

Basic Assistance Task Group
Minutes of Meeting on January 12, 2006

Based on the BAG request of September 19, 2005, Tom Weber has met with other NSF Division Directors and management teams to promote the development of grant competitions that would greatly reduce or eliminate budget details in the initial submission. Note – the request letter is posted on the FDP web site at: http://thefdp.org/Basic_Assistance.html

The current model being discussed would require a single total cost figure to be included in the application with a narrative describing the personnel involved and their effort levels. Some level of budget detail would then be requested only for those applications that were selected for funding.

Jim Randolph noted that he forwarded the 9/19/05 NSF request and attachments (principally information about the Westat review of the NIH Modular Application process) to both Chuck Paoletti at ONR and Jack Puzak at EPA. He asked that they review the Westat report and consider whether any form of the reduced-budget-detail model could be implemented in their grant competition portfolios. He also mentioned the potential for sending similar requests to other agencies (e.g., Department of Agriculture).

Jim Randolph opened a discussion of the relatedness notion (a.k.a. Closely Related Work or the Documentation and Allocation Standard). A handout was distributed that gave summary points from Beth Israel's presentation at the January 2005 FDP meeting and the relevant language from A-21, the current FDP terms and conditions, and the NIH Grants Policy Statement (versions dated 12/03 and 3/01).

There was general agreement that few institutions had officially adopted a specific policy and practice covering this local authority. In part this relates to the concern that declaring projects related increases the potential for the sponsoring agencies to interpret as overlapping support. In part, it also relates to there being no clear understanding of how this local authority can be of benefit to either the PI or the grantee institution.

The initial discussion covered relatedness as a postaward authority. The criteria to determine whether two or more projects could be considered related are defined in the FDP terms and the 3/01 NIH GPS. Determining that two projects are related seems a more straightforward process than defining the practical implications of the determination: i.e., once the projects are considered related, what additional flexibilities, in any, does/should that offer to the Principal Investigator?

The idea that relatedness might permit some degree of commingling of grant funds was discussed. Underlying algorithms could be created to accommodate for grants with different amounts and start/end dates. The sense of the group was that while this might have some benefit, other considerations at this time suggest this should not be pursued.

The discussion then turned to other potential benefits the relatedness authority might offer. The key benefit seems to be some degree of audit protection. For example, if audit questions arose about the allocation of charges between two projects, the ability to assert the projects were related might be an integral part of the grantee's response.

In that vein, the question was asked whether grantees should adopt a formal process to declare projects related. As is occasionally the case, creating formal processes increases the audit exposure. For example, if the grantee has an official process in place, the ability to use the relatedness authority as a defense might not be available if the projects in question had not been subjected to that formal process in advance. It is possible that not having an explicit process for declaring projects related, reserving the authority for as-needed situations, might provide greater institutional protection.

Jim Randolph proposed a survey of FDP members to determine which institutions have implemented the authority in any official way and what benefits they perceived. At a minimum, this might lead to dissemination of best practice information. He will prepare a draft set of questions and forward to the BAG group listserv for comment. He also will ask the FDP Executive Committee for permission to send the survey to the member administrative representatives.

A brief discussion of relatedness as a preaward concept was held. This idea centers on changing the perception of relatedness during the application stage from a negative factor (overlap) to a positive consideration (complementarity or how well the proposed project fits into the existing portfolio of active awards in that research group). Group conclusion: nice to think about but impractical to consider realistically in the current funding climate.