Q & A TRANSCRIPT FOR JUMPSTART GRANTSMANSHIP WEBINAR SUMMER SERIES: "FINDING AND RESPONSING TO THE NSF CALL FOR PROPOSALS

QUESTION 1

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: Can you define building capacity? What is the intention of building capacity?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: The intention of building capacity is really to get more students into the STEM degree granting programs. In many cases, we see there are basically horrendous statistics that are quoted. About 70% of students who enter a STEM track will drop out at some point. Building capacity begins to address barriers associated with not being able to schedule the classes that they need, too many requirements, or it's not what students thought it was when they signed up for it.

There are really lots of individual institutional reasons why attrition rates are high, but what we would really like to do is to be able to improve that number. So, we want to go from having relatively small percentages of students complete STEM degrees to having much larger percentages of students finish STEM degrees. The intention is to build capacity for completing those degrees.

QUESTION 2

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: Early on in the presentation you made a reference to a high level of funding. What is a high level of funding?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: We have a floor of $15 million, but every year over the last couple of years, we've been awarded at least $30 million to put out in awards for this particular program. We've ended up doubling what we thought our initial budget would be.

We work at the mercy of Congress, so Congress appropriates money. And oftentimes we actually don't even know how much money we have until we're well into the fiscal year. And money can be moved around through various mechanisms even very late into the fiscal year. As a minimum, we estimate that we will start with the $15 million budget that is in the appropriations language for the program. Historically, it has been higher than that every year.

QUESTION 3

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: There was a request for clarification related to track two and what is meant by not having NSF funding for the past five years. Again, is it all funding or is it specific programs?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: It's all funding. So yes, your prior grants would have had to have ended at least five years before the deadline for the current program if you're coming into the program.

QUESTION 4

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: What does it mean for a solicitation to have multiple directorates? What are the different roles of the directorates?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: It means a couple of things. First of all, it means that from the NSF side, there are actually two money managers for the program. When we get money allocated into the program, it is typically split into the two directorates. HRD gets about half and DUE gets about half, so we allocate money as best we can to the different proposals.

It also means that over the life of the award, the different divisions will be the ones responsible for managing the reporting that comes in and monitoring the work that goes on. In practical terms, it probably doesn't mean anything for the external community. It does represent NSF's commitment across different divisions, which are centers of interest. It shows that there's more than one center of interest for the HSI program, and more than one group of program officers at NSF that are interested in funding work that goes on at HSIs.

QUESTION 5

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: Is there a breakdown of how many awards per priority area are awarded in track one?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: There is not. I can informally infer that we probably see more proposals coming in in the Critical Transitions priority area than in the other two.

QUESTION 6

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: For track one, are institutions limited to submitting one proposal for one priority area, or just one proposal per institution?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: One proposal per institution per deadline.

QUESTION 7

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: If we apply to track one, Teaching and Learning in STEM, the director of this program is not a STEM person but is in our education division. Can this person be a PI?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: The person can be a PI as long as they are employed at the institution that is submitting the proposal. Presumably that institution would be an HSI. I will say, for teaching and learning in STEM, that you can have an individual who is an education professional be the PI. But you probably want to think about having some disciplinary faculty on your PI team, or those who are more directly related to what's going on in the STEM classroom.

QUESTION 8

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: For a project involving two STEM departments, for example, chemistry and math, how critical is it that one of the department chairs serve as a co-PI? Or is a letter of commitment sufficient from each?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: It is absolutely not critical that the chair serve as a co-PI. We want to see administrative support. That can come in a lot of different ways. Certainly having the chair serve as a co-PI could be one of those ways. Having letters of commitment could also be one of those ways. Having an administrator, perhaps a dean, serving as a co-PI could also be a commitment, an illustration of commitment.

QUESTION 9

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: Thank you. Are conferences that are funded by this program switching to webinars for the next year due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: It takes a little while for these things to work their way through the system, so conferences that we're funding now typically put in their proposals before the pandemic hit. We're asking them to give us a one-page contingency plan to think about what would happen if they can't do the conference the way they intended, whether they intended a face-to-face one or not, as we're making the awards.

I think at this point going forward, if you're planning a virtual conference, start with a proposal for a virtual conference, and show us why that's the best format for this particular conference idea, or how you can effectively run a virtual conference. We actually had a discussion about this in a staff meeting this morning. Someone has recently been to a conference they thought normally would have benefited from face-to-face interaction, but came away just blown away by how well a virtual conference worked. Apparently there are ways to make these really fun, exciting, and interactive environments.

QUESTION 10

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: For track one priority area two, can your partnership be with an institution outside of the United States?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: It can be, although we can't provide funding directly to an institution out of the United States.

QUESTION 11

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: What does NSF consider a high level of funding (for the specific submission) to be eligible for the HSI IUSE program?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: We've had a number of discussions about this. The intent of Congress is that we fund institutions that have not typically had high levels of NSF funding. That

probably means we're not going to be very strongly supportive of proposals that come from really high research-intensive institutions that do have these high levels. There are certainly going to be exceptions to that. If a proposal comes in that is well-crafted and really demonstrates the utility to building capacity in STEM at that institution, we will always consider it.

It's been somewhat of a challenge to really define that level, so we aren't drawing a hard and fast line, but we are trying to come up with measures that allow us to objectively judge how well-funded an institution is in relation to others in the same pool.

QUESTION 12

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: Is NSF receiving additional funding from the CARES Act?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: We have already received it, and most of it has already gone out the door.

QUESTION 13

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: Is it fair to meet with both Program Officers?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: You can certainly try to approach both of them. I know they're both very, very busy. I think it's unlikely you would be able to meet with both of them, although you can certainly make that request. One of the best things to do, if you have questions or are interested in how your proposal might be well-suited to this program, is to send an email to one or the other, or both together, and ask them a question.

Typically, if you send it to both of them, just one will answer. And what they'll do internally is they'll look at each other and say, do you have the bandwidth to handle this? And one will say yes, and one will say no.

QUESTION 14

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: We're going to revisit a question, again, related to the level of funding. I think there's just some confusion here. The question is asking about the eligibility linked to NSF level of funding: How much funding disqualifies your institution? I think it's the length of time, not the amount of the funding. Would that be correct?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: It is the length of time, yes. If you're institution is eligible, it cannot have any NSF funding-- and that means zero, like no NSF dollars-- or you have not had an NSF award in the five years prior to the deadline. That means if you had an award, it would have had to have expired five years before the current deadline. For example, for the deadline in September 2020, if your institution had an award that expired in December of 2015, you would not be eligible because you're two months over that limit.

QUESTION 15

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: If you work with a nonprofit, do they have to be a 501(c)(3)?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: It is not required that they have any particular status or certification. So, all they have to do is have the resources and the involvement in the project that makes it clear why they belong in that project.

QUESTION 16

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: This is another question about eligibility for track two. Just to be clear, you say that all or any NSF funding for the entire institution. Thus, if one PI has an NSF individual grant at the institution, then is that institution ineligible to be awarded track two funding?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: This institution is not eligible for track two funding.

QUESTION 17

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: What should I do if I have questions about my institution's eligibility for any NSF funding?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: I think one of the best things to do, if you have questions about whether your institution falls into that category, is contact one of the cognizant program officers. We have a conversation that says, I am at x institution. What do you think?

QUESTION 18

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: When a review panel is assembled for these proposals, are there guidelines provided that indicate that two-year colleges may have lower research capacities than four-year universities?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: Absolutely. We do provide a lot of education to our review panels, and we try to assemble diverse review panels. One of the things we've tried over the last couple of years is to have at least one faculty member from a community college on every review panel. I think we've succeeded, in thinking about most of the review panels that I can remember.

QUESTION 19

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: We have another question asking about diverse leadership. How important is it? Please share your thoughts on PIs coming from tenure versus non-tenure track positions.

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: We want to see the person who will be the most invested in the project named as the PI. The status of that individual doesn't matter to NSF. However, some institutions define who can submit a proposal from their institution. If your institution will allow you to submit a proposal, we will allow you to act as PI.

QUESTION 20

DR. MARTHA DESMOND: For track one, priority three proposals, how important is it for PhD granting-HSIs to partner with local community colleges?

DR. ELLEN CARPENTER: Partnerships are important. It depends on what your project is proposing. Priority area three is looking at STEM teaching and learning, so if you're looking at how to help students improve their transfer rate from a two-year college and you don't have a two-year college partner, that's going to be a problem.

If you are looking specifically at how to best teach physics to students at Hispanic Serving Institutions in rural environments, having a community college partner may not be critical at all. It really depends on the project itself and how it's structured, and the questions you're trying to answer.