Basic Assistance Grants Task Force
Washington, D.C.
Minutes of September 19, 2005

Susan Ross reported on FDP's formal request to NSF dated 9/19/05 requesting that NSF 1) develop and implement a modular grant mechanism and 2) develop and test a grant mechanism that either entirely eliminates or greatly reduces the level of budget detail required at the time of submission. Jim Randolph had reported on this positive development earlier in the day at the Administrative Process Standing Committee.

Bob Dooling led a discussion of the federal research chair (FRC) concept. A three-page document describing the federal research chair dated 12/8/03 had been included in the meeting binder. The basic concept is to fund a faculty member's program of research, rather than individual projects. Per Bob, it had been discussed at an earlier Basic Assistance Grants meeting, and had been well-received by faculty. He said administrators were somewhat less enthusiastic, and federal representatives were least supportive.

Bob proceeded with a detailed review of the FRC proposal. The concept has been adapted from the Canadian research chair. He suggested that there wouldn't be many FRC awards; the intent is that the FRC would be an exceptional and highly distinguished program.

From the faculty perspective, an advantage to the FRC is that there would be one account and one annual report. In addition, the FRC would include an honorific component. From the agency perspective, the advantage would be the ability to see the integration of the principal investigator's research results. A disadvantage of the FRC is that the PI may be more prone to sponsor reductions, and it would be more difficult to coordinate agency support.

General discussion of the FRC concept followed. One faculty member liked the idea, but was concerned about tying eligibility to the funding level, stating that math PIs would be at a disadvantage. Also, it may be difficult to handle IRB approvals and balancing various sponsors' financial requirements. Other faculty members were concerned about the dollar threshold. An administrator thought the financial threshold was a negative feature, and said it would be easier to merge any two awards using "relatedness".

One agency representative reported that NIH got rid of relatedness in the last Grants Policy Statement due to lack of use, due to the view that PIs would be penalized. The same agency rep thought that the combined progress report in the FRC proposal would be problematic. Another agency rep commented that project periods aren't synchronous. It wasn't clear whether there would be an impact with GPRA.

Another participant suggested that the FRC proposal needs a cost/benefit analysis. The high dollar threshold is problematic – some disciplines won't qualify.

There were some suggestions that universities just implement relatedness. One thought was to have a demonstration where there would be no penalty for implementing relatedness. Another suggestion was to bring the inspectors general into the discussion before we go down the "relatedness" path. Another idea was to conduct a survey of administrative reps on relatedness. It may also be helpful to build off the results of the faculty administrative burden survey.