Basic Assistance Task Group
Minutes for Meeting on January 20, 2005

Jim Randolph recapped the modular application process for NIH. Reported that the Westat review results had been delivered to NIH but were not yet publicly available. Per conversation with Tony Demsey, results are likely to be announced before the May FDP meeting. Reminded that review gathered information from all stakeholders: research faculty as PI's and peer reviewers; NIH program, review, and grants management staff; and grantee institution research administrators.

Hope - if none of the stakeholders are worse off, and some better, NIH would be sufficiently encouraged to continue and maybe expand the modular process (raise the dollar threshold beyond $250,000 direct per year and include other types of applications; e.g., program projects).

NIH concerned with experience from original introduction of modulars – R01 application size grew quickly up to the $250,000 level. Raising the threshold expected to increase application size again – NIH budget in no position to handle large increase in application / award size.

Tom Weber (NSF): Budget details are distractions for the reviewers. Would volunteer his division (Materials Research) for demonstration.

Not necessary to adopt modular – emphasis should be on eliminating unnecessary budget detail if broader goal is to streamline the application process. Key is to determine what is "necessary" for the review process and the award process. Must get away from procurement-type analysis of budgets by reviewers and agency staff.

Experienced NSF program managers can estimate the science/ and the budget needed to accomplish.

Options:

Modular - A faculty reviewer suggested decreasing the modules from $25 to $10-$15K, because reviewers are loathe to cut by $25K, but they might cut a smaller amount. Modules could be direct only or total cost.

Modular variation: add narrative about non-personnel items or provide an opportunity to explain unusual circumstances.

Employ some type of just-in-time process – total direct cost or total cost figure only in initial applications, with or without budget narrative. NSF request more detail only of likely awardees – define minimum necessary to prepare award.

Variation – rounded categorical totals only – variation of the building blocks model.

Cannot limit demonstration to FDP institutions only as the review process would be complicated by two types of applications (full and minimal budget information). Perhaps require that FDP institutions that apply, must agree not to require internal budgets or SRO sign-off.

Maybe the NSF CAREER awards would be a good testing ground. Just wouldn't want to have a single panel see proposals with and without the detailed budget. Small grants for experimental research at $50K (SGER's). Very controversial at NSF at first, but now have raised the limit.

Key remains the Westat results.

Weber: success criterion: renewability. Streamlining the application process is a good idea but have to maintain quality in terms of renewability.

Geoff Grant: Why require budget detail when the program officer knows what they're going to provide? Let people apply for some budget level, and provide a summary budget, like the NIH multi-year budgets.

(Randolph note – anyone remember the old Fixed Obligation Grant idea?)

Jack Puzak just wants a summary budget. They're going to a higher level of detail in their non-research projects. Haven't uncovered problems in research grants.

Need to better define statements of desired outcomes and evaluation criteria.