

CLOSEOUT FOR M96080022

On 20 August 1996, a program officer¹ told OIG of his concerns about a proposal² on which he was named as the program officer and which was being recommended for funding. He explained that he and the proposal's PI had discussed the possibility that the proposal, which had been well received by reviewers, might be declined because of budgetary constraints. The proposal was a revision of a previously submitted one that had received similar laudatory reviews and been declined. The PI, and subsequently a senior colleague,³ requested explanations from NSF for its decision to decline the revised proposal to which the Assistant Director⁴ (AD) responded. The program officer was concerned about the way the division decided to fund this proposal and also alleged that the PI was requesting funds for research already funded by another federal agency.

Later that fiscal year, the Division Director⁵ (DD) received some funds and decided to use them to support the best of the unfunded proposals, including the PI's proposal. The program officer protested this decision for three reasons, he felt that (1) the PI had complained too much, (2) the AD's letter represented a formal reconsideration that supported his decision to decline the proposal, and (3) the PI's proposal described research that was the focus of an award from another federal agency.⁶ The Deputy Division Director⁷ (DDD) determined that complaining was not a reason to sustain a declination, the AD's letter did not represent a reconsideration since it had not been requested by the PI, and the program officer had not assessed whether or not the scope of the NSF proposal overlapped with the other agency's award.

The program officer told the DDD that he believed that, during the program officer's performance appraisal, the DD had evaluated the program officer's interactions with the PI negatively. The DDD concluded that this precluded the program officer's further handling of the proposal and appointed another program officer.⁸ The second program officer did not have sufficient time to manage the proposal and a third program officer⁹ was appointed. The third program officer addressed the overlap issue and then asked that the proposal be assigned to another program officer. The DDD honored this request but concluded that "the substance

¹ Dr. [REDACTED] is the program officer in the [REDACTED] of the Division [REDACTED] within the Directorate [REDACTED]

² Proposal [REDACTED] is entitled, "[REDACTED]" It was submitted by Dr. [REDACTED], the sole PI. The PI is an [REDACTED] Department [REDACTED] at The [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]

³ The colleague was Dr. [REDACTED]. S. [REDACTED] at The [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]

⁴ Dr. [REDACTED] is the Assistant Director for the Directorate [REDACTED]

⁵ Dr. [REDACTED] is the Division Director for the Division of [REDACTED]

⁶ The Department of Energy is the other federal agency.

⁷ Dr. [REDACTED] is the Deputy Division Director for the Division of [REDACTED]

⁸ The second program officer was Dr. [REDACTED]

⁹ The third program officer was Dr. [REDACTED]

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of the issues regarding the [PI's] proposal are quite straight forward but have been blown out of proportion by several tangential issues fueled by personalities and internal politics which should not be having this impact on the handling of this proposal." The second program officer was reassigned the proposal. At this point, the original program officer told OIG of his concerns that "[t]he PI has misrepresented the record and duplicated [the other federal agency's] funded aims."

After reviewing the proposal jacket, OIG determined that, with the exception of the allegation of misrepresentation, the problems described above were program management issues. OIG determined that the PI's alleged misrepresentation concerned the unspecified overlap between the award by the other agency and the NSF proposal. The third program officer had clarified, with the other agency, the connection between the two related efforts and had, with the PI, developed a revised scope for the NSF-funded activity. Program officers routinely contact PIs and other funding agencies to evaluate the relatedness of projects and on the basis of that information can alter the scope of the NSF-supported project. In our judgment the allegation of misrepresentation does not have substance. In this case, the program's concern about overlap, and its resolution, exemplifies one aspect of normal proposal processing and evaluation.

This inquiry is closed and no further action will be taken in this case.

cc: Staff Scientist, Deputy AIG-Oversight, AIG-Oversight, IG