Operational Aspects of the GSS
from the Standpoint of Board of Overseers

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The General Social Survey (GSS) is supported by funding from the National Science Foundation, supplemented by payments from users who contribute "modules" of questions of varying length and complexity. NSF funding is awarded on a five-year cycle and supports the bulk of the survey core. Survey operations are carried out by NORC under the direction of the GSS PI's, Drs. Tom Smith, James Davis, and Peter Marsden.

Mission of GSS Board of Overseers
The GSS Board of Overseers is an independent body of scholars who serve NSF and are entrusted with providing review and oversight of the GSS. As set out in the "Charter of the Board of Overseers of the General Social Survey," the Board's mission is to, in consultation with the principal investigators and the GSS staff, review the work and develop plans and budgets of the GSS; advise and consult with the PIs in developing proposals to agencies or foundations; in consultation with the principal investigators and representatives of funding agencies, approve priorities and the allocation of time in the survey instrument (including the balance of continuity and new areas of inquiry); approve the questionnaire proposed by the GSS staff; take other steps to enhance the scientific value of the GSS, such as recommending to the GSS research on issues of measurement and validity and undertaking its own studies to assess the quality of the GSS data.

Make-up of Oversight Board
The Board is made up of between 9 and 15 scholars chosen to represent the GSS user community with respect to academic discipline, substantive area of research, methodological expertise, institutions, and geography and in a way that is consistent with the NSF's affirmative action goals. Although Board members are selected carefully, full representation of all constituencies on a small board is seldom possible at any given time.
Over time, however, the Board tries to ensure that important constituencies are not excluded for a long period. The Board has traditionally been dominated by sociologists, although, at any point during the past five years, between one and four Board members have been political scientists. The Board currently has one economist. The Board typically includes expertise on race-ethnicity, politics, stratification, gender, family, religion, health, crime, law, demography, and survey research methodology. Efforts are made to include persons who have had experience with other major survey data collection efforts and with the GSS as researchers, teachers, and module developers. In recent years, the Board has included persons who have served on the oversight boards or as investigators for NSF's other two long standing social surveys, the American National Election Survey and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Affiliates of the University of Chicago or NORC are not eligible to serve on the Board.

Board members typically serve four-year terms. Officers of the Board include the Board Chair, who serves a two-year term (renewable for a second term), a Board representative to the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), and the Chair of the Board's Long Range Planning Committee. New Board members are selected through election by the current Board, subject to final confirmation by NSF staff. The Board comprises persons who have varying lengths of tenure. Because the Board selects its own colleagues and successors, it must weigh the desirability of recruiting highly qualified and compatible members against an inward-looking tendency to select persons who resemble themselves too closely. For the most part, the Board has successfully maintained a balanced approach to this issue. Further details about the Board's membership rules are provided in the Board Charter.

Board Activities
Most of the Board's work occurs during and around its regular semi-annual meetings with the PIs and representatives of NSF, typically Pat White of the NSF Sociology Program and Ed Hackett, Director of NSF Division of Social and Economic Sciences. The Board's specific activities depend in part on when meetings occur relative to the two-year cycle of planning and implementing the GSS. In a meeting during the later stages of data collection (e.g., Fall 2006), the Board receives and comments on reports supplied by the PIs, the NORC Vice President, and representatives from field staff. NORC representatives attend these Board meetings, make an oral presentation, and field questions from Board members about response rate, cost, data quality, interviewer performance, and other operations issues. In meetings that take place shortly after data collection is complete (e.g., Spring 2007), more attention is given to longer range issues.

In all meetings, but especially those leading up to a new survey, the Board devotes considerable attention to review of topical modules that have usually been proposed by third parties (non-PIs, non-Board members). Between meetings, selected Board members carry out regularly schedule activities, such as attendance at ISSP meetings, or ad hoc Board business. Recent examples of the latter include a review of possible items on the measurement of gay identification, development of a module design to explore the potential of the new GSS panel, and sychometric analysis of the GSS vocabulary test WORDSUM. The Board also receives reports from the PIs about funding the upcoming survey, plans for the ISSP, and other logistical or substantive issues that the PIs bring to its attention. The Board's Long-Range Planning Committee usually meets the day prior to the regular Board meeting. This committee identifies longer run issues that require the Board's or the PIs attention, including enduring procedural problems and periodic review of core questionnaire items.

Module Development and Review
Topical modules originate from university-based academics with funding from government or foundation sources; researchers in government agencies; from PI Tom Smith in collaboration with a funding source; and from Board members themselves. The GSS is an attractive vehicle for modules because it is a face-to-face interview with a comparatively high response rate, it contains substantial complementary demographic and attitudinal content in the core part of the survey, and its regular schedule provides the opportunity for longitudinal collection of module items. Module proposers often approach the PIs or, less often, the Board with ideas for modules

before they obtain funding. Proposers confer with Tom Smith about cost, time estimates, and timetables. The Board reviews these initial proposals – usually in the form of a written prospectus although sometimes on the basis of a short oral report by Smith. The Board comments on the scientific merit, technical quality, and feasibility of the proposals and encourages or discourages further development. Smith conveys the Board's reactions to module proposers. Proposals that are given a "green light" by the Board for further development are, subject to the developers' success in securing funding, further reviewed for substantive and technical merit by the Board when specific questionnaire items have been written. In principle, the Board can accept or reject a module at this time. In practice, when necessary, the Board typically supplies critical advice for further improvement, which Smith conveys to the proposer.

Funding of the Board
The Board is supported by a segregated part of the NSF core grant. The Board's funds pay for the costs of semi-annual meetings, GSS pretests, and board initiated studies.

The Problem of Innovation
The procedures described above generally work well for both the PIs and the social science community. Nonetheless, the Board, the PIs, and NSF are constrained by the exigencies of funding and scheduling a regular large scale survey that is largely devoted to replicated measurement. These constraints create ongoing operational problems.

 • The PIs must complete a fully funded survey in timely fashion every two years. A large fraction of GSS funding comes from modules funded by sources other than the NSF core grant. The PIs are constrained to accept modules that are technically competent but may not be of general scientific interest, or that may, in the Board's judgment, be of marginal technical quality. The PIs and Board must balance the need for funds against the scientific quality and significance of the survey.

 • The time between when module questionnaire items are submitted for Board review and deadlines for pretesting and CAPI programming is short. Requests by the Board for further revision may be impractical if a module is to be included and its financial contribution secured in time for a given Survey. This limits the Board's ability to influence survey content and quality. Requiring proposers to submit initial and final module plans farther in advance of final deadlines may discourage proposers and jeopardize key funding sources.

 • The GSS should balance replication in substance and method with substantive and procedural innovation. The PIs are constrained by their funding, which provides limited room for major innovation. The PIs tend to make their greatest efforts at innovation when they apply to renew the core NSF grant. The outcome of this application largely determines the scope of innovation for the next five years. For example, long overdue innovations such as the panel and Spanish interviewing only appear in the 2006 GSS after repeated unsuccessful past efforts by the PIs to secure core funding for them. The Board, however, while firmly committed to replicated measurement and mindful of the PIs circumstances, tends to push for scientifically valuable changes without regard for the five-year funding cycle.

The Board's impulses at times do not jibe with the priorities of the PIs who, understandably, are concerned with replication, deadlines, and budgets. Some low cost (yet highly desirable) innovations have occurred mainly through the Board's efforts at persuasion. For example, following extensive discussion between Board and PIs, the GSS will now release interview "process" data (e.g., numbers and types of contacts, interviewer characteristics, etc.) on the public file. This innovation required no supplementary funding. Other innovations, such as a state of the art website for public access, while long a Board priority, is only now being implemented because of the PIs success in obtaining supplementary NSF funding. Yet other costly innovations, such as cognitive pretesting of GSS items remain under discussion between PIs and the Board.