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NSF Adopts Portfolio Framework to Ensure Transparency and Accountability

During the year-long discussion of the National Science Foundation's (NSF) future operation, the words transparency and accountability have been at the forefront. The House Science, Space, and Technology Committee, chaired by Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX), has made clear in their attacks on individual grants, the proposal for a High Quality Research Act, and the recently-released discussion draft of NSF's reauthorization dubbed FIRST (see [Update, November 23, 2013](#)) that they want a Foundation that is more responsible and responsive to its overseers in Congress and its constituents in the scientific community.

The Committee leadership as well as the House Leadership, in the person of Majority Leader Rep. Eric Cantor (R-VA), had also added the notion of prioritization to transparency and accountability with regard to NSF. This has come with not-so-veiled threats to curtail research support for the social, behavioral and economic sciences (SBE). However, this has not manifested itself in the

proposals that have emerged, so far.

The NSF leadership, including the National Science Board, has decided it was time to adopt what they are calling a "portfolio approach" to their business of awarding grants for research. "Our goal is to consider and communicate individual investment decisions in the context of broader research portfolio objectives," NSF acting director Cora Marrett explained in a memo to the NSF staff.

These portfolio objectives would align with the national interest as defined by NSF's mission "to promote the progress of science; to advance the national health, prosperity and welfare; to secure the national defense."

To achieve these goals, NSF will enlist its program officers to "articulate the content and opportunities" of their program's portfolio of awards and "provide grant abstracts that clearly explain to the public the project's significance and funding justification." The Science Committee and others have used the abstracts to question the value of certain grants.

NSF's Division Directors will regularly review the development of the portfolios of individual and cross-cutting programs to ensure that they address both review criteria-- intellectual merit and broader impacts-- and align with directorate and agency priorities.

The Directorate leaders will articulate the substance, goals, and priorities of the combined research portfolios they oversee. They will make sure they promote NSF's mission.

The Office of the Director becomes responsible for establishing NSF's directions and goals and conducts an agency-wide management review to confirm that "investment decisions promote and align with NSF's mission and investment priorities."

Although one presumes NSF has always done most of the above as part of the way it has operated for more than 60 years, the pressure to demonstrate openness and the responsible guardianship of public funds creates the necessity for reiterating basic values. At the same time, the Foundation feels the need to respond to constant attacks on individual grants, of which they give out approximately 11,000 per year, with a renewed focus on a broader picture of scientific progress. Whether this will satisfy NSF's critics remains to be seen.

Sen. Alexander and Rep. Holt Honored at Launch of Phi Beta Kappa's Arts and Sciences Initiative

The Phi Beta Kappa Society recently launched a new Arts and Sciences Initiative to build support for the liberal arts and sciences. The initiative's goal is to "champion the value of the liberal arts and sciences for the role they play in preparing students for lifetime careers, civic participation, and personal fulfillment in a democratic society." More information is available [here](#).

At a launch event on December 4, NPR social science correspondent Shankar Vedantam gave a keynote address on how the liberal arts and sciences expand our thinking beyond "what we know we know" and help us approach other realms of understanding. Phi Beta Kappa named Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ) the inaugural recipients of the 1776 Award, which recognizes national leaders who advance the arts and sciences, and whose leadership provides heightened visibility for their value to the nation. In his acceptance speech, Alexander emphasized the importance of a well-rounded liberal arts education, particularly one that incorporates U.S. history, a subject in which many American students score poorly. Holt, who is a Ph.D. physicist, stressed the importance of "thinking like a scientist" in "separating useful ideas and nonsense," and noted that decisions based on evidence and scientific thinking yield the best results.

Two New NCHS Data Briefs: Pregnancy Rates and Adolescent Use of Psychotropic Medication

The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) has released two new data briefs, one on pregnancy rates in U.S. women and another on adolescent use of psychotropic medication.

The first brief, [Pregnancy Rates for U.S. Women Continue to Drop](#), finds that the pregnancy rate in 2009, 102.1 per 1,000 women aged 15-44, had reached its lowest level in 12 years. Rates for women under 30 declined, while rates for women over 30 increased. The teen pregnancy rate reached historic lows in 2009 for the three major race/Hispanic origin groups.

The second data brief, [Psychotropic Medication Use Among Adolescents: United States, 2005-2010](#), finds that six percent of U.S. adolescents reported using psychotropic drugs in the past month. Use of antidepressants and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) medication were highest. Males were more likely to use ADHD drugs, while females were more likely to use antidepressants. The data brief was compiled using data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES).

AAAS Celebrates On-Call Scientist Program in Honor of Human Rights Day

In honor of Human Rights Day on December 10, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Scientific Responsibility, Human Rights and Law Program is launching a video series celebrating the contributions of its pro-bono on-call scientist and engineers, who offer their knowledge and expertise to assist human rights organizations. The first video is available on [YouTube](#) and will be posted on the [AAAS website](#) on Tuesday. In addition, AAAS has launched a podcast series, "SciTech for Human Rights," that features on-call scientists sharing the implications of their work for human rights. The first episode is posted [here](#).

Academies Report Considers Abrupt Impacts of Climate Change

The National Academies' Board on Atmospheric Science and Research (BASRC) released a new report, entitled [Abrupt Impacts of Climate Change: Anticipating Surprises](#). The study was authored by the Committee on Understanding and Monitoring Abrupt Climate Change and its Impacts.

At the report's launch event, committee member Anthony Barnosky, University of California, Berkeley, explained that the report considered two types of abrupt changes. The first refers to large and rapid changes in the physical climate system that take place within a few years to a few decades; unfold faster than expected, planned for, or budgeted for; and leave little time for society and ecosystems to adapt. The second category of abrupt changes consists of abrupt *impacts*, caused by gradual changes in the climate that push human and natural systems over a threshold (think of gradually rising water overflowing a levee). Barnosky shared some examples of abrupt changes underway already, including the faster-than-anticipated disappearance of summer Arctic sea ice and extinction pressures. The report also examines the potential impacts of abrupt changes on food security, water security, ecosystem services, infrastructure, human health, and national security.

Committee Chair James White, University of Colorado, Boulder, summarized the report's call for an Abrupt Change Early Warning System, which would monitor, model, and synthesize the data to better predict when the climate or a system is nearing a tipping point. This system would build on existing infrastructure, but would also require further planning and research. White emphasized that the social science research on how best to communicate these types of risks and how to make information usable to different stakeholders needs to be integrated into the early warning system in order for it to be effective.

The full report is available for download [here](#). A shorter [summary](#) is also available.

Hamilton Project Focuses on Supporting America's Lower-Middle-Class Families

At a forum held on December 4 by the Hamilton Project of the Brookings Institution, panelists discussed the economic issues facing America's lower-middle-class families. Emerging from two new discussion papers, proposals were introduced during the forum that would aid the more than half of American families who earn less than \$60,000 a year and live on the brink of poverty.

Former U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin kicked off the forum with remarks on the state of poverty in the United States. The U.S. is experiencing its worst rates of poverty in over two decades, conditions Rubin called "morally and socially incomprehensible and economically unproductive." He then introduced the two authors of the first proposal, Melissa Kearney and Lesley Turner, professors at the University of Maryland. Kearney and Turner's proposal sought to address a pervasive problem facing many lower-middle-class families: the tax structure for those close to the poverty line provides disincentives for dual-income-earning families.

Their proposal attempts to alter the current tax structure in a (presumably) politically acceptable manner so that it would eliminate many of the incentives for single-breadwinner households. As it currently stands, filing taxes in a low marginal tax bracket, such as a family with a joint \$60,000 per year income, ends up with a very high marginal tax rate for the second earner (typically the wife). When combined with the costs of child care, it often makes more sense financially for the second earner to stay at home. Further, a two-earner household loses access to many beneficial tax credits.

Commenting on their proposal, Kevin Hassett, Senior Fellow and Director of Economic Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, said that "we've removed Clinton's reforms around the benefit to work" for a large portion of the population and that this is one of the primary problems facing our welfare system today. Peter Orszag, former director of the Office of Management and Budget, agreed that this disincentive is a problem, but argued that the proposal would not ultimately change much. Orszag suggested that a more comprehensive approach would be to examine subsidized child care-- an expensive proposition, but one that has shown much success in other developed nations.

Kearney and Turner agreed that a more comprehensive solution would be better, but felt that a proposal not as "meek" as theirs would be seen as politically unfeasible and, ultimately, every little bit for these families helps. Additionally, they noted that even with the current disincentives, many second-earners choose to work, which ultimately creates a marriage penalty for couples thinking of getting married and, conversely, a marriage bonus if only one spouse works.

Strengthen, Not Reduce the Food Stamp Program

In the second panel, discussants addressed a new proposal by Diane Schanzenbach of Northwestern University that would strengthen the food stamp program, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Schanzenbach explained that food insecurity following the recession is at a record high of 15 percent, compared to 11 percent prior to the recession. In order to fix SNAP to meet this increased need, one must consider two factors: 1) the spending floor-- the minimum amount of money one needs to purchase food and 2) the income one has available to purchase food. The current program gives maximum benefits of \$200 per month, and recipients must combine cash and SNAP for food purchases.

Schanzenbach proposed the following changes to address the increasing demand: 1) increase the spending floor to take into account increasing costs and changing societal factors, and 2) reduce the marginal tax rate for dual-earner families. There are other positive changes that could be made, she said, including increasing incentives for purchasing fruits and vegetables and increasing the flexibility of benefit amounts during economic downturns.

Responding to her comments, Robert Greenstein, President of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, emphasized the importance of securing the safety net. "It cuts poverty nearly in half," he said. He brushed aside complaints about increasing costs of the program, stating that any increase

is due to the poor economy and the initial stimulus funding during the recession. He said that the stimulus increase for SNAP was the "best bang for the buck" in the totality of the stimulus, and by the end of the decade, SNAP costs will decrease to mid-1990s amounts.

"I just wish this city would face up to what it's doing to poor people," Joel Berg, Executive Director of the NYC Coalition Against Hunger, said about House Republicans' recent attempts to cut SNAP's funding. Work disincentives due to SNAP are very small and decreasing, only eight percent of SNAP recipients get cash benefits, and SNAP has less than a 10 percent overhead-- much less than private enterprises, he continued. He finished by commenting on the overall logic of SNAP opponents. According to the opponents, Berg said, "this program dramatically reduces poverty, therefore we do not need it."

In a brief question and answer session, two interesting topics were brought up. When asked about placing a burden on employers to pay higher wages-- i.e. a higher minimum wage-- Greenstein predicted that it is very unlikely to happen in the current political environment, thus the need for smaller changes to programs that already work, like SNAP. Finally, in response to a question about the connection between poverty and education, Schanzenbach asserted that the biggest return on investment in the safety net comes early in life.

National Academies Roundtable on Crime Trends Seeks Reasons for Crime Decrease

At a December 3 discussion at the National Academies Roundtable on Crime Trends, panelists presented new findings and discussed possibilities for future research in analyzing crime trends.

In the first panel, David Farrington, University of Cambridge, presented on individual differences and their implications for explaining crime trends. He began by noting that crime has decreased since the mid-1990s, but there are no clear explanations for why. Unemployment should theoretically lead to an increase in the crime rate, but that does not paint the whole picture. As an additional caveat, he pointed out that a one percent national increase in the crime rate could mean a 10 percent or greater increase in smaller demographic crime rates. There also other factors at play, such as biological factors, changing neighborhoods, family dynamics, increase/decrease in impulsiveness, and many others.

Continuing on the theme of the difficulty of determining the causal mechanism in analyzing crime trends, Farrington pointed out that most studies focus on the change *between* individuals rather than *within* individuals. There are many factors that happen to/within an individual, he said, that could have as significant an impact as those that happen between, such as employment, drug use, marriage or divorce, etc. Moreover, creating a causal link between changes in crime trends now versus 1995 would also have to take into account the increased security and surveillance present in today's society and that today there are more material goods available for theft. In conclusion, Farrington asserted that future research must better establish the causal factors on individual offending to create an accurate picture of why crime rates change.

The second discussion revolved around a new paper by Jessica Reyes, Amherst College, on the relationship between childhood lead exposure and crime trends. She opened by stating that there exists an abundance of evidence that lead is terribly unhealthy, especially for children. It impairs development in childhood, lowering IQ and causing ADHD and other behavioral problems. Moreover, there could be a "substantial cumulative" effect on large populations with lead exposure at the societal level.

She noted that the difficulty in addressing the lead-crime hypothesis is the existence of numerous compounding variables that must be isolated. The Clean Air Act (CAA) was tremendously successful in lowering the amount of lead-exposure in children. However, the CAA was not equally effective in every state, so exposure amounts varied from state to state and city to city. Reyes acknowledged that exposure to lead can also be driven by other elements that are known contributing factors to

crime, such as poverty, bad neighborhoods, lack of education, etc.

There is "strong evidence," Reyes said, "that lead exposure is responsible for crime and other antisocial behaviors" which have demonstrated an increased likelihood in committing crime. Her research estimated that a significant part of the crime increase between 1972 and 1992 could be attributed to lead exposure, and 56 percent of the decrease in the 1990s could be attributed to lower exposures following the implementation of the CAA.

Eric Baumer, Florida State University, raised many questions about these surprising findings. He had concerns about the shifting relative age structure used in her research and that it did not properly line up with exposure amounts. Additionally, he wondered why measures in other countries do not correspond to this study. He suggested that the research should better reflect the heterogeneity among states and that Reyes should better control for residence in urban versus rural areas.

Baumer also wondered why lead exposure only seemed to affect violent crime (excluding homicide), but other types of crime, including property crime and homicides, did not have similar correlations. Finally, he noted that the fact that lead has only a "modest" effect on personal attributes, but a seemingly large effect on aggregate crime rates is problematic for her study.

NSF Seeks Proposals for New Methodologies of Evaluation

The National Science Foundation's (NSF) Education and Human Resources directorate supports the Promoting Research and Innovation in Methodologies for Evaluation (PRIME) program. It is currently soliciting proposals for support of research on evaluation with special emphasis on: "(1) exploring innovative approaches for determining the impacts and usefulness of STEM education projects and programs; (2) building on and expanding the theoretical foundations for evaluating STEM education and workforce development initiatives, including translating and adapting approaches from other fields; and (3) growing the capacity and infrastructure of the evaluation field."

Three types of proposals will be supported by the program: Exploratory Projects that include proof-of-concept and feasibility studies; more extensive Full-Scale Projects; and workshops and conferences.

The program expects to make 13 to 18 awards in FY 2014. Approximately 7-10 will be full scale projects and approximately 6-8 will be exploratory projects. The remainder of funds will go to support conference and workshop projects, RAPIDs and EAGERS, pending availability of funds. NSF anticipates spending \$8 million on these awards pending the availability of funds.

For more information contact: Janice M. Earle, (703) 292-5097 or jearle@nsf.gov; or the PRIME Program Officers, 703-292-8650 or DRLPRIME@nsf.gov.

The proposal deadline is February 1, 2014.

The full solicitation can be found at: http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2014/nsf14515/nsf14515.htm?WT.mc_id=USNSF_25&WT.mc_ev=click.

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