Ideas for Leveling Out the NSF-Wide Award Workload

Background/Purpose: In FY 2012, BFA convened an Award Workload Workgroup with representation from each of the Directorates and all levels of staff to address the perennial issue of award workload being compressed into the last quarter of the fiscal year. As a result, a variety of suggestions for improvements to the NSF-wide calendar, improvements in operating procedures and IT enhancements have been compiled below.

Category/Proposed Activity	Timeframe Short Term (< 1 year) Medium Term (1-2 years) Long Term (> 2 years)	Impact on Award Workload	Cost / Resource Commitment
NSF-Wide Calendar Activities Directorate & Divisional Calendars roll up into an NSF-Wide Calendar			
Shift solicitations, tweaking slightly over time as appropriate, to end up in a better cycle. Plan solicitation dates to accommodate start dates.	Long Term	High	Staff time only
Evaluate panel cycle; look at how deadlines are distributed.	Long Term	High	Staff time only
Set priority deadlines for RET/REU supplements – e.g., for full consideration proposals must be received by ….	Medium Term	Medium	Staff Time only
Set up cross-cutting, special emphasis or new multi-year initiatives so that funds are committed in the 1st quarter, at least for subsequent years, considering that initial implementation may not be feasible in the 1st quarter.	Long Term	Medium	Staff Time only
Improve Operating Procedures			
Create quarterly targets (rather than year end spend out plans based on Critical Dates) in order to commit to forwarding no more than 35% of Directorate award actions to DGA in the 4th quarter. [Note: The number and type of actions impacts DGA workload more significantly than funding amounts.]	Long Term	High	No cost, management issue
Establish requirement that proposals reviewed in panels held during the 4th quarter will be awarded in the following fiscal year (exceptions for high-priority, special, or sensitive programs).	Long Term	Medium	No cost, management issue
Prepare guidelines/best practices for solicitations to streamline and/or reduce delays during the clearance process-related to panel calendar considerations above. Improve current PIMS system to address clearance processing issues – also see IT recommendation below to replace PIMS.	Long Term	Medium	No cost, management issue/staff time (except for changes to PIMS)
Standardize procedures across Directorates/Divisions so that program admin staff can support each other during peak workload periods or as needed – could possibly be addressed with Standing Operating Guidance or documented procedures.	Medium Term	Medium	No cost, management issue/staff time

Support additional BFA targeted outreach and encourage participation and involvement of Operations Specialists, Program Support Managers, and Program Managers in training sessions hosted by the AMG and the Academy. (For example, all Directorates/Divisions commit to inviting DGA and DACS liaisons to come to staff meetings at least twice a year to conduct outreach and share hints and tips for proposal processing. There is also a new Academy course offering on Proposal Life Cycle targeted to administrative staff and the Merit Review Basics course for Program Officers.)	Short Term	Medium	Staff time only
Information Technology Improvements			
Modernize the award system – migrate functionality into eJacket. [Note: Current award system, used to obligate approximately 20,000 actions annually, was built on client-server technology that is now outdated (12 years old), is expensive to maintain, and is does not have the flexibility to respond to ever changing requirements. Integration of award management into eJacket would provide significant program and user benefits and process improvement including forward funding and non-standard increments, award notice distribution to PIs, and automated decommitments.]	Long Term (possible Medium Term with incremental implementation **if supported by program**)	High	Medium to high cost – incremental process integration into eJacket currently in planning stage, which may take several years to complete, and is a significant investment, i.e., several million dollars.
Make eJacket (Automated Compliance Checking) tools available to all programs to assist in their review. (Compliance checking for required proposal sections went into effect in March 2013.)	Ongoing	High	(cost for additional enhancements will need to be developed based on identified requirements)
Make improvements to the eJacket co-funding process, which could enable Program to get actions to DGA/DACS sooner. [Note: The FY13 budget for eJacket includes no functional improvements because of budgetary constraints and a new IT funding process requiring all major IT investment to receive approval of the Capital Planning and Investment Control (CPIC) Board.]	Medium Term	High	Medium to high cost – varies based on requirements ranging from ~$500K for the near-term co-funding process improvements to several million dollars over a longer period of time.
Simplify the process by which pending award actions are cancelled by DGA in order to fix coding or other eJacket proposal data prior to award (to either avoid or automate decommitment and need to re-DD concur) – could be addressed through integration of award functionality in eJacket noted above.	Long Term (possible Medium Term incremental steps)	Medium	Related to modernizing award system and iTRAK (costs estimate will need to be developed based on actual requirements)
Consider moving approval of certain non-dollar actions back to Program Managers – could be considered as part of modernization of the award system after determining feasibility of policy changes.	Medium to Long Term	High	Staff time only (not including system changes), shifts some responsibility to Program
Consider replacing PIMS with a modern system to improve and streamline the clearance process.	Long Term	High	High – this could range radically in price depending on the solution selected from a Commercial-Off-The-Shelf (COTS) product to a new, customized solution.

Proposal pressure versus impact on award workload: While related, these are separate issues in many respects. Certainly, addressing proposal pressure would assist in managing the award workload, but proposal pressure is an area of concern that is worthy of further discussion across NSF. The previously noted recommendations are focused more on impacting the award workload, which is currently compressed into the last quarter of the fiscal year.

Conference Rooms and Panel Reviews: Availability of rooms for panel reviews is a recurring issue. Optimization of conference rooms could certainly be improved through better planning especially of the solicitation and review cycle. Recommendations that might assist in this regard are probably most closely related to the recommendations under NSF-wide Calendar Activities. It is not clear that there is a definitive nexus that would result in Leveling Out the NSF-Wide Award Workload; however, optimization of conference room resources would most certainly assist in managing proposal pressure. Please note that DAS will be working on this matter. Suggestions for improving conference room availability include:

- Block rooms for each Directorate;
- Designate some conference rooms for full day only, others for partial day;
- Reward Directorates who release unused rooms;
- Consider utilizing distributed conference rooms;
- Increase Virtual Meeting capabilities;
- Charge Directorates for rooms reserved and not cancelled;
- Expand the advance time for booking reservations;
- Consider changing system setting issue to allow for booking more than an hour at a time; and
- Hold a Focus Group with Program Officers.