AAAC Demographics Working Group
Minutes (Brad Peterson) from the 19 December 2014 Teleconference

Attending: Jim Buckley, Prisca Cushman (Chair), Hashima Hasan, James Lowenthal, Brad Peterson, Jonathan Rall, Keivan Stassun, and Jim Whitmore

Prisca noted that the near-term goals of the WG is to have a set of questions that will lead to the fact-based discussion with which we have been tasked. The final version of the questions should be ready prior to the AAAC meeting in March 2015.

Prisca directed the attendees to the draft of the Demographics Section that could be ready for the March 2015 AAAC report. The draft can be found as a link on the agenda page for this meeting.

The first section of the report will define the problem. We want to be able to identify trends for each agency, specifically with data on number of proposals per year, success rates, and funding profiles, and discuss the balance between grants and facilities.

A second section will address the impact of the current trends on proposers, reviewers, and the agencies themselves. The evidence here will be largely anecdotal. At least two participants from the agencies noted that "reviewer burnout" has been a serious recent issue: too many proposals to evaluate and too low a success rate. The pool of reviewers has in some cases been greatly reduced by over-restrictive conflict of interest (CoI) guidelines. This has in some cases led to what some participants feel is over-reliance on individuals who are not proposal writers themselves (e.g., postdocs, faculty who are no longer active in research). Agencies could mitigate CoI problems with multiple panels, though it is noted that there are real overhead costs associated with multiple panels even if the total number of reviewers is kept constant. There was in any case consensus that the CoI problem needs to be rethought and maybe CoI itself needs to be redefined.

The WG then moved on to a discussion of the key questions:
1. Who is writing the proposals? We need to collect basic demographics (seniority, gender, minority), institutions proposing.
2. Why are there more proposals? (More astronomers or more proposals per astronomer? Need plots of proposals vs. time, for example. Need to get membership numbers for professional societies. Are we getting proposals from institutions that we didn't in the past?

The WG identified a third question that should be added to this list:
3. What do funding requests include now, and how does this compare to the past? For example, it seems that more institutions are charging for graduate tuition.

Overhead rates have gone up as well. What other factors have changed? Or have requests kept pace with inflation but funding levels have not?

More generally, the WG asks how do we capture the collective belief that more good proposals are going unfunded? Many of the funding programs track number of proposals received, number that are fundable (meaning they cleared some quality bar) and number actually funded: we should try to capture this information where it is available.

The WG then discussed next steps. Prisca noted that we still need a lot of information for the specific individual agencies. The agenda page has a link to Prisca's assessment of where we are now for each agency wiki page and what needs to be done by the liasons.

WG members James Lowenthal and Todd Hoeksema are members of the AAS Committee on Astronomy and Public Policy and will work with this working group and the AAS to formulate survey questions to help inform the section of the report on how proposers and agencies are affected by the current funding environment. The survey questions should be formulated very soon, if we want to be able to present a reasonable "work in progress" by the March Report.

Prisca would like to have another telecon during the first half of January. A doodle poll will be set up to maximize attendance.