

The National Sea Grant College Program's Planning, Implementation and Evaluation System

(April 2014)

Overview

The National Sea Grant College Program (NSGCP) is committed to careful planning and rigorous evaluation at both the state and National Program level in order to ensure that the Program has local, state, and national impacts. The Planning, Implementation and Evaluation (PIE) Process includes three phases:

- **Planning** at both the national and state levels that is strategic and ambitious in addressing local, regional, and national needs;
- **Implementation** of the plans within each state, with coordinated and collaborative research, outreach and education activities for four years; and
- **Evaluation** of the success of those efforts in meeting the goals, measures, and objectives set forth in the plans. The evaluation component begins with a site visit to each Sea Grant program to ensure programs are well managed, connecting with stakeholders, and collaborating with other Sea Grant and NOAA programs, and other relevant partners. A Performance Review Panel then looks at the outcomes and impacts of the programs in relation to their plans. Ongoing evaluation of the program happens through program annual reports and the NSGO Annual Review.

Sections I-V below describe each component of the integrated PIE system, and how merit funds are allocated.

I. Planning

National Network Strategic Plan (every four years; next planning process begins in 2016 for the 2018-22 National Network Plan): Every four years, the NSGCP develops a new national, network-wide strategic plan. Sea Grant's national plan is completed iteratively with the development of strategic plans for the individual Sea Grant programs. NOAA's strategic plan, NOAA's Five-Year Research Plan, the National Ocean Policy and other relevant national plans provide a broad set of potential priorities for Sea Grant's national planning effort. Likewise, stakeholder input collected for individual Sea Grant planning efforts is integrated with other relevant local and regional plans to identify the most appropriate national priorities. Sea Grant's national, network-wide plan priorities serve as the foci for Sea Grant's next four-year implementation cycle and results obtained help NOAA achieve its strategic objectives.

Individual Sea Grant Program Strategic Plans (every four years; next in 2016): The national strategic plan serves as the basis for individual Sea Grant programs to complete their strategic plans. The individual program plans include performance measures and targets that align with and support national performance measures for the national priority areas. Since each program has a unique set of local and regional stakeholders, partners and priorities, the individual program plans may not address all of the national priority areas. Sea Grant program plans are developed in concert with the assigned Federal Program Officer and reviewed and approved by the NSGCP Director. Sea Grant program plans guide and inform their requests for proposals and all other, research, outreach and education activities. In addition, these plans are used as the basis for program evaluation.

These plans are living documents; programs may make changes to their plans to address *significant* emerging or unexpected issues (e.g., Hurricane Sandy, Deepwater Horizon, Fukushima debris field, etc.). The National Sea Grant Office (NSGO) must be notified of and approve any plan changes.

II. Implementation

Once their strategic plans are approved, the Sea Grant programs have the authority to implement their plans in order to achieve optimal results. They consider the local, regional and national priorities identified during the planning process as they conduct research, outreach and education activities. At the national level, focus area teams identify areas where gaps may exist for achieving the goals identified in the national, network-wide plan. National Strategic Investments are used to address gaps and help the National Program reach its goals. Implementation of Sea Grant activities happens primarily at the individual Sea Grant program level.

The PIE system contributes to improved regional and national coordination. For instance, funding competitions, omnibus grant applications and awards are synchronized to facilitate collaborative efforts among programs. Also, there is a common format for annual reports so that impacts of individual projects and Sea Grant programs can more easily be synthesized to highlight nation-wide achievements.

III. Evaluation

Sea Grant's program evaluation processes are designed to ensure the greatest benefit for the federal and state investment and are based on program annual reports. Site visits ensure that all programs are managed effectively and continue to meet the *Standards of Excellence* (see Appendix A) expected of all Sea Grant Colleges and Institutions. Performance reviews are used to evaluate each program's impacts on society, economy and environment according to the priorities set forth in the individual program plans. The NSGO Annual Review considers all aspects of the programs, and the National Sea Grant Advisory Board's Biennial Report to Congress gives an overall assessment of the National Sea Grant College Program.

The integrated components of program evaluation within Sea Grant are described below.

Annual Reports – Programs submit annual reports through an online database: Planning, Implementation and Evaluation Resources (PIER). Information provided in PIER is used by each program and the NSGO to evaluate progress relative to the program’s plan, targeted performance measures and metrics, and serves as the basis for the four-year Performance Review Panels’ evaluation. Annual Reports are also a way for the program to conduct a self-evaluation of its progress toward accomplishing the four-year plan. Information from PIER is used by the NSGO to track and report progress of the National Sea Grant College Program to NOAA.

Program Site Review Visits (every four years; begins in 2014) – Every four years, a site review team (SRT) visits each Sea Grant program to assess program operations. Programs are evaluated, on-site, in three general areas: 1) their approach to management; 2) the scope and success of their engagement with stakeholders; and (3) the degree of collaboration with other Sea Grant and NOAA programs, and other relevant partners. At the conclusion of the site visit, the SRT produces a report that describes findings and makes suggestions and recommendations to improve the Sea Grant program’s operations. Although the SRT is not responsible for providing numerical ratings for any of these three areas, the report should include a finding addressing whether the program meets the *Standards of Excellence* (i.e., addressing appropriate categories within the Sea Grant Regulations; see Appendix B). The SRT reports are used by the NSGO to determine whether the Sea Grant program: 1) is recertified, and 2) is eligible for merit funding.

Performance Review Panels (every four years; next in 2015) – Every four years, following the completion of all Sea Grant program site visits, external Performance Review Panels (PRP) conduct retrospective evaluations of each program’s overall impact on society from both an environmental and a socioeconomic perspective based on the program’s four-year plan. A numerical rating is assigned by each PRP. The results of the PRP are used to determine eligibility for and amount of merit funding; the process is described below in the section on “Rating and Allocation of Funding.”

NSGO Annual Review – The NSGO meets each year to discuss the progress of each Sea Grant program relative to its plan, and to identify aspects of the program that might be improved. Once every four years – in the year following the PRP – an expanded NSGO Review is conducted. It includes a complete program evaluation that is based on the SRT report, the PRP findings and ratings, and the Sea Grant program’s responses to the SRT recommendations and PRP findings. The NSGO Review makes the final determination of whether or not a Sea Grant program meets the *Standards of Excellence* and finalizes the rating of the PRP.

“The State of Sea Grant” (every two years; next in 2014) – Every two years, the National Sea Grant Advisory Board provides a “State of Sea Grant” report to Congress as mandated by Sea Grant legislation. The biennial report assesses the overall progress of the National Sea Grant College Program in addressing the priority areas highlighted in the national plan. This review relies extensively on information collected through PIER from Sea Grant

program annual reports and the subsequent analysis of the national focus areas. It also informs the next national strategic planning process.

IV. Rating and Allocation of Funding

The program evaluation process results in recertification, an overall rating and a determination of merit fund eligibility for each program. Overall program ratings are assigned by the NSGO based on the PRP ratings. Merit funding eligibility is determined based on the SRT reports, the PRP rating, and the responses from the Sea Grant Program.

Site Visits

After the site visits and reporting are completed, the NSGO discusses the findings, suggestions and recommendations included in the site visit reports and assesses any response from the program during the expanded NSGO Review. Based on that discussion, the NSGO makes the final decision of whether the program is meeting the *Standards of Excellence* expected of all programs. Programs that meet the *Standards of Excellence* are eligible for merit funding.

Performance Review Panels

There is one PRP per national focus area. Each PRP is responsible for providing a rating for each program that participates within that national focus area (identified in the program's strategic plan). The PRP uses the following rating scale:

- a. *Highest Performance* – exceeds expectations by an exceptional margin in most areas/aspects (1)
- b. *Exceeds Expectations* by a substantial margin in some areas/aspects (2)
- c. *Meets Expectations* in most areas/aspects (3)
- d. *Below Expectations* in some areas/aspects (4)
- e. *Unsuccessful* in most areas/aspects (5)

For each program, the national focus area rating is weighted based on the proportion of funding resources allocated by the program to that national focus area. "Funding resources" include all NOAA federal, matching and leveraged funds that are managed by programs, and used to meet the goals and objectives of the four-year plan. Each program's national focus area PRP scores are then combined to provide an overall performance rating. For example, if a program allocated 10% of its resources to the Sustainable Coastal Development (SCD) focus area and was rated *Highest Performance* (1), and 90% of its resources to Healthy Coastal Ecosystems (HCE) with a rating of *Exceeds Expectations* (2), it would receive an overall weighted rating of 1.9, calculated as follows:

$$\begin{array}{cc} \text{SCD} & \text{HCE} \\ [10\% * 1] & + [90\% * 2] = (0.1) + (1.8) = 1.9 \end{array}$$

There is no requirement that a program address all national focus areas in its strategic plan. Instead, the rating process is intended to emphasize those areas that each program considers most important based on the amount of allocated resources.

If a program receives an overall rating of 4 or more, it will not be eligible for merit funding, and the program will be placed on probationary status (See Section V).

Allocation of Merit Funds

Merit funding eligibility is based on the site review and PRP, and the funds are allocated based on the overall program rating from the PRP. The merit rating is calculated by subtracting the PRP rating from 5, and then cubing that number. For instance, the program in the example above received a PRP rating of 1.9; the merit rating of this program is 29.8 ($5 - 1.9 = 3.1$; $3.1^3 = 29.8$). If the merit pool were \$10M, and the sum of all of the individual ratings for all eligible programs happened to be 1,000, each merit rating point would be worth \$10,000. In this example, the program would receive \$298,000 in merit funding. Any program that does not meet the Sea Grant *Standards of Excellence* based on the site review or is put on probation based on the PRP rating will not be eligible for merit funding. Once a program reaches the *Standards of Excellence*, they are eligible for merit funding.

V. Recertification of the Sea Grant Programs

The Office of Management and Budget, the National Sea Grant Advisory Board and other entities have recommended that the Sea Grant programs be recertified on a reasonable and regular schedule. The four-year evaluation, including the site visit, the performance review panel and the NSGO Annual Review constitutes the Sea Grant program recertification process. A successful review results in recertification of the program for the next eight years. Recertification is required for a program to maintain its federal funding.

If a program does not meet the *Standards of Excellence* based on the site visit or if the program's overall performance is *Below Expectations* or *Unsuccessful* based on the PRP rating, the program is placed on probationary status. Any Sea Grant program on probation will not be eligible for merit funding.

During each succeeding NSGO Annual Review, any program that did not meet the *Standards of Excellence* will be assessed to determine the program's progress toward meeting the *Standards of Excellence*. If progress is satisfactory, the program will be allowed to continue on probation until the next site visit. If at that time the program meets the *Standards of Excellence*, the program is considered recertified. However, if progress is found not to meet the *Standards of Excellence* expected of a Sea Grant program after two years of NSGO Annual Reviews, or if a program does not reach the *Standards of Excellence* for a second consecutive four-year review cycle, the National Sea Grant College Program Director will refer the matter to the National Sea Grant Advisory Board for consideration of whether to recommend decertification of the program. Any Sea Grant program placed on probation as a result of the PRP review must be rated *Meets Expectations* (3) or higher in the next PRP

review. If the program fails to achieve that rating, the National Sea Grant College Program Director will refer the matter to the National Sea Grant Advisory Board for consideration of whether to recommend decertification of the program.

Appendix A

Sea Grant Program *Standards of Excellence*

This section lists the *Standards of Excellence* that are expected of every Sea Grant program. This information can also be found in [Sea Grant's Federal Regulations](#) (15 CFR 918.3). The Site Visit Teams are responsible for reviewing seven of the qualifying areas plus “collaboration” (collaboration was added based on the 2006 National Research Council Report, *Evaluation of the Sea Grant Review Process*). The remaining two qualifying areas, (1) Leadership and (8) Productivity, are evaluated through Sea Grant’s PRP process. The Federal Regulations state that Sea Grant programs “must rate highly in all of the following qualifying areas”.

I. Site Review Criteria

A. Program Management and Organization

- **Organization.** The Sea Grant College under review must have created the management organization to carry on a viable and productive Sea Grant program and must have the backing of its administration at a sufficiently high level to fulfill its multidisciplinary and multifaceted mandate.
- **Programmed team approach.** The Sea Grant program under review must have a programmed team approach to the solution of ocean/coast/watershed/Great Lakes problems which includes relevant, high quality, multidisciplinary research with associated educational and advisory services capable of producing identifiable results.
- **Support.** The Sea Grant program under review must have the ability to obtain matching funds from non-Federal sources, such as state legislatures, university management, state agencies, business, and industry. A diversity of matching fund sources is encouraged as a sign of program vitality and the ability to meet the Sea Grant requirement that funds for the general programs be matched with at least one non-Federal dollar for every two Federal dollars.

B. Stakeholder Engagement

- **Relevance.** The Sea Grant program under review must be relevant to local, state, regional, or national opportunities and problems in the ocean/coast/watershed/Great Lakes environment. Important factors in evaluating relevance are the need for ocean/coast/watershed/Great Lakes resource emphasis and the extent to which capabilities have been developed to be responsive to that need.
- **Extension/Advisory services.** The Sea Grant program under review must have a strong program through which information, techniques, and research results from any reliable source, domestic or international, may be communicated to and utilized by user communities. In addition to the educational and information dissemination role, the

advisory service program must aid in the identification and communication of user communities' research and educational needs.

- **Education and training.** Education and training must be clearly relevant to national, regional, state and local needs in fields related to ocean, Great Lakes, and coastal resources. As appropriate, education may include pre-college, college, post-graduate, public and adult levels.

C. Collaborative Network Activities

- **Relationships.** The Sea Grant program under review must have close ties with Federal agencies. State agencies and administrations, local authorities, business and industry, and other educational institutions. These ties are: (i) To ensure the relevance of its programs, (ii) to give assistance to the broadest possible audience, (iii) to involve a broad pool of talent in providing this assistance (including universities and other administrative entities outside the Sea Grant College), and (iv) to assist others in developing research and management competence. The extent and quality of an institution's relationships are critical factors in evaluating the institutional program.
- **Collaboration.** The Sea Grant program under review must provide leadership in ocean/coast/watershed/Great Lakes activities including coordinated planning and cooperative work with local, state, regional, and Federal agencies, other Sea Grant programs, and non-Sea Grant universities.

II. Performance Review Criteria

- **Leadership.** The Sea Grant program under review must have achieved recognition as an intellectual and practical leader in marine science, engineering, education, and advisory service in its state and region.
- **Productivity.** The Sea Grant program under review must have demonstrated a degree of productivity (of research results, reports, employed students, service to State agencies and industry, etc.) commensurate with the length of its Sea Grant operations and the level of funding under which it has worked.