



**National Sea Grant College Program
Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation (PIE) Policy
(2024-2027 cycle)**

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Overview

This National Sea Grant Office (NSGO) policy document provides the processes to address both the statutory and regulatory requirements of the National Sea Grant College Program (Sea Grant) for strategic planning, program implementation, and evaluation including individual Sea Grant programs and the NSGO.

Sea Grant is committed to careful planning and rigorous evaluation at the individual Sea Grant program¹ and national levels to ensure that Sea Grant has meaningful local, regional and national impacts. The Planning, Implementation and Evaluation (PIE) system builds on regular assessments and feedback, and more importantly, focuses on program improvement. The PIE system includes three phases:

- **Planning** at the national and state levels that is strategic and inclusive in determining and addressing local, regional and national needs;
- **Implementation** of strategic plans within each state, with coordinated and collaborative research, outreach and education activities; and
- **Evaluation** of those efforts in meeting the goals, objectives, and measures set forth in both national and program-level strategic plans, and assessment of each program's success in meeting the Sea Grant *Standards of Excellence* ([Appendix A](#)) for program recertification.

The primary drivers for planning and evaluation are found in the National Sea Grant College Program Act legislation and the Sea Grant College Code of Federal Regulations (CFR).

- Statutory drivers for planning and evaluation processes reside in Sea Grant's legislative requirements under the National Sea Grant College Program Act, as amended in 2020 ([33 U.S.C. 1121 et seq.](#)).
- Regulatory drivers for the eligibility, qualifications and responsibility of Sea Grant programs reside in [15 CFR 918.3 and 918.5](#). In addition, the Sea Grant program must meet qualifications as evaluated every four years by a site review team. As a result of this review, Sea Grant programs must be rated highly in all of the *Standards of Excellence* criteria (Appendix A). Recertification designation will be made on the basis of merit per [15 CFR 918.4 and 918.6](#), including the ability to maintain a high quality of performance consistent with the CFR for the eligibility, qualifications and responsibility of Sea Grant programs.

¹Sea Grant College Programs, Sea Grant Institutional Programs and Sea Grant Coherent Area Programs are collectively referred to as "Sea Grant programs" throughout this document.

Timeline

The timeline provides a high-level view of three PIE implementation cycles:

*2018-2023, 2024-2027 and 2028-2031.

Multiple full PIE Cycles	Year 3	Year 4	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 1	Year 2
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033
Strategic Planning & Omnibus Application	Blue	Blue			Blue	Blue	Green	Green			Purple	Purple						
Implementation			Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Green	Green	Green	Green	Purple	Purple	Purple	Purple		
Full Cycle Evaluation									Blue	Blue			Green	Green			Purple	Purple

* While the typical PIE timeline consists of up to two years of planning and omnibus application, four years of implementation and up to two years of evaluation, this timeline was altered for the 2018-2023 cycle.

I. Planning

National Strategic Plan

Strategic planning is a cornerstone of effective program management. Traditionally, Sea Grant revisits the national strategic plan every four years to determine if it needs to be updated.

The national strategic plan is completed iteratively with the development of strategic plans for the individual Sea Grant programs. The strategic plan priorities serve as the foci for Sea Grant’s next implementation cycle. The Department of Commerce (DOC), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Oceanic and Atmospheric Research (NOAA Research) and other relevant national plans provide a broad set of potential priorities for Sea Grant’s national planning effort. Likewise, constituent input collected for individual Sea Grant program planning efforts is integrated with other relevant local and regional plans to identify the most appropriate national priorities. The national strategic plan includes national focus areas, goals, desired outcomes, performance measures and metrics that each Sea Grant program is expected to align with in their respective strategic plans to the greatest degree possible.

Individual Sea Grant Program Strategic Plans

The national strategic plan serves as the framework for individual Sea Grant programs to complete their individual strategic plans. The strategic plans of each Sea Grant program include performance measures and metrics that align with and support national performance measures and metrics for the national focus areas. Since each Sea Grant

program has a unique set of local and regional constituents, partners and priorities, the individual Sea Grant program strategic plans are not required to address all of the national focus areas and may include elements that fall outside of the national focus areas.

The strategic plans of Sea Grant programs are expected to be developed through an inclusive constituent process and in collaboration with the assigned federal program officer and approved by the National Sea Grant College Program director.

Strategic planning is key to identifying locally, regionally and nationally relevant priorities, effective management and oversight of the Sea Grant programs. The strategic plans of each Sea Grant program guide their requests for proposals (RFPs) and all other research, extension, outreach and education activities. In addition, the strategic plans of each Sea Grant program are used as the basis for evaluation. Annual reports and the full cycle evaluation are framed in the context of progress made relative to the goals and objectives outlined in the individual Sea Grant program's strategic plan during the review period.

The strategic plans of Sea Grant programs may be adapted, for example, to address emerging and/or unexpected needs and opportunities (e.g., Hurricane Sandy, Deepwater Horizon, Fukushima debris field, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law/Inflation Reduction Act, etc.). Changes should not be routine and must be approved by the National Sea Grant College Program director with input from the federal program officer. Any proposed changes must be generally consistent with that program's overall strategic plan priorities to ensure that the program maintains its approved focus and makes progress towards accomplishing outcomes while adjusting to new trends and opportunities.

References:

Planning and other related guidance documents are located on the Inside Sea Grant website: <https://seagrant.noaa.gov/insideseagrant/Planning>

II. Implementation

Implementation happens at different levels within Sea Grant. Once the strategic plans of individual Sea Grant programs are approved, the programs have the authority to implement their plans to achieve optimal results. Programs consider the local, regional and national priorities identified during the planning process as they conduct research, outreach and education activities. These efforts support national priorities. Community engagement and multi-way flow of information and services ensure that Sea Grant actions meet

demonstrated needs, help support communities and businesses and enable policy-makers to make balanced, well-informed decisions.

Many implementation activities are funded by NSGO (federal) and matching funds in each Sea Grant program's omnibus award; the start and end dates of which correspond with the effective dates of the program's strategic plans. The omnibus award serves as an implementation plan of the strategic plan. However, the strategic plan and other activities may be funded from other sources, including additional NSGO or other NOAA, federal and leveraged funds. For example, in areas in which additional investment is needed and available, the NSGO may develop and invest in National Strategic Investments (NSIs), which complement the strategic objectives of the individual Sea Grant programs. NSIs have a national or regional focus and are intended to enhance Sea Grant's capabilities (research, education, extension and outreach) to respond to high-priority issues and opportunities. NSI projects are generally selected through competitions and are often driven by annual congressional appropriations language.

The PIE system contributes to improved regional and national coordination of Sea Grant activities, identification of new opportunities, fostering external partners and continued impact of Sea Grant.

Reference:

Pertinent highlighted documents for implementation, including the Policy for the Allocation of Funds, Competitive Research Allocation Policy, National Competition Policy, Omnibus Application Requirements and other grant-related policy and guidance documents, are located on the Inside Sea Grant website:

<https://seagrants.noaa.gov/insideseagrants/Implementation>

III. Evaluation

Sea Grant's program evaluation processes are designed to ensure the greatest benefit for the federal and state/local investments, and they support the continued impact and improvement of Sea Grant activities. The major goal of the evaluation process is to help Sea Grant understand impacts and improve, where needed. The goals of reporting are to provide data on a routine basis to determine progress being made by individual Sea Grant programs. The drivers of evaluation are to meet mandates for evaluation and merit funding, conduct external reviews to evaluate the overall effectiveness of programs and improve program performance.

The evaluation system of the individual Sea Grant programs includes annual, mid-cycle and full cycle evaluations. Annual evaluations include annual reporting and feedback, as well as grant progress reporting. The mid-cycle NSGO Review also includes feedback to the program. The full cycle evaluation includes site review visits, an external evaluation and a full cycle NSGO Review.

The evaluation system supports continuing understanding, feedback and improvement; program recertification; and a determination of merit funding eligibility for each program. The integrated components of program reporting and evaluation within Sea Grant are described in more detail in the sections below.

Annual Evaluations

The annual evaluations include a (1) review of the program's annual report, including submission of publications to the Sea Grant Collection at the NOAA Library, (2) review of grant progress reporting and (3) NSGO staff discussions with the programs.

The goal of annual reports is to evaluate progress relative to each Sea Grant program's strategic plan and grants, which includes assessing common national performance measures and metrics, financial management and program results. Annual reports are also a way for the program to conduct a self-evaluation of its progress toward addressing the national strategic plan. Annual reporting serves as a basis for the mid- and full-cycle evaluations, described further below.

Annual reports serve as an opportunity for programs to provide project updates on progress and performance and to work closely with their federal program officer to discuss progress, changes, challenges and successes. The annual report is also a source of information about how the program is progressing towards its strategic goals, and whether the program is changing course, addressing new opportunities or perhaps not advancing in some areas that are important to the program.

Programs submit annual reports on all projects that receive funding through NSGO through the Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation Resources (PIER) database. These annual reports include the estimated level of effort per focus area to demonstrate the amount of effort in dollars dedicated to each national focus area, leveraged funding that programs use to carry out their missions, qualitative narrative reporting of project updates, highlights, optional accomplishments and national performance measures and metrics. These annual report categories are used to track program progress against their strategic plan and thus

toward the national strategic plan.

Additionally, each Sea Grant program submits documents and publications resulting from Sea Grant-funded work to the Sea Grant Collection at the NOAA Library. Documents submitted to the Sea Grant Collection serve as supporting records of program achievements.

The annual report and the documents and publications are the source of much of the information that NSGO uses to describe Sea Grant's work to the public, NOAA and Congress; and program and NSGO review helps ensure the information is accurate, consistent and thoughtfully prepared to maximize messaging of Sea Grant's impacts.

After the annual report review, NSGO staff provide feedback, as necessary, to each Sea Grant program, and the programs then have the opportunity to respond. Constructive feedback on a regular basis provides opportunities for program advancement and improvement.

All NOAA awards come with progress reporting requirements, also known as Research Performance Progress Reports (RPPR). NSGO will continue to work with Sea Grant programs to create further efficiencies between NOAA progress reporting in the eRA (Electronic Research Administration) grant management system website and NSGO annual reporting in the PIER database. The DOC implemented the new eRA system in fiscal year 2024 (2023-2024), which affects the possible mechanisms and timing to streamline reporting requirements. The NSGO will continue to work with the network to balance accountability, efficiencies and impactful messaging on the great work of the network across various reporting mechanisms.

References:

Annual reporting and grant progress report guidance and other supporting documentation are located on the Inside Sea Grant website:

<https://seagrant.noaa.gov/insideseagrant/Reporting-Evaluation>

Mid-Cycle NSGO Review

The NSGO staff meets mid-cycle after Year 2 of annual reporting to internally discuss the progress of each Sea Grant program. This qualitative review looks at progress toward each program's strategic plan as well as impacts emerging from past activities and is essential for effective program management. To effectively administer the program, the NSGO must be aware of the activities, accomplishments, opportunities and challenges faced by the

individual Sea Grant programs.

After the mid-cycle NSGO Review, the NSGO provides feedback via a written memo to each Sea Grant program, and the programs then have the opportunity to respond. Constructive feedback on a regular basis provides opportunities for program advancement and improvement, as well as related documentation for this. Program improvement is taken into account as part of the full-cycle evaluation.

Full-Cycle Evaluations

The full-cycle evaluation takes place in or around the year following the expiration of the national- and program-level strategic plans and looks at the integrated impact of each Sea Grant program towards that plan and assesses each program's success in meeting the *Standards of Excellence*. The full-cycle evaluation process builds on the annual evaluation process and mid-cycle review and includes a site review visit, an external evaluation and a full-cycle NSGO Review that determines recertification and merit fund eligibility for each program.

Site Review Visit

The primary purpose of the site review visit is to help the NSGO determine whether Sea Grant programs are meeting the drivers for planning and evaluation processes found in the statutory requirements (see Overview above) and the *Standards of Excellence*.

A Site Review Team (SRT) visits Sea Grant programs to assess, discuss and report on broad issues related to how the program is managed, the program's impacts and if the program meets the *Standards of Excellence*. All programs are evaluated, to the extent possible, in a similar manner and against common national performance measure and metric benchmarks. The program's annual evaluation information, the findings from the mid-cycle NSGO review and the program director's response noted above are included in the materials provided to the SRT, along with other materials.

The SRT will be required to provide two levels of evaluation: to determine if the program has 'met' the *Standards of Excellence*, and to provide a performance rating for each national focus area identified in the program strategic plan and in the context of the program funding levels.

According to the CFR on eligibility, qualifications and responsibility of the National Sea Grant College Program, a Sea Grant program must meet the criteria encompassed by these categories. The site review visits will focus on the four broad categories in the *Standards of*

Excellence:

- Program Management and Organization (organization, programmed team approach and support)
- Engagement (relevance, advisory services and education and training)
- Collaborative Network Activities (relationships and collaboration)
- Performance (leadership and productivity)

The SRT is also responsible for providing a rating for each relevant national focus area (identified in the individual Sea Grant program strategic plan and in the context of the program-funded levels). The SRT uses the following rating scale:

- Performance demonstrated accomplishment of highest merit (1)
- Performance demonstrated accomplishment of special merit (2)
- Performance demonstrated accomplishment of merit (3)
- Performance below that expected in some areas/aspects (4)
- Performance below that expected in most areas/aspects (5)

After a site review visit, the SRT produces a report that describes findings, determines if the program meets the *Standards of Excellence*, provides numerical ratings based on a performance review of the program's national focus areas and makes suggestions and recommendations to advance the Sea Grant program's management and organization, engagement, networking activities and performance.

Reference:

Site Review Visit Guidance is located on the Inside Sea Grant website:

<https://seagrants.noaa.gov/insideseagrants/Reporting-Evaluation>

External Evaluation

After all of the program site review visits are complete, the Evaluation Committee of the National Sea Grant Advisory Board (Advisory Board) will provide an external review of all the site review visit findings and responses from the Sea Grant programs to ensure that all site review visits were conducted in a consistent and equitable manner. After the external evaluation process, the chair of the Evaluation Committee will report the findings of the Evaluation Committee to the Advisory Board for approval. Once findings are approved by the Advisory Board, the Evaluation Committee's findings about individual programs will be provided to the National Sea Grant College Program director in advance of the full-cycle NSGO review.

Full-Cycle NSGO Review

The evaluation process wraps up with a full-cycle NSGO Review. The full-cycle NSGO Review includes a complete program evaluation review that is based on the findings from the site visit and Evaluation Committee.

During the full-cycle NSGO Review, the National Sea Grant College Program director will make the final determination of whether or not an individual Sea Grant program meets the *Standards of Excellence* and thus if a program is: 1) recertified, 2) eligible for merit funding and the 3) determination of final merit score.

Recertification of the Sea Grant Programs

The Office of Management and Budget, the Advisory Board and other entities have recommended that the Sea Grant programs be evaluated for recertification on a reasonable and regular schedule. The full cycle evaluation, including the program site review visit, the Evaluation Committee findings and full-cycle NSGO review, constitutes the program recertification process. A successful review results in recertification of the program for the next four years. Recertification is required for a program to maintain its NSGO federal funding.

At the end of the full-cycle review process, the National Sea Grant College Program director will submit a final evaluation and recommendation letter to each program summarizing the findings from the site review visit and the Evaluation Committee. The letter will include recertification status and details on the program's eligibility for merit funding. If the program is eligible for merit funding the letter will include an overall merit score that determines the estimated amount of merit funding the program will receive over the next four-year cycle.

A determination that a program 'meets' the *Standards of Excellence* results in recertification of the program for the next four-year omnibus cycle. Programs that meet the *Standards of Excellence* are then eligible for merit funding. Recertification and merit funding timelines are projected below:

- 2014-2017 evaluation results in recertification and merit funding for 2022-2023 and 2024-2027
- 2018-2023 evaluation results in recertification and merit funding for 2028-2031
- 2024-2027 evaluation results in recertification and merit funding for 2032-2035

The National Sea Grant College Program director will require a program that doesn't meet the *Standards of Excellence* or if the program's performance rates poorly, to submit a

corrective action plan for a particular area that is not meeting standards, and the program will be placed on probationary status. Any program on probation will not be eligible for merit funding.

Once a program is on probation, it will be assessed to determine if it is making progress toward meeting the *Standards of Excellence* yearly after each annual reporting cycle. If the program is found to meet the *Standards of Excellence* the program will be taken off of probation and merit funding reinstated. However, if progress toward meeting the *Standards of Excellence* is not being made for two annual reporting years, or if a program does not reach the *Standards of Excellence* for a second consecutive full-cycle evaluation, the National Sea Grant College Program director will refer the matter to the Advisory Board for consideration of whether to recommend decertification of the program.

Allocation of Merit Funding

A merit pool of funds has been established in the Sea Grant budget to be allocated to individual Sea Grant programs based on overall performance. If programs are eligible for merit funding, then the individual program's national focus area performance ratings from the site review visit are used to assign each program an overall merit score. The following rating scale is used during the site review visits:

- Performance demonstrated accomplishment of highest merit (1)
- Performance demonstrated accomplishment of special merit (2)
- Performance demonstrated accomplishment of merit (3)
- Performance below that expected in some areas/aspects (4)
- Performance below that expected in most areas/aspects (5)

The overall merit score and the available funds in the merit pool determine the amount of merit funding a program will receive in the next four-year cycle. For each program, the national focus area performance rating is weighted based on the proportion of funding resources allocated (by estimated level of effort) by the program to that national focus area. Funding resources include all Sea Grant core (base and merit + match) and all other funds arising from Sea Grant's appropriation (e.g., aquaculture and other national initiatives) and associated match, and pass-through funding used to meet the goals and objectives of the program's four-year strategic plan. Leveraged funds are not included in the calculation, but will be seen as additional resources that a program obtained to achieve its strategic goals.

For example, if a program allocated 25% of its Sea Grant-appropriated funding resources to the HCE focus area and was rated a 2, allocated 15% of its resources to SFA focus area and

was rated a 2, allocated 20% of its resources to RCE focus area and was rated a 3, and allocated 40% of its resources to ELWD focus area and was rated a 3, then it would score an overall weighted rating of 2.6, calculated as follows:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{HCE} & & \text{SFA} & & \text{RCE} & & \text{ELWD} \\ [25\% \times 2] & + & [15\% \times 2] & + & [20\% \times 3] & + & [40\% \times 3] = & 2.6 \end{array}$$

The final merit score is 2.6, corresponding to a rating of “performance demonstrated accomplishment of special merit.”

The final merit score determines merit funding levels. Final merit funding levels depend on the size of the merit pool of funds available, which may not be finalized until Sea Grant’s appropriation levels are known. Any program that does not meet the *Standards of Excellence* based on the site review visit or is on probation will not be eligible for merit funding.

IV. Independent Review Panel

The Evaluation Committee of the Advisory Board will also convene an Independent Review Panel (IRP) to provide an external evaluation of the effectiveness of the NSGO and the National Sea Grant College Program overall. The main purpose is to evaluate Sea Grant in its entirety (i.e., all the individual Sea Grant programs and the NSGO at least once every five years). This approach allows external reviewers to move beyond evaluating recertification and ratings, challenges and progress made in individual programs, and to consider the broader issues by evaluating the management of the NSGO and the overall impact of Sea Grant. These include identifying areas for growth or improvement, exploring ways to strengthen the Sea Grant network relationships, examining the nature of the individual program’s relationship with the NSGO and the effectiveness of annual evaluations. The IRP comprises members from the Advisory Board, NOAA, NOAA Research, Sea Grant Association (SGA), leaders from academia/industry and state/federal agencies.

At the conclusion of the IRP process, the chair of the Evaluation Committee will report the findings from the IRP to the Advisory Board for approval. The IRP report will also be provided to the individual programs and subsequently shared with NOAA Research, NOAA leadership, and the SGA, and incorporated into the next Advisory Board Report to Congress.

V. Report to Congress

“The State of Sea Grant” Report to Congress

The Advisory Board provides a “State of Sea Grant” report to Congress as mandated by Sea Grant legislation “at least once every four years on the state of the National Sea Grant College Program and shall notify Congress of any significant changes to the state of the program not later than two years after the submission of such a report.” The report assesses the overall progress of Sea Grant in addressing the focus areas highlighted in the national strategic plan. The report communicates Sea Grant priorities and progress to legislators. The report relies extensively on information collected through PIER from Sea Grant program annual reports and the subsequent analysis of the national focus areas.

Appendix A: Sea Grant Standards of Excellence

This section lists the Sea Grant *Standards of Excellence* expected of every Sea Grant program. This information is in [Sea Grant's Code of Federal Regulations \(15 CFR 918.3\)](#). The site review teams (SRTs) are responsible for reviewing all of the qualifications set forth below plus “collaboration” (collaboration was added based on a recommendation from the 2006 National Research Council Report, Evaluation of the Sea Grant Review Process). The federal regulations state that Sea Grant programs “must rate highly in all of the following qualifying areas.”

Site Review Criteria

- **Program Management and Organization**
 - **Organization.** 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.** Must have a programmed team approach to the solution of ocean, coast, watershed and Great Lakes problems which includes relevant, high-quality, multidisciplinary research with associated educational and advisory services (e.g., extension and outreach) capable of producing identifiable results.
 - **Support.** 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.

- **Engagement**
 - **Relevance.** Must be relevant to local, state, regional or national opportunities and problems in the ocean, coast, watershed and Great Lakes environment. Important factors in evaluating relevance are the need for ocean, coast, watershed and Great Lakes resource emphasis and the extent to which capabilities have been developed to be responsive to that need.
 - **Extension/Advisory services.** 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 (e.g., extension and outreach) must aid in the identification and communication of user communities' research and educational needs.

- o **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 (e.g., outreach events), and adult (e.g. job training) levels.

- **Collaborative Network Activities**

- o **Relationships.** 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 program) 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.
- o **Collaboration.** Must provide leadership in ocean, coast, watershed and 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.

- **Performance Review**

- o **Leadership.** Must have achieved recognition as an intellectual and practical leader in marine science, engineering, education and advisory service in its state and region.
- o **Productivity.** 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.