PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

IPA case study: The National Science Foundation Rotator Program

For almost 40 years, the National Science Foundation has brought career scientists and academic professionals temporarily into its ranks through the Intergovernmental Personnel Act—or IPA—Program. These individuals—along with staff hired through the Visiting Scientist, Engineer and Educator Program under the NSF Act of 1950—are known as NSF rotators.

Initial IPA assignments can be made for up to two years and may be extended for an additional two years if the extension benefits both organizations. Visiting Scientist, Engineer and Educator Program participants, or VSEEs, have a maximum two-year appointment at NSF. Rotators function as key connectors between NSF's grant-making responsibilities and the needs of the scientific community the agency serves.

NSF was an early adopter of the IPA program because it recognized three benefits in participating.

First, IPA assignees bring a fresh perspective to the agency. Given the dynamic nature of scientific discovery, knowledge of ongoing research is imperative to the success of NSF's mission.

Bill Malyszka, deputy chief human capital officer at NSF, noted that the IPA program enables the agency to be "more agile in looking at emerging sciences and bringing people in, evolving [its] grant programs as the science evolves." Most importantly, NSF rotators with appropriate approval can continue to conduct their professional research, creating a direct link between NSF and the scientific community.

Second, IPA assignees gain a great deal from working as NSF rotators. As rotators, they get the opportunity to expand their network and grow professionally without leaving their primary career.

According to NSF, rotators who join one of the agency's directorates get the chance to "make recommendations about which proposals to fund, influence new directions in the fields of science, engineering and education, support cutting-edge interdisciplinary research, and mentor junior research members." After IPAs return to their non-federal organizations, they use their newfound knowledge to inform future research.

These non-federal organizations benefit from the IPA Program as well. When IPA placements return home, they bring with them a wealth of first-hand knowledge about the federal research funding process.

In addition, NSF requires that institutions provide just a minimum 10% cost share for every full-time agreement—a small price to cover relative to the benefits received. Non-federal organizations also develop a relationship with NSF by coordinating with the agency to place IPA candidates, along the way gaining NSF recognition as a respected part of the scientific community.

“[The IPA program] is so important because it brings in perspectives, it brings in connections, it brings in relationships,” Malyszka said. “[When the IPAs] leave the building, those relationships with our folks go back out into the science community, and so I think the rotators serve really as a bridge between NSF and who we serve.”