

National Science Foundation
Annual Office of Management and Budget M-12-12 Conference Report
FY 2013

Overview

This report is submitted as required by Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Memorandum M-12-12, “Promoting Efficient Spending to Support Agency Operations.” OMB M-12-12 requires all federal agencies to report, by January 31st of each year, information on all agency-sponsored conferences from the previous fiscal year where the net expenses for each single conference were in excess of \$100,000. In addition, for any single conference with net conference expenses that exceeded \$500,000, this report is to include the agency head’s waiver that identified the exceptional circumstances that necessitated exceeding the \$500,000 threshold.

This report is comprised of two sections:

- Description of the Report
- Fiscal Year 2013 Summary

Description of the Report

In compliance with OMB Memorandum M-12-12, this report includes information on conferences that were held during the period October 1, 2012 through September 30, 2013, regardless of approval date. Only conferences hosted or sponsored by NSF are included. Conferences hosted by NSF grant awardees for purposes related to award objectives are not subject to the approval and reporting requirements.

Definition of Conference and Conference Expenses

For the purpose of this report, NSF used the definitions for “conference” and “conference expenses” provided by OMB M-12-12:

- Conference: a meeting, retreat, seminar, symposium or event that involves attendee travel.
- Conference Expenses: all direct and indirect conference costs except for amounts paid under federal grants to grantees and federal employee time for conference preparation. Some examples of conference expenses are: travel and per diem, payments to merit review panelists and committee members, rental of rooms for official business, audiovisual use, light refreshments, registration fees, and ground transportation. Additionally, conference expenses are net of any fees or revenue received by the agency through the conference.

Types of Conferences at NSF

NSF sponsors and hosts a wide variety of conferences that fall into five major categories, described briefly below:

- **Subject Matter:** Conferences held for purposes such as providing opportunities for collaboration among members of the scientific, engineering, and education communities and discussing future direction and strategies to advance science and engineering.
- **Merit Review Panels:** An assembly of NSF staff and guests for the purpose of reviewing and evaluating research proposals. Panelists provide advice and recommendations concerning proposals submitted to NSF for financial support. Panels can be held on-site or off-site.
- **Training:** A developmental activity, meeting, seminar, class, program, symposium, or related activity that is educational in nature and the content of which is germane to improving an individual's or organization's performance. Training is considered a conference when it involves travel costs.
- **Staff Retreats:** An on-site or off-site meeting primarily attended by NSF staff to review progress and challenges associated with implementation of government or departmental policies and to engage the NSF workforce in discussions covering various aspects of NSF or divisional activities.
- **Other:** Conferences that fall outside of the primary conference types defined above such as NSF Grants Conferences, Committee of Visitors (COVs), and Advisory Committee (AC) meetings.

Fiscal Year 2013 Summary

Actions Taken by NSF to Improve Management of Conference Costs

Over the course of the fiscal year, NSF took several steps to reduce conference spending and ensure that all conferences were reviewed and approved at appropriate levels and to reduce conference spending.

- December 2012 – Issued NSF Bulletin No. 12-19, “Conference Planning, Approval and Reporting Requirements,” to implement the conference approval requirements of OMB Memorandum M-12-12 and to update agency policies related to the approval and reporting of all conference obligations and expenses.
- December 2012 – Agency-wide travel targets for FY 2013 were established in accordance with OMB Memorandum M-12-12 to help manage all travel costs, including those related to conferences, more proactively and to comply with the Administration's mandates for reducing costs. All NSF directorates and offices obligated 28 percent less than their established travel targets.

- During the year, NSF expanded the use of virtual merit review panels over prior years. In FY 2013, 1,874 panels were held, of which 537, or 29 percent, were wholly virtual. By comparison, only 9 percent of panels held during FY 2012 were wholly virtual. The increase in virtual panel participation can be attributed to several factors: a response to reductions in travel budgets; development of virtual panel training materials; and management’s encouragement to utilize virtual panels as a viable reviewer participation mechanism. The term “virtual panel” refers to a panel meeting where reviewers participate via teleconference, videoconference, or an online meeting technology.

Conference Expenses in Excess of \$100,000

Between October 1, 2012 and September 30, 2013, NSF sponsored five conferences with net expenses in excess of \$100,000. The total cost of the five conferences—attended by 2,028 individuals—was \$2.8 million. The average cost per attendee was \$1,391. Approximately 44 percent of attendees traveled at NSF expense. All of these conferences were conducted at on- or off-site local facilities.

The attached Table (https://www.nsf.gov/bfa/docs/conference_reports/confdata_fy13.pdf) includes the following information on conferences for which the total net cost to NSF exceeded \$100,000¹:

- Conference name and justification for how the conference advanced NSF’s mission;
- Sponsoring NSF organization;
- Conference dates;
- Number of conference participants and number of individuals whose travel expenses were paid by NSF;
- Conference location;
- Net conference expenses.

¹ The amounts used to determine the final cost of a conference were a mix of actual costs and estimated costs; and, as a result, additional conferences may have been included, or some excluded, if only actual costs were used.

Director's Approval of Exceptional Circumstances

Only one conference received approval from the Director to waive the \$500,000 limitation on conference spending based on the exceptional circumstances. The Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP) panel meeting was a three-day local conference that hosted almost 800 reviewers to review over 12,000 Fellowship applications. The purpose of the GRFP panel meeting was to provide expert advice and recommendations on fellowship applications submitted to NSF. GRFP helps ensure the vitality of the human resource base of science and engineering in the U.S. and reinforces its diversity. The program recognizes and supports outstanding graduate students in NSF-supported science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines who are pursuing research-based masters and doctoral degrees at accredited U.S. institutions.