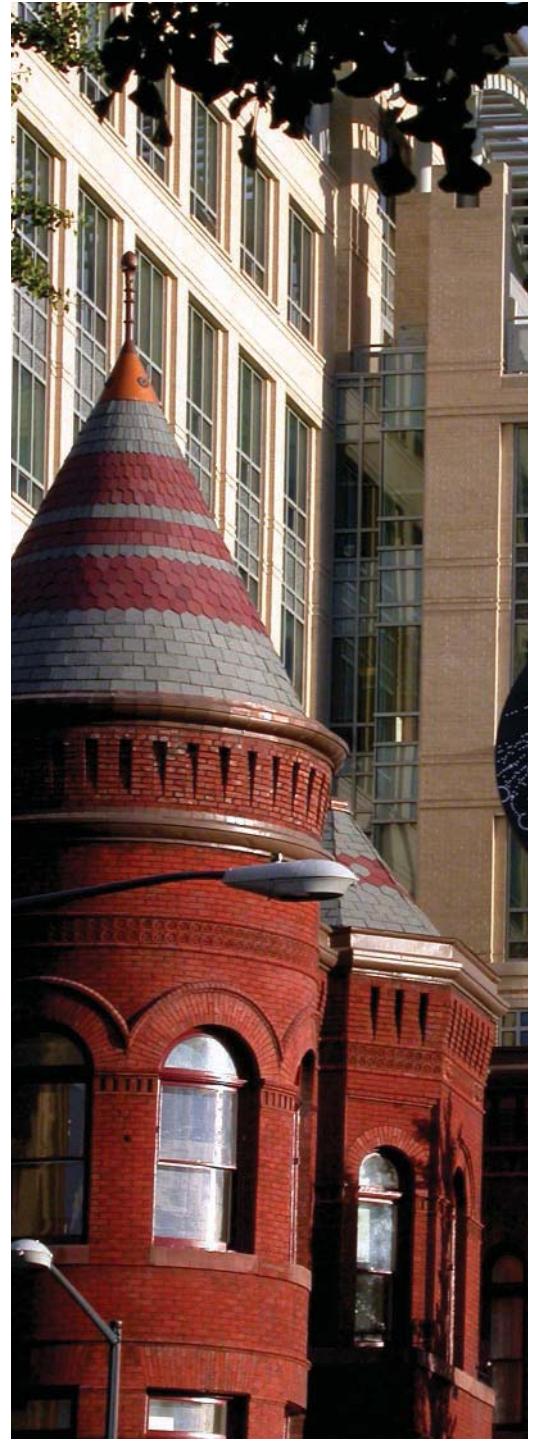
PUBLIC ACCESS

Legislation passed in late 1997 protects the Academies from government control under the Federal Advisory Committee Act. But in doing so, it explicitly requires the Academies to ensure public access to committee activities.

For example, any meeting of a committee at which anyone other than committee members or officials, agents, or employees of the institution is present — whether in person, by telephone, or teleconference — is considered a “data-gathering committee meeting.” Except as determined and approved in advance by the Academies’ leadership, all data-gathering committee meetings are open to the public. Data-gathering meetings that involve committee consideration of classified, proprietary, or personal-privacy information, however, exemplify situations in which meetings are not open to the public.

To facilitate the process of informing the public about a committee’s work and enabling interested individuals to attend open data-gathering sessions, an advance announcement must be posted — preferably 14 days before the meeting — on the institution’s Web site.

Data-gathering committee meetings should be regarded as on the record. Therefore, whether or not





J.D. TALASEK

representatives of the news media are in attendance, the chair of the meeting should advise everyone present of the nature and purpose of the meeting. Statements of this type are necessary to help ensure that participants and observers do not misinterpret the purpose of the meeting, or prematurely interpret the discussion to be the positions of individual participants, the committee, or the institution. For guidance on assembling introductory remarks for the chair, see “Setting the Ground Rules at an Open Meeting to Which the Public and Press Have Been Invited as Observers,” available on the AcademyNet.

To acquaint the public with the background of committee members, the chair should ask each member to state briefly, in open session at the first data-gathering committee meeting, those aspects of his or her background, experience, expertise, and previously stated positions that appear relevant to the functions to be performed by the committee. Committees also should create opportunities that facilitate the gathering of as wide a range of views as possible, such as having a session for public comments at a data-gathering committee meeting or soliciting comments in writing or via e-mail from interested members of the public.

Within 10 days following a closed committee meeting, the Academies will post a brief summary of the meeting on the Web, listing the committee members present, the topics discussed, and materials made available to the committee. This summary will not disclose the substantive content, conclusions, recommendations, discussion of draft reports, or any report review comments.



DISSEMINATION

Once a report has successfully completed review and been thoroughly edited, Academies staff working with the Office of Congressional and Government Affairs and the Office of News and Public Information develop a release timeline. At this stage it is critical to observe carefully the institution’s rules of confidentiality until the report is ready for release to the public.

CONGRESSIONAL OUTREACH

The Office of Congressional and Government Affairs (OCGA) is responsible for dissemination and outreach to the congressional and executive branches of government. One component of this is congressional and sponsor briefings. These briefings take place up to 24 hours before the public release of a report. Dissemination of reports that are congressionally mandated involves specific guidelines for briefing members of Congress. For other reports, OCGA informs concerned members of Congress and the appropriate congressional committees.

OCGA also monitors congressional activities on issues that affect the National Academies and helps committee members or staff prepare and submit testimony for Congress.

ACADEMIES' NEWS OFFICE

The Office of News and Public Information (ONPI) is the liaison between the Academies and the news media and general public. Many reports of the National Academies are newsworthy, and the media serve as an important channel for disseminating the content of reports.

For each report, ONPI works closely with study staff to develop a release plan that may include a news release; public briefing; embargo arrangement; outreach to targeted media; and media preparation for committee members to help them speak comfortably with journalists and handle potentially difficult inquiries.

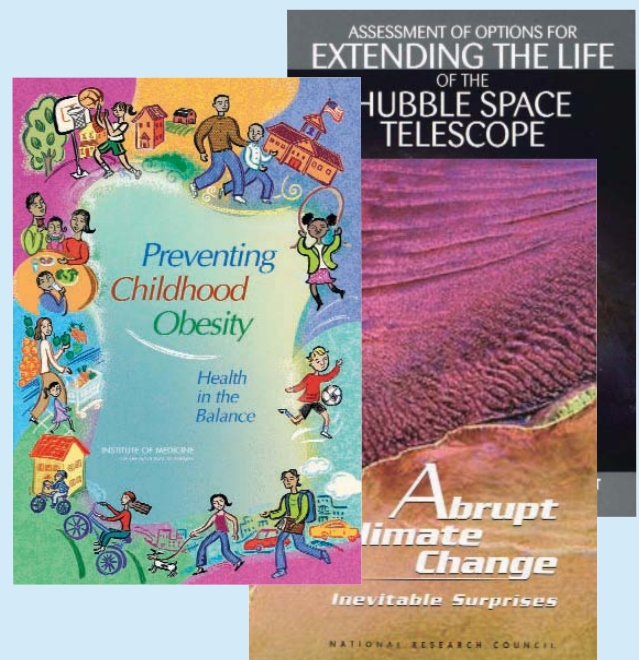
Committee members or staff who receive a call from a reporter concerning a pending report generally should feel free to respond, but in a limited way. Journalists may be provided with a project's statement of task, the committee roster, the identity of the sponsor(s), and the cost of the study, as well as general information about the background and scope of the project. Findings and recommendations, however, must be kept confidential until the report is released.

ONPI should be informed of substantive conversations with the news media, especially if there is any problem. Staff or committee members seeking guidance about media relations may consult with ONPI at any time. If a reporter is asking leading questions or inquiring about controversial issues, it often is best to delay answering until after conferring with ONPI.

ONPI also publicizes Academies reports through weekly and monthly electronic newsletters and the institution's magazine, *The National Academies In Focus*.

NATIONAL ACADEMIES PRESS

The National Academies Press (NAP) is the publisher for the institution. NAP offers a wide range of services, including publication planning, editing, printing, marketing, and distribution. It publishes nearly 200 committee reports each year, ranging from pre-publication photocopies to full-color, high-quality trade books that are marketed and sold around the world. The NAP Web site at <www.nap.edu> makes all of these publications available online — more than 3,000 books and 500,000 book pages in 2005. Most books published by NAP are also offered as PDF files, many of which are free to the public.



Current committee members are permitted free access to all available PDF files and should contact study staff to make the necessary arrangements; they also receive a 25 percent discount on all books purchased from NAP for personal use.

COMMUNICATIONS INITIATIVE

The National Academies strive to disseminate the results of their work to a wide range of audiences. The Office of Communications was formed in 2001 to help the institution accomplish this. Specifically, this office works in partnership with Academies program units to engage the public with the institution's work, create new products and services for different audiences, build stronger relationships with existing and potential sponsors, and harness the Web as an effective communication vehicle. Committees are encouraged to identify potential audiences for their studies early in the process, discuss how to reach those audiences, and consider ways of expanding public interest throughout the study process.

ACADEMIES' WEB SITE

Information about the institution's work is available on the Web at <national-academies.org>. A broad range of material can be found online, including current project information, news releases, and full-text reports.

USEFUL REFERENCES

Guidelines for Review: Consensus Reports

The National Academies Study Process: Ensuring Independent, Objective Advice

Roles of the Committee Chair

A Unique National Resource

Revised 2005

Copies of this booklet are available from the Office of News and Public Information

Tel.: 202-334-2138

E-mail: news@nas.edu

Fax: 202-334-2158

Internet: national-academies.org



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The nation turns to the National Academies—National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine, and National Research Council—for independent, objective advice on issues that affect people's lives worldwide.

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