NSF Funding Remains Strong

For the 15th straight year, Congress failed to finish the annual federal appropriations bills by the October 1 “deadline.” While the Democrats control both houses of Congress and the White House and probably could have done everything on schedule, the failure to finish on time this year occurred in large part because of the need to focus on priority legislation – such as the stimulus package and healthcare reform. As a result, many federal agencies have been operating under a continuing funding resolution (CR) for the first part of Fiscal Year 2010.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) is one of the agencies being kept open by the CR – which essentially means the NSF is operating at last year’s funding levels. Ultimately, the bill that controls Foundation spending is likely to be enacted as part of an omnibus spending measure that wraps multiple appropriations bills into a single piece of legislation. So what will this mean for the NSF’s funding level?

In 2007, Congress passed and President Bush signed the America COMPETES Act. This law called for aggressive federal spending levels on science and authorized the doubling of the NSF budget within seven years. In early 2009, President Obama announced that he supported the aims of the COMPETES Act and his first budget as president proposed $7.045 billion in FY 2010 spending for the NSF – enough to keep the agency on track to double, as envisioned.

As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the stimulus) however, the NSF received a “bonus” appropriation of $3 billion. As a result, many in Congress have not felt the need to pass a significant increase for the Foundation during the regular appropriations process. Still, both the House and Senate have passed legislation that would provide more than $6.9 billion for the NSF for FY 2010. Ultimately these bills will have to be melded by a conference committee – made up of both Senators and Representatives – and the final product will be passed as part of the aforementioned omnibus legislation.

So what will the final package hold for the NSF’s Geography program? It is likely that most NSF research accounts will end up receiving increases of five percent or more. We will not know a final number until the omnibus package has been enacted and the Foundation’s leadership has made decisions about how to divvy up the appropriation for the NSF’s Behavioral and Cognitive Science (BCS) Division – the Geography program is part of BCS.

Of note, FY 2010 is first full fiscal year in which NSF’s Geography program is operating under its 2008-2012 strategic plan. As part of the plan, the Geography and Regional Science Program was renamed the Geography and Spatial Science (GSS) Program earlier this year. The renaming was done to recognize the role new tools and techniques have played in augmenting and shaping geographic research in recent years – and to reflect the broadening scope of the program by including other scientists conducting research in the spatial sciences – such as geographic information science, spatial analysis, and spatial cognition. The strategic plan, which is available at www.nsf.gov/sbe/bcs/grs/GSS_StrategicPlan_2008.pdf, also highlights geography’s role as “an active player in the rapid development of interdisciplinary partnerships that characterize contemporary research.” The plan was developed under the leadership of the GSS program officers – Scott Freundschat, Dan Hammel, Kenneth Young, and former AAG President Thomas Baerwald.

Visit Capitol Hill during the AAG Annual Meeting

We at the AAG, under the leadership of Doug Richardson, are working diligently on a number of exciting programs for the 2010 Annual Meeting that will highlight our time in Washington, D.C. I wanted to reach out briefly to those planning to attend to offer my assistance should you desire to meet with your member of Congress or Senators while you are in town. Most Congressional offices welcome visits by constituents – and many Representatives and Senators will make an effort to meet in person with distinguished visitors from their home districts and states.

In addition to sharing any important concerns you may have with your elected representatives, the visits would give you an opportunity to talk to the members about the important of funding for geography research and education! If you are interested in visiting your delegation on Capitol Hill, please do not hesitate to contact me at jwertman@aag.org and I will gladly offer advice about your delegation and tips for visiting the hill. Thanks and we hope to see you in April!

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