

Equity Action Plan Digest: National Science Foundation

Summarized by Travis Reginal

This is one in a series of Urban Institute digests summarizing federal agencies', subagencies', and commissions' 2022 equity action plans, which were released in response to the Biden administration's January 2021 executive order, Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. The National Science Foundation's equity action plan is available at https://www.nsf.gov/equity/NSF_Agency_Equity_Action_Plan.pdf (PDF).

Overview

What <i>problem</i> is the agency trying to solve?	"To promote the progress of science and maintain our Nation's scientific leadership and global competitiveness, the United States must educate, train, and retain more scientists, engineers, and computer scientists. Historically, underrepresented and underserved communities are the largest untapped Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) talent pools in the U.S." (p. 2)
Priority groups	Underrepresented and underserved communities
Historic harm mentioned?	No
Partners in implementation	Historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges and universities
Equity defined as	"Full and equal access for underrepresented and underserved communities" in STEM (p. 3)

Pillars and Principles of Equity

Acknowledgement of past harm and present barriers	Sexual and other forms of harassment are barriers to full participation by underrepresented groups in the scientific endeavor (p. 6); challenging contracting environment for minority-serving institutions and disadvantaged small businesses (p. 8); lack of robust connections based on trust between NSF and Indigenous and Native American communities (p. 10)
Impact goals	Mitigate harassment (p. 5); optimize demographic data collection (p. 6); increase participation of disadvantaged entities (p. 8)
Actions and activities	Required researchers collecting data at certain astronomical facilities to include Indigenous community acknowledgements in publications (p. 4); improving market research and acquisition planning for procurement and contracting (p. 8); increasing subcontracting opportunities for small and disadvantaged entities (p. 9)
Accountability measures and approaches	Monthly reports from the Office of Equity and Civil Rights (p. 13)

Note: For the rubric we used to evaluate these components of the equity action plans, see the appendix to the Urban Institute's 2023 brief "Pathways to Equity at Scale: An Analysis of the 2022 Federal Equity Action Plans and Recommendations for 2023 Plans," available at https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Pathways%20to%20Equity%20at%20Scale%20Appendix_0.pdf.

Types of Equity and Related Activities

Procedural (example: expanding language and translation services; simplifying the vendor application process)	Increased outreach to minority-serving institutions and small disadvantaged businesses; revising the NSF Proposal and Award Policies and Procedures Guide to make tribal governments eligible to apply for NSF funding (p. 4); hosting listening sessions and roundtables on the campuses of historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges and universities; hosting town halls and listening sessions with tribal nations, followed by a comment period for additional feedback (p. 11); requiring NSF travel proposals to certify that the meeting organizer has a written policy that addresses harassment and sexual assault (p. 4)
Distributional (example: creating new procurement program)	Pilot testing a change to the user interface for collecting demographic data from principal investigators (p. 6); pilot testing the collection of demographic data from undergraduate and graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and teachers (p. 7)
Structural (example: policy change via proposing legislation related to an equity goal; changing organizational functions)	Established agency equity team (p. 3); created the Tribal Consultation and Engagement Working Group (p. 10)

Key Metrics to Measure Progress on Equity

<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ progress toward adhering with agency antiharassment policies across grantees overall and by different types of institutions (p. 6)■ progress toward achieving high response rates in demographic data collections (p. 7)■ progress toward receiving useful responses from respondents to NSF data (p. 7)■ increase in the number of small and disadvantaged entities receiving prime and subcontract awards (p. 9)■ percentage of small disadvantaged businesses among total annual contract obligations (p. 9)■ number of community engagement activities completed by NSF (p. 11)
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Looking Ahead: Key Reflections for Plan Implementation

Where is the agency set up for success?	Ongoing connections with postsecondary institutions to encourage and sustain investments in new generations of scholars
Areas for future investment and growth	Guidance on equitable research team structures, experience, and content in all proposed grant projects; institutional investments and support to build capacity to apply for complex NSF grants
