NCAR Non-NSF Proposal Review Panel (PRP) Report

Albert Semtner
2016 PRP Chair
Naval Postgraduate School

UCAR Annual Members Meeting
October 11, 2016
The Proposal Review Panel

- Vernon Morris, Howard University
- David Parsons, University of Oklahoma
- Albert Semtner (Chair), Naval Postgraduate School
- Allison Steiner, University of Michigan
- Robert Street, Stanford University
- Jie Zhang, George Mason University
Findings for FY15

The Panel discussed 50 proposals selected from 93 overall in an executive session. The conclusion was that no proposals were deemed to be unfair competition for universities. The current review criteria included a maximum total co-sponsorship level of 30% from NCAR for the FY 2015 proposals and no unfair use of models, data, high-performance computing, tools, and observational instrumentation.

Based on data from the current proposal set, the Panel also noted that next year’s criteria of a maximum 15% total co-sponsorship and a maximum 15% co-sponsorship of any NCAR FTE in FY 2016 proposals should not impose undue constraints on most NCAR PIs and should simplify the review process in early 2017.

NB: Before any proposal is submitted, NCAR managers at the Laboratory and Director's levels scrutinize each proposal for fairness; and proposal PIs must have justified why any planned use of an NCAR resource does not compete unfairly with universities.
81% of total dollar value was reviewed; and at least 50% of proposals from each laboratory were included.

Distribution of proposals reviewed was: RAL 19; HAO 12; MMM 7; ACOM 6; CGD 3; CISL 1; IMAGe 1; and EOL 1.
General comments and recommendations

Collaborative funding: The panel noted the decrease in the percentage of proposals with university collaboration; and we wish to monitor future collaborative levels with continued charts like the one above. Although it is too early to conclude a trend, we encourage NCAR scientific staff to consider increasing university collaborations, when appropriate. This issue of a lack of university involvement is especially true for technology transfer efforts within RAL.

Recommendation: The panel supports James Hurrell’s idea that the decrease in collaborative proposals be discussed with the NCAR Executive Committee and that NCAR monitors the proposal process to see if a trend is beginning to develop.
NCAR response

• NCAR presented the Panel report and recommendations to the NCAR Executive Committee on March 29th. The NCAR Executive Committee requested further analysis of our collaboration statistics and agreed to monitor collaboration efforts within their labs.
General comments and recommendations

2) Community access to model and software developments: We understand that outside funding is often a necessary condition for undertaking many model developments upgrades at NCAR and that the resulting modeling capabilities often greatly enhance the research facilities that are available to the university community. The Panel was pleased to note that most of these proposals stressed making the new modeling capabilities available either as a supported community facility or through other means. A few proposals seemed to be vague or suggested restricted access.

Recommendation: The panel commends NCAR staff for seeking creative pathways for developing and improving modeling and other software capabilities that benefit the scientific community. We encourage investigators to be specific in their proposals regarding pathways for future access to models and software and to describe how improvements in model physics will be transferred into the modeling suite.
NCAR response

- The NCAR Executive Committee recognized the desire to provide more explicit information about these plans. This information will be provided in the response to the criteria and not necessarily in the proposal to the sponsor.
General comments and recommendations

3) Large international projects: Several issues were brought up regarding large, international projects conducted by RAL. The Panel noted that such international visibility and benefit to society should be expected at a successful national center. While these non-RFP based proposals are not considered to have an unfair advantage over the university community in terms of the usage of facility and staff, the Panel noted that they may pose an advantage over university community in terms of equal access.

Recommendation: Some of the large international projects conducted by RAL appear to be based on longstanding relationships with the sponsors, such that they might be approaching sole-source status. While the panel wishes to continue to review these proposals, we ask that proposals that are sole source and/or based upon sponsors requesting proposals from NCAR be identified as a separate category. The NCAR Executive Committee should also be aware that some UCAR University members are becoming increasingly interested in this arena.
The university members’ interest in seeking foreign and commercial funding was brought to the attention of the NCAR Executive Committee on March 29th. NCAR will be sensitive to this issue moving forward.
General comments and recommendations

4) Links to co-sponsorship levels in the university community: The 15% maximum per FTE co-sponsorship for FY 2016 might in the past have been justified as similar to a university scientist’s ability to provide co-sponsorship, but the latter is so variable that this comparison is no longer valid.

Recommendation: The Panel asks that the 15% per FTE be described as the maximum level of NCAR’s base funding that can be applied in a project having clear benefits for both the sponsor and NCAR rather than as a university standard.
NCAR response

• NCAR agrees with this recommendation and will implement the change on future proposals.
General comments and recommendations

5) Proposals exceeding the 15% level: There may be a rare need in the future for relaxation of the 15% limits for a proposal that promises significant technological and/or scientific benefits back to the university community or to society in general.

Recommendation: The Panel concurs with Jim Hurrell’s suggestion that the NCAR Director notify the Chair of the Proposal Review Panel in advance of proposals that exceed the 15% level and that this notification describe the expected benefits of the proposal.
NCAR response

• NCAR greatly appreciates the Panel’s acknowledgement of unique situations in which proposals require a higher level of co-sponsored staff time and/or high performance computing. NCAR anticipates implementation of this recommendation will be a rare occurrence.