

Trip Report to Washington D. C. on April 27 and 28

A group of 18 faculty (11 from the College of Engineering and 7 from the College of Arts and Sciences) and two administrators (Vahid Motevalli and Francis Otuonye) travelled to Washington, DC, on April 27 and 28, to meet with program directors at NSF, DOE, DARPA, NIH, and DOT. Two faculty from the College of Education, who earlier expressed interests in the trip did not respond to e-mails and therefore did not attend.

The group met with a number of high-level NSF directors, including Assistant Director of Engineering, Chief Operating Officer, and Division Directors in the morning of April 27 for overview of the NSF and its different programs. In the afternoon, each faculty had a one-to-one meeting with an NSF program director, and some had the opportunity to meet with four program directors to discuss their projects. Depending on the schedules, some faculty arranged meetings with other government agencies. On the second day of the trip, April 28, those in the group who remained in DC (12 of the group) initially had a meeting at DARPA and received a presentation from the Deputy Director, DARPA Office for Science. Subsequently, most fanned out to different agencies depending on individual interests and the availability of the program directors they wished to visit. As a result of the visits, three faculty have already been invited to serve on review panels either at NSF or DOE.

Each faculty was required to provide a trip report. For convenience, the trip reports are posted at the link: <https://www.tntech.edu/research/announcements/national-science-foundation-meeting-april-2015>. Please contact Amy Knox at akknox@tntech.edu or 372-3464 for password information.

A debrief meeting was held on May 4th, and the group presented their experiences about the trip. The following are comments from the group:

Pros

- Some discussed their projects with up to four program directors and found out what they are looking for in a proposal.
- It was helpful to learn the expectations of the program directors. Learned more about serving on review panels and gained insights on upcoming funding levels for proposals.
- Liked the structure of the visit; having the first part at the NSF being general was helpful and enjoyed the flexibility of being able to set up meetings with program directors from a variety of agencies in the afternoon. It was nice to give the program director a face to put with a name and hear about new program objectives.
- Found the general meetings in the morning helpful. Felt like the meeting with the program director was more of a mentoring meeting and gained valuable feedback.
- Morning session was helpful. Even coming from a different department, it was helpful to get the engineering perspective.
- Came in with an idea and found out which program would be the best fit; also received insight regarding how to tailor proposal to what the panel will fund. Set up a future review of a white paper.
- Spoke to someone in DoE who helped narrow focus to the right program; developed relationship begun through Oak Ridge National Lab contact.
- Able to share ideas with program directors and received positive feedback. Also discussed the potential for co-funding opportunities. Learned how a specific area handled EAGER funding. At NIH meeting, focus was more on the science.

- Goal was to get name, face, place recognition; important to talk about TTU; it will be useful to go again once proposals have been submitted. Found out that Physics handles CAREER grants and other program differently than other directorates. Also received good information from Earth Sciences.
- Morning session covered a lot of programs that were new. Also had two meeting with program directors over programs where proposals had been submitted, not funded, and received reviews. Able to talk through the reviewers comments and prioritize them. Furthered a relationship that had begun at a workshop.
- Flexibility of other program directors was appreciated when appropriate program directors were unavailable; Program director suggested alternative strategies and approaches; was invited to participant in an upcoming workshop.
- Learned that review panels are directed not to take the name of the school into account when reviewing a proposal. Whether or not this happens, the program director does not take the name of the school into account when making decisions.
- Program directors are trying to maintain a balanced portfolio so they want to diversify they type of places they provide funding too; can't give all of the funding to large schools.
- Found out it was important to clarify for the reviewers if the department is undergraduate only; this might impact how they score certain criteria. Found another project home for an idea; learned about the balance that Physics uses when it comes to CAREER and single PI proposals; learned that to serve on a review panel in Physics one must have received funding under that program.
- Sent summary to program director ahead of time and gave a presentation and received feedback; asked about the size and durations of projects typically funded.
- Received feedback regarding which program to submit to; received information about first steps in serving on a review panel; also received invitation to send in one-pagers to program director to review.
- Program director was able to provide information to steer investigator towards some areas and away from others.
- Learned about new programs.

Cons

- More lead time to contact program directors to schedule meetings would have been helpful.
- Could not secure all of the desired meetings; timing was difficult
- Learned from the program directors in their area that they had never awarded EAGER funding and had no plans to do so in the future.
- Having the visit the last week of class was difficult timing.
- Timing of visit; also concerned about feasibility (infrastructure) requirements of specific funding programs.
- Scheduling
- Timing. The applicable NSF division was holding a CAREER writing workshop in Boston and were not available to meet. There is a need for additional funding for these types of trips that is available for individual trips and immediate needs.
- Mixing up of TTU with Texas Tech was a recurring observation.