

National Visiting Committee Checkpoints

Purpose and Goals

The Advanced Technological Education (ATE) program supported by the National Science Foundation funds projects to improve technological education at the undergraduate and secondary school levels. The goal of the program is to produce more technicians to meet workforce demands and improve the technical skills and content preparation of these technicians and the educators who prepare them. Most of its grants are made to two-year colleges.

Successful applicants for large grants (funded at \$750,000 or more) are required to appoint a National Visiting Committee (NVC). These committees are groups of advisors that work with grantees and NSF to help them achieve their goals and objectives. They assess the plans and progress of the project and report to NSF and the project leadership. Committee members also provide advice to the project staff and may serve as advocates for effective projects.

In general, National Visiting Committees are similar to the advisory committees that are already an integral part of community colleges. In fact, most state and federally funded programs for these colleges require a local or regional advisory committee. However, there are differences between these committees and the NVCs. For example, local advisory committees report only to the project leadership who, in turn, set the meeting agendas. The NVCs not only report to the project, but also to the National Science Foundation.

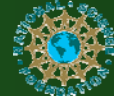
Furthermore, NSF appoints the committee members, and the NVC chairperson plays a major role in setting the agenda. The purpose of this Handbook is to help those who are responsible for organizing an NVC, planning and conducting meetings, and for postmeeting activities. It is intended for the chairs of NVCs, the project leadership (PIs or a project coordinator), and for committee members (advisors.)

This document includes reminders and suggestions called *checkpoints*, to consider when organizing and implementing NVCs. It is based on a literature search, observations of NVC meetings, and surveys of ATE project leadership. The handbook's format is a checklist of items together with explanatory text. The text includes examples of meeting agendas, suggested meeting topics, and details on how to have a successful meeting. References to actual ATE agendas, NVC reports, and project responses to these reports are provided. In addition, some suggestions for evaluating an NVC are included.

Committee chairs and project leaders are to consider the handbook a resource to help them with their NVC experiences. It is not intended to establish policy, nor does it necessarily apply to other NSF programs that use similar committees. Users are encouraged to consider each reminder and choose those that are applicable to their situations.

Overview

The primary responsibility for organizing an NVC lies with the principal investigator (PI). However, the PI works with his/her program officer at the National Science Foundation during this process. Some PIs also involve their co-PIs or their project coordinators. It is



useful to think of the NVC members as “critical friends.” Their task is to help the projects and NSF implement successful projects. They help project staff consider and resolve concerns and issues and provide a “snapshot” of progress to NSF. It is important to establish collegial and professional relationships to make this process work. Listed below are several key considerations to follow in organizing a committee. They are presented as checkpoints to help keep track of items to be considered.

CHECKPOINTS

1. Select NVC members who are leaders in the fields of science, mathematics, engineering, technology, business/industry, and education.

NSF and PIs may recommend individuals for NVCs; however, the final responsibility rests with the Foundation. Usually, NSF suggests names of people who live outside the state in which the grant is located. However, qualified advisors who live in the state can be selected if approved by a program officer.

A directory of those who have served or are serving on NVCs has been developed by The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University as part of its ongoing evaluation of the ATE program. The directory includes the affiliations, e-mail addresses, telephone numbers, and addresses of potential advisors. Approximately 110 names are included. The directory can be accessed at <http://ate.wmich.edu>.

When the selection process has been completed, the National Science Foundation usually sends out formal letters of invitation. PIs should contact their program officers to discuss this process. The project leaders may wish to send out letters of thanks to those NVC members who agree to participate.

2. Consider advisors from business and industry, technology education, K-16 education, women, and minorities.

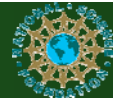
It is important to have a broad spectrum of backgrounds among the committee members. In this way, different viewpoints can be considered to help the project best achieve its goals. The backgrounds listed in the checkpoint above are made for committees that work with ATE projects. Different backgrounds may be needed for committees advising other NSF program areas.

Some examples might include teacher education, instructional systems, former students, curriculum development specialists, and the like.

3. Choose advisors who have the time and are committed to serve.

Advisors are expected to attend all meetings, review materials, and help in writing the NVC reports. The annual time commitment is one to three days. The NVC chair has additional responsibilities that will require more time. Make sure advisors know the expected frequency of meetings and the likely date for the first meeting.

It is important to discuss consultant fees and expense reimbursement with possible advisors. Most ATE projects reimburse travel expenses but expect NVC members to



serve as volunteers. If committee members are paid an honorarium, be aware that NSF has a limit on the amount of daily fees that can be paid.

Sometimes advisors may be called upon to spend additional time with a project to provide special expertise in a given area. However, such added requests are optional and not required of committee members.

In recognition of the time commitment given by these individuals, NSF will write letters of support to a member’s employer or university administrator (president, dean, and department head) acknowledging the contribution of these professionals.

4. Choose a chairperson who can effectively plan and run meetings and be responsible for preparing the report.

PIs will work with their program officer to select an effective chair. The chair’s task is to set the agendas, facilitate the committee meetings, and ensure that a committee report is prepared promptly. *In general, NVC chairs should not be members of the project leadership team.* Our observation of several NVCs suggests that separation of these roles results in a more effective NVC. An analysis of 24 ATE projects and centers as part of another study revealed that NVC chairs had the following affiliations. (One project had co-chairs which gives a total of 25 in the list below.)

- A PI or co-PI from another ATE project 7
- Industry representative 6
- Education (generally a community college administrator) 5
- Organization (usually a professional association) 4
- The PI of the ATE project 2
- Chairmanship rotates each year 1

5. Appoint advisors for a specific length of time.

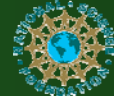
Most ATE grants are expected to last a minimum of three years. Funding is annual with the expectation that subsequent years will be funded if satisfactory progress is made. Most advisors are asked to commit to three-year terms.

However, some projects have found that it works better to appoint members for either one- or two-year terms with the possibility of reappointment. This allows the project some flexibility to handle problem situations that might occur. Effective advisors can be reappointed, and those who don’t have the time or lose interest can be replaced.

6. Be alert for potential conflicts of interest among the advisors.

Generally, this is not a problem. However, situations might occur where there are too many advisors from one company or institution. This could create conditions where the interests of the project might become secondary to the interests of the sponsoring company. Although it may be difficult to predict, try to avoid choosing those who have their own agendas and try to use the NVC or the ATE project to advance these agendas.

7. Determine the size of the committee.



Key trade-offs on committee size are cost and the number of people that can effectively interact during a meeting. NSF suggests that the size of an NVC, including the chair, be 4-6 members for projects and 8-10 for centers. In addition, most NVCs have an NSF program officer serve as an ex officio member of the committee. When the program officer cannot attend, they will often send a representative, typically a former NSF officer.

Data were available on the size of the 24 NVCs mentioned earlier. The average number of advisors on these committees was 7. The range was 4 to 13.

PIs are expected to include the cost of an annual NVC meeting in the proposal budget. Selecting large committees with the expectation that some advisors cannot attend a meeting is not recommended. NSF expects that NVC members who agree to serve will attend each annual meeting. This is the case, even though most committee members receive only travel expenses, not a consultant fee. The opportunity to help improve the nation's technological capacity seems sufficient reward to most potential committee members.

8. Provide adequate staff and financial support for the committee.

Some things to consider are secretarial support, travel cost reimbursement, background publications, and consultant fees, if applicable.

9. Make sure all those involved understand the purposes of a National Visiting Committee.

The NVCs serve two major roles in the ATE program. They are to advise the projects and assess progress. The advising role is intended to help the project make improvements and enhance its likelihood of success. The assessing role helps gather evidence that the project is on track and is carrying out the activities that it promised. Or, if activity changes have been made, these changes should be documented and approved by the appropriate NSF program officer. In this way, the NVCs expand the capability of NSF to monitor its larger grants.

NVC advisors can also assist a project by bringing its strengths and accomplishments to the attention of the faculty and administrators of the host institution. They may also disseminate information about the ATE project at their home institutions, at meetings of professional associations, and to the business/industrial community.

10. Formally recognize and publicize the committee and its contributions.

Thank you letters are an effective way of showing appreciation for the work of NVC advisors. This is especially important since the time of most NVC members is donated, either by them or by their employer. Formally recognizing their contributions increases the likelihood of continued and productive service.

Some projects put the names and photographs of the advisory committees on the project's Web site. Others list them on project letterheads.



11. Have the NVC prepare a committee report after their meeting.

NVCs are expected to prepare a report of their meetings. This report goes to the project staff and directly to the National Science Foundation.

12. Center aspects that should be reviewed by the NVC with comments.

1. Project mission, vision and goals
2. Staffing and project management plan including financial planning and reporting system.
3. Administrative support and business/industry and other partnerships
4. Main project activities or subprojects including curriculum and/or course materials.
5. Documented worker or education demand and current supply (participant recruitment).
6. Faculty recruitment, development, retention and professional development training.
7. Publicity (website, newsletter, media coverage)
8. Dissemination
9. Response to previous NVC recommendations
10. Overall evaluation of project and local project evaluation.