The Joys of Being an NSF Program Director

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It is once again the season when our community needs to find a new volunteer to serve as program director for the "Theory of Computing program" or "Theoretical Foundations cluster" or whatever name our home inside CISE at NSF may have in the future. It feels to me as if I only recently finished my service in that role, but in fact I served from January 2001 through August of 2002, and it is now time for us to find a replacement for the redoubtable William Steiger, my successor's successor.

I was asked by the SIGACT Committee for the Advancement of Theoretical Computer Science to write a bit about why I greatly enjoyed my stint as program director, and why I think you might enjoy it.

Now one advantage of the position was that we could get the *Washington Post* delivered daily, and the *Post* is one of the few really great American papers still left; the *Chicago Tribune*, while not absolutely horrible, is no longer at all in the same league. I will return to the subject of the Washington DC area at the end, but let me turn my attention now to some less frivolous matters.

First of all, speaking in purely selfish terms, I found the position of program director to be inherently interesting. If you have an interest not only in what we do, but also in the process and policy issues of what we do, then you too might really enjoy spending a couple of years being a program director. At many universities, definitely including mine, the whole funding process is a major component—perhaps the single most important component—in determining who will get tenure, promotions, etc. As somebody interested in process and policy, I really enjoyed getting to see how this system works from the inside.

Not only is NSF an interesting place, it is a highly *purpose driven* place. As faculty, we are called on to do many, many different tasks, some of which seem to have a clear goal, and some of which, well, leave one scratching one's head. One wonders, depending on where one is and who is the Dean/Provost/etc. any given year: Is the goal really to *educate* the masters students, or rather to keep them happy enough that we keep making money from them? NSF has one of the clearest goals possible: find the absolute best research to fund. (There can be huge disagreement about what is the best research, of course, but there really is not any disagreement about the underlying goal.)

Being a program director also gives you the ability to provide two good services to your research community. First, you have some ability to drive the direction of the research community. Second, you get to run the best, fairest competitions for funding possible. There is really quite a difference between the best panel run by somebody who knows the research area, knows who are likely to be

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good panelists, and is good at managing such things, and a panel run by an outsider who is a fair to middling manager of such things.

Finally, I found NSF a pleasant change of pace from the university. Part of that, I think, is the joy of any temporary position. Knowing I was there for roughly two years, I could easily simply shrug off the annoyances. I must say, I really love my home department, but having joined it seventeen years ago, and having (I hope!) more than seventeen more years of productive time left there, I don't always find it so easy to shrug off certain irritations. But beyond the joys of being a temporary visitor, NSF is a good place to work. It has a university-like atmosphere, complete with seminars, etc., and smart and pleasant colleagues. Secret (taught to me by the late Carl Smith, who also enjoyed his time as a program director back around the late 1980s): NSF has a lighter workload than most of us have at our home universities. I worked many eight and some seven hour days—I have only very rarely managed to work only forty hour weeks at my home university. (Tonight when I finish this article, I have to post my student's next programming assignment for beginning data structures, write a quiz for them, etc.)

Incidentally, most program directors (including Yours Truly) choose to make the program director job a four-day-a-week position, and reserve the fifth day for their research life. A request to do so is automatically granted.

Now I will not kid the reader. If you hate all administrative tasks, then do not go to NSF. On the other hand, if you have some modest talent for administration and are senior enough to have tenure, then I imagine you have been loaded with all sorts of administrative tasks in your home university. An nice side benefit of leaving for NSF is that all of these cease. (When I left for NSF, I was Director of Undergraduate Studies for a department that had well over 600 majors at the height of the dot com boom. The previous two holders of that position had only ended their time in it by leaving the country in one case and dying in the other—both far more extreme than going to NSF for a couple of years.)

To conclude my serious remarks, let me remind you that serving as program director really is providing a great service to your community. We are all privileged to "work" as scholars and researchers, and to be members of this fascinating and vibrant research community. It behooves us all to spend a couple years of our professional life giving something back to this community, and ultimately, to the nation, in promoting its scientific life.

In a lighter vein, let me say a few more words about the DC area. It is a tremendous place to spend a couple of years. I say this as one who lived several years in Boston and many years in Chicago and who loves both places. However, the Washington area has some great attractions. It has the greatest free museums in the western hemisphere, the Kennedy Center, important historical sites nearby, and superb public transportation. Washington also has vastly better weather than either Boston or Chicago most of the year, and only slightly worse a couple of months a year. And, working those forty and even sometimes thirty-seven hour weeks, I actually got to take my children to see all those attractions. (Oh, okay, truth in advertising: they were young enough that for the Kennedy Center my wife and I got a babysitter and went without them.)

So, consider taking on this position now. Equally importantly, if now is not the right time because of, e.g., the age of your children, keep the thought in the back of your mind for a few years from now.