

NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

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May 23, 2005

Dr. William S. Smith
President
Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy
Suite 350
1200 New York Ave
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Bill:

I am writing in answer to your letter of 10 May 2005, requesting some clarifications of plans for the Senior Review. First, let me thank you for your constructive and supportive approach to this difficult task. As I said in my letter to you, we are ready and willing to interact with you and with your communities as this process gets underway.

I have provided answers after each of the questions, copied below from your letter:

- Which AST current commitments will be considered on or off the table? We know that input has been solicited from NOAO, NSO, Gemini, NAIC and NRAO. We also understand that the unrestricted grants program (AAG) is off the table. However, a great many other elements such as the University Radio Observatory program, the Telescope System Instrumentation Program, NSF research centers such as the Adaptive Optics Center, and other parts of the NSF AST portfolio may be considered. It is important to understand how these will be represented and considered.

All elements of the program that we control are under consideration. This includes the UROs, TSIP, AODP, and so on. The Center for Adaptive Optics, while accounted for in our budget, is not under our control. Numerous Foundation-wide programs such as CAREER, the Math Science Priority Area, Cyberscience, etc., are also not options. These amount to ~\$20M of our annual budget in addition to the \$31M in AAG. This puts roughly \$143M of our FY2005 program, e.g., "on the table."

- How will the membership of the Senior Review Panel be selected to ensure an unbiased process without conflicts of interest? What will be the community's role in the Panel selection process?

AST will select panel members to be as free of conflicts as possible, in the same way we do for our review panels and other committees. Inasmuch as the panel will be a subcommittee of the MPS Advisory Committee, the chair of the MPS AC and the Assistant Director, MPS, will be consulted on membership. I have also asked the Astronomy and Astrophysics Advisory Committee for suggestions and will make the same request of the Committee on Astronomy and Astrophysics. I would welcome suggestions from you, too.

- How will the charge to the Senior Review Panel and the “well-understood criteria” to be used reflect the recommendations of the Decadal Survey? When will we see the charge and criteria, and how will the community be able to comment on them?

The charge to the panel will specifically reference the recommendations of the Decade Survey plus Connecting Quarks with the Cosmos, and the interagency plan for investing in the Physics of the Universe as documents delineating the strategic goals set by the community. The deliberations of the panel will concern the rate of progress towards these goals on one side against the cost of attaining these goals, as delineated by your input concerning the loss of capability that would result from closure or privatization of the elements of your facilities. We will consult with the panel and its chair as well as the MPS AC in setting the exact charge. You will be provided with this charge as soon as possible.

- How will the review itself be conducted? Will the facilities be able to present material to the Panel? If the Panel is to be given a set of budgetary scenarios, how will the facility managers respond to Panel questions about the implications of those scenarios for their facility? How will the community be able to provide comments to the Panel and by what process will the community be involved in reviewing the draft recommendations?


The panel will be provided with the input from the facilities, the scenarios that AST puts together using that material, including the impact of these various futures on existing facilities and estimated rates of progress on the overall goals as outlined in the reports referenced above. The panel will receive this in advance of its first meeting so that it can formulate any questions in advance. The facilities will have an opportunity to address these questions (provided to you in advance) at the first meeting. After its first meeting of deliberation and clarification, the panel will meet at a later date to formulate its recommendations. If in this process the panel has further questions, the facilities will certainly have an opportunity to provide answers.

The general community will be given an opportunity to provide input to the panel in advance of its meetings. The exact nature and format of this input will be determined in consultation with the panel.

The panel may wish to have outside reviews of its recommendations in advance of their submission to the MPS AC. The nature and extent of that review will be up to the panel and NSF.

Again, thank you for your cooperation in this challenging task. Done properly and wisely, I believe it can result in a healthier program in the long-term, and one that is poised to take advantage of improving outlooks when they occur. Please do not hesitate to contact me again if you have further questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. Wayne Van Citters". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

G. Wayne Van Citters, Director
Division of Astronomical Sciences