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Introduction

On June 16-18, 2015, a Plan of Work Panel of Experts convened to discuss streamlining strategies and improvements to the data collection and reporting process surrounding AREERA and NARETPA funds (including Hatch, Hatch Multistate, Smith-Lever 3b&3c, Evans-Allen, and 1890 Extension). The Panel produced a set of recommendations to NIFA for streamlining the POW reporting process to reduce the reporting burden on the Land Grant University (LGU) partners and the review burden on NIFA National Program Leaders (NPLs). The recommendations were vetted by the LGU panel members with the Research and Extension Directors in their regions and by NIFA NPLs with their Institutes. The final recommendations were presented to NIFA's Director, Dr. Sonny Ramaswamy, on September 27, 2015.

NIFA would like to express its sincere thanks to the LGU partners at the Agricultural Experiment Stations and in the Cooperative Extension Service; the Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy (ESCOP) and the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP); and other stakeholders who gave feedback and supported the work done by the panel. Specifically, the agency would like to acknowledge the efforts of the members in each these groups who conducted in-depth conversations with their own membership and stakeholders prior to the convening of the panel. As a result of their efforts, Directors of the Northeast and Western Experiment Stations and Northeast Extension provided NIFA prior to the June meeting detailed explanations of the concerns of their partners and stakeholders; this allowed NIFA to tailor the panel topics appropriately and proactively.

Statement of Agreement to Recommendations

In general, NIFA leadership agrees that all of the recommendations made by the panel are sound and rooted in a common sense approach to reduce duplication and reporting burden. The recommendations support long-term cost and resource saving strategies at both the federal and state

levels. Our response to the panel's recommendations is broken into three parts: [context](#), [timeline](#), and [responses to discrete recommendations](#). In part one, we discuss the goals of the agency's Grants Modernization initiative and explain the circumstances under which NIFA staff have determined that we can reasonably implement the panel's recommendations. In part two, we provide a general timeline for implementation. In part three, we address each discrete recommendation including the agency's agreement and next steps for developing the foundation of a new reporting paradigm, identifying business and system requirements, and working with the panel sub-groups.

Context

NIFA's capacity to implement the panel's recommendations and our proposed timeline for doing so will be affected by two significant projects underway in the agency. Unlike in 2010, when the Panel of Experts recommended changes to the POW software, a self-contained reporting system, the current set of recommendations involves integrating the POW software and reporting process into other NIFA reporting systems. At the same time, NIFA's internal grants management system is undergoing a thorough overhaul. The ultimate vision is that once NIFA's grants management overhaul is completed and AREERA/NARETPA reporting is fully integrated with other reporting systems, the entire life-cycle management of all NIFA grants will be in one system. We anticipate that this one-system approach will reduce the reporting burden of grantees. The new one-system will also offer more efficient internal controls for the agency to ensure proper documentation is in place before making capacity awards and payments each year; this applies to accounting for an institution's Plan of Work when reviewing its application for funding (which is a legislative requirement for the agency).

Since the panel met in June 2015, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) initiated an audit of our capacity grants process (October 2015) that will continue through much of fiscal year 2016. The OIG audit team will issue their preliminary recommendations in the summer of 2016, some of which will have an impact on how NIFA conducts the award process and manages the post-award accountability and reporting process for AREERA and NARETPA funds.

Timeline

NIFA leadership is committed to being good fiscal stewards, continuous organizational improvement, and open communication with its partners and stakeholders. It is imperative that significant changes to NIFA's grants management systems be well thought out and carefully executed. When the panel met in June 2015, NIFA had not secured a contract for implementing the first phase of the new grants system, and NIFA leadership was not aware that the OIG was planning an audit of capacity grants. Further, the Agency does not yet have a full set of detailed requirements to enable it to define the scope of the work required. Consequently, as a first step, the agency has begun a 90-120 day assessment effort to answer the following questions (assessment began in December 2015):

1. What are the mandatory components of a Plan of Work that work well in the current system that must be moved to the new system, and what are the best technical solutions for doing so?
2. What are the components desired in the new system (as recommended by the Panel) that are met, partially met, or not met in the current system, and how might they be developed in the new system?
3. What are the first phases of new development that should occur in order to lay the foundation of the new AREERA reporting process and what does the timeline for FY16 look like?

To answer the questions above, NIFA is beginning with in-depth brainstorming discussions between the Office of Information Technology (OIT) and the Planning, Accountability, and Reporting Staff (PARS). These two offices are committed to working with the Panel subgroups and other stakeholder groups from the LGU system to ensure the agency is understanding the intent of the Panel Recommendations and implementing technical solutions that capture the business requirements determined by the subgroups. OIT and PARS plan to begin discussions with the subgroups and others from the LGU system in the second quarter of FY16.

Additionally, the receipt of the OIG's recommendations in the summer of 2016 will give the agency more insight into how it can improve the overall reporting process for capacity programs. NIFA will then be better positioned to establish a complete timeline for integrating program and project level reporting¹ in a single system. ***NIFA therefore commits to providing an official update on timeline in the summer of FY16.***

Because the activities outlined above create some unknowns for future reporting in the current POW system, NIFA will consider waiving the requirement for states to submit Plans of Work in FY17 and FY18. In doing this, NIFA would count the 2017-2021 POW, due from the institutions April 1, 2016, as the last update to program plans before the waivers are put in place for FY17 and FY18. The 2017 POW would cover all institutions and keep them eligible for receiving AREERA/NARETPA funds through 2021 (provided all other eligibility requirements are met). Reporting of accomplishments at the program level for these funds would still be required in the Annual Report of Accomplishments and Results using the current POW software.

Responses to Discrete Recommendations

Note: Each recommendation below carries the number or number/letter combination with which it was originally labeled in the Panel's final recommendations to NIFA. To see the recommendations in their original format, please consult the [Appendix](#).

Panel Recommendation #1: There should be one reporting system with a stable platform that has the elements depicted in the graphic [submitted by the Panel]. The existing Plan of Work and Annual Report of Accomplishments reporting system should be eliminated concurrent with the introduction of the new system.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree on the one-system approach suggested above. This is the strategy that NIFA is currently moving toward with the Grants Modernization initiative. This initiative will provide long-term cost savings by eliminating multiple concurrent systems. It will also provide efficiency and cost savings since data will no longer have to be transferred and shared across multiple systems, which can result in confusion, technical glitches, and reporting and tracking inefficiencies. Because we cannot estimate the duration of the first few phases of the Grants Modernization initiative, we cannot currently commit to a timeline for building in the elements suggested in this recommendation.

¹ "Reporting" in this context encompasses the qualitative, programmatic description of research and extension activities both at the project/program initiation phase and accomplishment reporting phases.

To ease burden in the meantime, NIFA will consider waiving the requirement of submitting POWS in FY17 and FY18. Annual Reports will continue to be required each year until the new system is ready.

Panel Recommendation #1a: In support of this recommendation, NIFA should invest in human capital and hardware/software to improve the current and future reporting system (or its replacement for the single system/database approach) and make plans to discontinue support of the older and less flexible POW platform. The “single system” approach should be developed in a way that allows for aggregation of all numerical data wherever possible; it should also be able to prepopulate qualitative/descriptive data wherever possible.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree and recognize that it helps both us and our partners when data are more readily accessible and able to be aggregated in a way that helps “tell the story” of how we are working together to advance agricultural research and extension across the nation. In light of Grants Modernization, NIFA must be careful to dedicate resources to keep current systems operational. We also recognize that it would be wasteful to put too many resources toward systems that will be retired and replaced by new ones. Thus, we will focus our resources on the new system to perform better and to allow better data accessibility, population, and aggregation. The old (current) system will not be enhanced in this way.

Panel Recommendation #1b: Concurrent with the recommendation above, technical issues currently present in REEport, including but not limited to the excessive time needed to upload and download documents, formatting issues, and the tendency for the system to crash should be addressed, especially if the REEport platform will be leveraged for the single system approach recommended here; the system needs to be a robust and high-performance platform.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree and are working on performance issues in REEport. We’ve heard from multiple stakeholders that the performance of the current REEport system is not acceptable and needs to be improved so that our partners and grantees may report efficiently for as long as REEport remains our primary reporting system. A release for improved system performance is currently planned for second quarter FY16.

Panel Recommendation #1c: The future system (whether REEport or other) should include the capability for advanced querying of all data elements and the ability to export data in desired formats.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree and we will work with sub-groups composed of POW Panel members and other LGU staff and faculty to ensure the query function of the new system satisfies our partners’ needs.

Panel Recommendation #2: The Institutional Profile module in the new system should contain those elements mandated by AREERA and other data elements deemed essential by NIFA, including:

- a) a Short Programmatic Overview of the submitting institution(s);
- b) a Short Annual Programmatic Summary covering Research, Extension, and Integrated program and project accomplishments (the summary should highlight those programs and projects that have realized significant accomplishments and impacts in the previous year);
- c) description of Merit and Scientific Review processes;

- d) description of Stakeholder Input and utilization processes;
- e) Multistate Extension and Integrated Research and Extension components as required by AREERA;
- f) a list of “planned programs” (or whatever they will be called in the new system).

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree that only legislatively required and essential data should be collected in the new system. We will rely heavily on the sub-groups of the Panel and other partners who would like to volunteer to help NIFA operationalize this recommendation. We will need to identify specific business rules and technical requirements to build the new section to the satisfaction of both NIFA and the LGUs. This new module is the part that will be the most different from how the current POW system works, so it will take some brainstorming, and collaboration with our partners, followed by execution in to workable modules.

Panel Recommendation #3: The Institutional Profile module should be structured so that it may remain relatively unchanged from year to year and will re-populate annually for the institution; this results in a 5-year dynamic, rolling “plan” for all 1862 and 1890 Institutions (both Research and Extension).

- a) If an institution wishes to make changes to their profile annually, they should be able to do so (both add and subtract program elements), and a mechanism to highlight such changes for the NIFA reviewer should exist.

NIFA RESPONSE: We understand this recommendation to mean that institutions require the flexibility to alert NIFA annually if they would like to make changes to how they plan to structure their programming/resources for the next five years. However, this recommendation also takes into account that the nature and purpose of the AREERA capacity funds means many states will not have any changes to make in some years, and the system should allow for this. We also agree that NIFA reviewers should have a clear and easy way to identify changes made to the profile from year to year.

Panel Recommendation #4: The listing of “planned programs” that is entered into the “Institutional Profile” should allow tagging to NIFA’s topic areas; this will allow entered data to be rolled up for NIFA’s use.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree that the concept of tagging planned programs to “topic areas” (be they challenge areas, portfolios, USDA goals or other) that can be rolled up with aggregated data is sound. However, NIFA would like to look further into whether or not this feature would be used for reporting by the agency. We acknowledge and agree with recommendation #2 above and do not want to require anything we do not deem essential or will not be useful. It is prudent to wait until we are nearing the end of FY17 to see how the agency might use such “tagging” in the new grants system currently under development. If it does not look like such data will be useful, then we suggest not implementing this capability.

Panel Recommendation #5: The Research Capacity and Competitive reporting modules should function in a manner similar to how they are currently accounted for. The Extension Capacity reporting module should be developed to include planning and reporting related metrics needed by NIFA to assess progress and to promote the accomplishments of capacity-funded programs.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree that no major changes should occur to the research project level reporting for Hatch, Hatch Multistate, and Evans-Allen activities. Meanwhile, we agree that Extension capacity reporting should be developed in a way that advances NIFA's ability to promote Extension's accomplishments in certain topic areas, focusing only on what the agency needs for these efforts.

Panel Recommendation #6: The Extension and Research Capacity and Competitive reporting modules should be linked to the National Impacts Database (NID) so that users of the system are not required to enter impact statements that are already documented in the NID.

- a. The potential for linking to the Excellence in Extension database should be explored as well in order to determine if there is any opportunity to further reduce duplicative reporting.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree that reducing duplication by linking to data from other systems is an efficient use of resources. The assessment NIFA is currently doing (and that will be completed in the summer of FY16) will address when this linkage can be accomplished. Note, however, that security of Federal systems is of critical importance, and connecting with the NID database will require appropriate security systems to be in place.

Panel Recommendation #7: Participation in the National Impacts Database (NID) should be optional, not mandatory. The NID will be informed by the Extension and Research Capacity and Competitive reporting modules of the single system. Language in the NID should be updated to link to NIFA's topic areas so that NIFA may properly associate impacts to agency's areas of focus.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree with this policy and will support it if the NID is indeed linked to NIFA's new reporting system and meets security needs.

Panel Recommendation #8: Knowledge areas (KAs) and Subjects of Investigation (SOIs) should be expanded and/or modified to meet both Research and Extension's needs.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree. NIFA has long had difficulty querying our databases using classification codes to produce reports that include both research and extension activities. We believe that expanding the classification schema to accommodate extension areas of work will allow our partners to more appropriately classify their work and enable NIFA to produce more accurate reports and data aggregation.

Panel Recommendation #9: NIFA should restore the flexibility of a state to report by institution (1862, 1890), organization (Research, Extension), or jointly.

NIFA RESPONSE: We recognize some of the logistical challenges some states have with the requirement to submit a state-level integrated POW and Accomplishment Report and can agree to restore the flexibility for 1862 and 1890 institutions to report separately. However, we also want to be clear that the agency has an essential need to be able to show how the capacity funds—Hatch, Smith-Lever 3(b) and 3(c), Evans-Allen and 1890 Extension—support leveraging of other funds and help translate research into action within extension. We will need to find a way in the new system (perhaps in the institutional profile) for states to submit data which demonstrate integration at the organization level.

Panel Recommendation #10: The following sub-groups should be created in order to ensure all recommendations of the Panel of Experts are carried out accurately and efficiently (note that a Panel Expert may serve on one or more sub-groups):

- a) a sub-group to define the Extension Capacity program reporting module; the group will clearly define data fields/elements that need to be included in the new module;
- b) a sub-group to operationalize the data elements and functionality of the “Institutional Profile;
- c) a sub-group to identify new Knowledge Areas (KAs) and Subjects of Investigation (SOIs) for addition to NIFA’s Manual of Classification so that both Research and Extension can classify projects and programs accurately;
- d) other sub-groups as needed; for example, fiscal monitoring/tracking (the Panel of Experts will serve as a committee for determining when a new sub-group is required).

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree that sub-groups will be the key to making sure the agency stays on track with the intent of these recommendations. They will also provide constant feedback loops between NIFA/National Program Leaders and state/regional leaders on policies and processes surrounding the AREERA/NARETPA capacity funds. We absolutely support the three sub-groups already identified above and others as they are deemed necessary. The Planning, Accountability, and Reporting Staff at NIFA will serve as the coordination point for these groups.

Panel Recommendation #11: Reporting Deadlines: NIFA should keep all capacity reporting deadlines with the due dates that currently exist but should re-visit this issue once the new “single system concept” has been implemented (currently Feb 1 for Research REEport Financial Report; Mar 1 for Research Progress and Final Report; April 1 for all other capacity reporting).

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree. The current date is functional for both the partners (as we heard during the Panel discussions) and for NIFA. The agency’s main concern is to keep the POW and Annual Report deadlines before the application for funding is due each fiscal year, but there is a wide range of dates the agency could accommodate if a date change is desired in the future.

Panel Recommendation #12: A permanent accountability and reporting track (akin to the fiscal track) for the National Extension and Research Administrative Officers' Conference (NERAOC) should be implemented. NIFA should send Representatives from the Planning, Accountability, and Reporting Staff (PARS) to the meeting annually so that feedback can be gained and improvements made to the database, by both sides, without waiting for the Panel of Experts to convene every five years.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree. We are pleased to hear from the planning committee of the 2016 NERAOC that a new track on reporting has already been designated. NIFA has also already committed resources to sending multiple staff from the PARS team at NIFA. Beyond the 2016 NERAOC, we expect to maintain this level of commitment by the agency and hope that a stronger presence from reporting staff will facilitate more two-way communication and updates between the LGUs and NIFA on the new system being developed and the policies/procedures contained therein.

Panel Recommendation #13: A commitment should be made by NIFA to work with Land Grant partners to ensure that the resultant system is fully searchable by (but not limited to) author, keyword, topic, programmatic classification, and location of work, and that the information within the modules will be effectively linked within the larger system.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree. As we build NIFA's new grants system, we will ensure along the way that the data are being collected, processed, and stored in a way which enables advanced querying by each discrete data element collected.

Panel Recommendation #14: NIFA should strengthen the State Liaison Program to more effectively build and maintain relationships between program leaders and state institutions.

- a) NIFA should clarify, standardize, and communicate the review criteria NPLs use to review programs/projects.
- b) NIFA should clarify and communicate/educate its LGU partners how data are used to report out to various audiences and stakeholders.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree. It is essential that NIFA have "one voice" when it comes to communicating policy and suggestions for how to improve programming within the LGUs and states. Having "one voice" cannot happen unless National Program Leaders are all provided the same foundational training and knowledge on serving in their role as a State Liaison. Meanwhile, we appreciate the desire for our LGU partners to have stronger, more synergetic relationships with their state liaisons. We commit to initiating an effort to make these improvements starting in first quarter FY16. The Planning, Accountability and Reporting Staff at NIFA will coordinate this effort and provide period updates to the Panel representatives.

Panel Recommendation #15: Non-AREERA programs, such as McIntire-Stennis, should not be included in the new reporting model proposed in these recommendations at this time, but the Panel acknowledges that the new "single system" approach, combined with NIFA's grants modernization initiative, could eventually result in a framework that may be applied to all NIFA funding programs.

NIFA RESPONSE: We agree and will revisit the idea of including other NIFA programs under this new reporting model after we have had time to evaluate its effectiveness once implemented.

Appendix

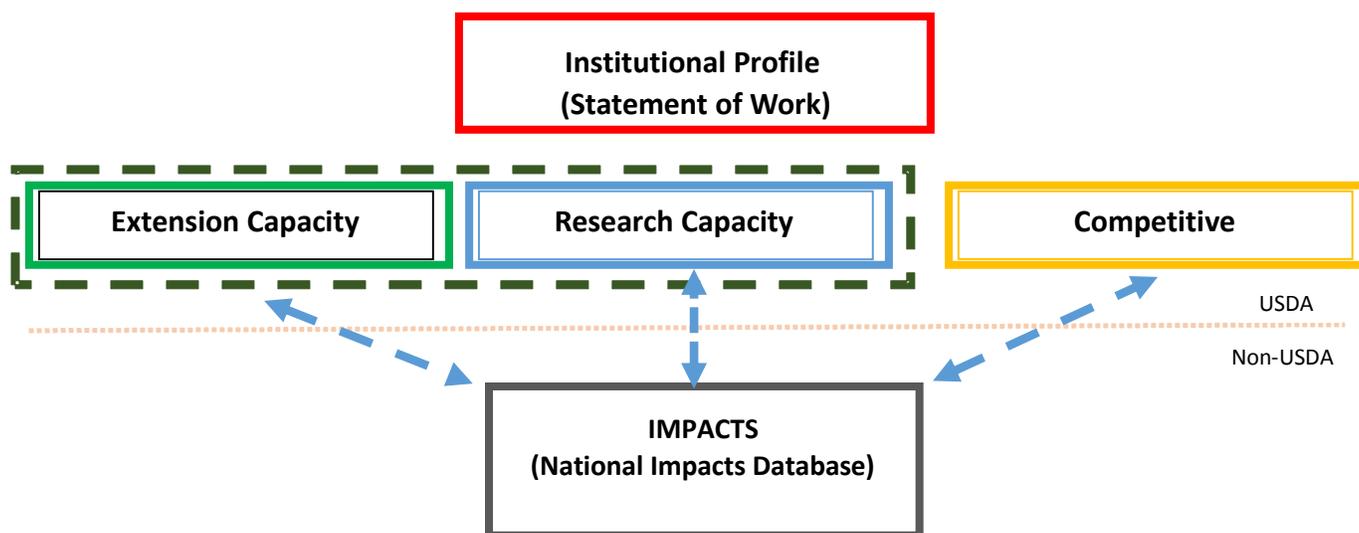
Plan of Work Panel of Experts *Recommendations to NIFA*

A Panel of Experts on the AREERA Plan of Work reporting process convened on June 16-18 to discuss improvements to the current reporting process. The Panel consisted of 14 members representing Research, Extension and NIFA. The Panel, with input from their respective regions and from NIFA program leaders, agreed that the current process is duplicative and burdensome. The Panel makes the following recommendations to NIFA so that the process may be streamlined in a way that reduces the reporting burden on the Land Grant Institutions as well as the review burden on NIFA National Program Leaders. The Panel also believes that this streamlining will improve data quality and result in a data collection that meets legislative requirements while also providing NIFA what it needs to continue to promote the effectiveness of the AREERA capacity funds.

The following recommendations are classified under two categories: system-specific and general.

SYSTEM-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. There should be one reporting system with a stable platform that has the elements depicted in the graphic below. The existing Plan of Work and Annual Report of Accomplishments reporting system should be eliminated concurrent with the introduction of the new system.



- a) In support of this recommendation, NIFA should invest in human capital and hardware/software to improve the current and future reporting system (or its replacement for the single system/database approach) and make plans to discontinue support of the older and less flexible POW platform. The “single system” approach should be developed in a way that allows for aggregation of all numerical data

- wherever possible; it should also be able to prepopulate qualitative/descriptive data wherever possible.
- b) Concurrent with the recommendation above, technical issues currently present in REEport, including but not limited to the excessive time needed to upload and download documents, formatting issues, and the tendency for the system to crash should be addressed, especially if the REEport platform will be leveraged for the single system approach recommended here; the system needs to be a robust and high-performance platform.
 - c) The future system (whether REEport or other) should include the capability for advanced querying of all data elements and the ability to export data in desired formats.
2. The Institutional Profile module in the new system should contain those elements mandated by AREERA and other data elements deemed essential by NIFA, including:
 - g) a Short Programmatic Overview of the submitting institution(s);
 - h) a Short Annual Programmatic Summary covering Research, Extension, and Integrated program and project accomplishments (the summary should highlight those programs and projects that have realized significant accomplishments and impacts in the previous year);
 - i) description of Merit and Scientific Review processes;
 - j) description of Stakeholder Input and utilization processes;
 - k) Multistate Extension and Integrated Research and Extension components as required by AREERA;
 - l) a list of “planned programs” (or whatever they will be called in the new system).
 3. The Institutional Profile module should be structured so that it may remain relatively unchanged from year to year and will repopulate annually for the institution; this results in a 5-year dynamic, rolling “plan” for all 1862 and 1890 Institutions (both Research and Extension).
 - b) If an institution wishes to make changes to their profile annually, they should be able to do so (both add and subtract program elements), and a mechanism to highlight such changes for the NIFA reviewer should exist.
 4. The listing of “planned programs” that is entered into the “Institutional Profile” should allow tagging to NIFA’s topic areas; this will allow entered data to be rolled up for NIFA’s use.
 5. The Research Capacity and Competitive reporting modules should function in a manner similar to how they are currently accounted for. The Extension Capacity reporting module should be developed to include planning and reporting related metrics needed by NIFA to assess progress and to promote the accomplishments of capacity-funded programs.
 6. The Extension and Research Capacity and Competitive reporting modules should be linked to the National Impacts Database (NID) so that users of the system are not required to enter impact statements that are already documented in the NID.
 - a. The potential for linking to the Excellence in Extension database should be explored as well in order to determine if there is any opportunity to further reduce duplicative reporting.

7. Participation in the National Impacts Database should be optional, not mandatory. The NID will be informed by the Extension and Research Capacity and Competitive reporting modules of the single system. Language in the NID should be updated to link to NIFA's topic areas so that NIFA may properly associate impacts to agency's areas of focus.
8. Knowledge areas (KAs) and Subjects of Investigation (SOIs) should be expanded and/or modified to meet both Research and Extension's needs.
9. NIFA should restore the flexibility of a state to report by institution (1862, 1890), organization (Research, Extension), or jointly.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

10. The following sub-groups should be created in order to ensure all recommendations of the Panel of Experts are carried out accurately and efficiently (note that a Panel Expert may serve on one or more sub-groups):
 - e) a sub-group to define the Extension Capacity program reporting module; the group will clearly define data fields/elements that need to be included in the new module;
 - f) a sub-group to operationalize the data elements and functionality of the "Institutional Profile;
 - g) a sub-group to identify new Knowledge Areas (KAs) and Subjects of Investigation (SOIs) for addition to NIFA's Manual of Classification so that both Research and Extension can classify projects and programs accurately;
 - h) other sub-groups as needed; for example, fiscal monitoring/tracking (the Panel of Experts will serve as a committee for determining when a new sub-group is required).
11. Reporting Deadlines: NIFA should keep all capacity reporting deadlines with the due dates that currently exist but should re-visit this issue once the new "single system concept" has been implemented (currently Feb 1 for Research REEport Financial Report; Mar 1 for Research Progress and Final Report; April 1 for all other capacity reporting).
12. A permanent accountability and reporting track (akin to the fiscal track) for the National Extension and Research Administrative Officers' Conference (NERAOC) should be implemented. NIFA should send Representatives from the Planning, Accountability, and Reporting Staff (PARS) to the meeting annually so that feedback can be gained and improvements made to the database, by both sides, without waiting for the Panel of Experts to convene every five years.
13. A commitment should be made by NIFA to work with Land Grant partners to ensure that the resultant system is fully searchable by (but not limited to) author, keyword, topic, programmatic classification, and location of work, and that the information within the modules will be effectively linked within the larger system.
14. NIFA should strengthen the State Liaison Program to more effectively build and maintain relationships between program leaders and state institutions.
 - c) NIFA should clarify, standardize, and communicate the review criteria NPLs use to review programs/projects.

- d) NIFA should clarify and communicate/educate its LGU partners how data are used to report out to various audiences and stakeholders.
15. Non-AREERA programs, such as McIntire-Stennis, should not be included in the new reporting model proposed in these recommendations at this time, but the Panel acknowledges that the new “single system” approach, combined with NIFA’s grants modernization initiative, could eventually result in a framework that may be applied to all NIFA funding programs.