Portfolio Review Roles

*January 2015*

Portfolio reviews are the centerpiece of OSF’s emerging approach to assessment. They are meant to be thoughtful conversations that demonstrate and refine programs’ decision-making processes and evaluative thinking by assessing concrete aspects of past efforts and identifying adjustments to the work going forward.

Establishing this new ritual within the organization requires many of us to take up different roles than we may have in the past. What follows is a brief guide to the main roles participants assume during portfolio reviews at OSF. As with many other parts of the process, these designations are subject to interpretation based on each program’s needs.

# Portfolio Lead

The portfolio lead is the staff person with current, primary responsibility for the portfolio, who will represent the program’s perspective on it. He typically is the main author of the portfolio review document and the first presenter at the review itself. In preparing for this five- to seven- minute presentation, the portfolio lead can assume that attendees have read the portfolio review document and should not attempt to summarize it. Instead, his initial remarks should illustrate the program’s experience with the portfolio and any outstanding, retrospective questions in this regard. Often this can be done via reference to some specific examples that reveal the logic and assumptions behind a program’s decisions and how they played out in reality.

Occasionally, portfolio lead responsibilities are split between two colleagues, particularly in the case of large or complex portfolios. Also, portfolio leadership can shift because of staff turnover or reassignment. If the period under review includes a time when another person handled the portfolio, the new lead might want to gather that person’s perspective, if feasible.

**Moderator**The moderator’s job is to manage and guide the discussion in two ways. She is responsible for ensuring that the meeting follows the portfolio review format, which calls for two or three short presentations followed by open discussion, concluding with a discussion about the future. This deliberate shift from looking backward to looking ahead should take place about 60 minutes into the meeting. The moderator also has a specific obligation to encourage a probing and productive conversation, albeit with the support of the other participants. This means ensuring that those assembled refer as much as possible to specific pieces of work carried out within the portfolio; that all contributions are focused on benefitting the portfolio in question; and that participation during the meeting is sufficiently broad.

The moderator role is often played by the program director, a board member, or other OSF colleague. The moderator should have sufficient familiarity with the work and those present to be able to ensure an inclusive discussion.

**Discussant**The discussant follows the portfolio lead and responds to the portfolio review document and presentation. His role is that of the friendly critic, posing provocative questions and pinpointing unvoiced assumptions. Rather than making comments about the broader field, the discussant should focus on the portfolio and materials presented, offering reflections and supportive critique. Chris usually plays a discussant role in presidential reviews. However, many programs arrange for a board member, program director or staffer, or other OSF colleague to precede Chris as an additional discussant.

**Program Director**Along with any other role the program director may take up, her main job is to ensure that the full program’s perspective is brought to bear on the portfolio in question. This can mean sharing her own thoughts on relevant grantees or activities, offering insights on the state of the field or the logic behind the program’s decisions, or signaling where other staff could usefully enter the conversation.

**Board Members**In addition to other parts they may play, board members are encouraged to offer their unique take on the portfolio, pose questions to staff, and make proposals. Although we often look to board members to help us with strategy development and forward planning, in this case we first ask them to join us in looking backwards to assess discrete pieces of our past work. See here [LINK] for a sample email to board members describing their role in the process.

**Other Contributors**Similarly, other OSF staffers join to offer their views of the work and help answer the questions that arise. While their interventions will certainly be informed by their experiences, they should be focused on supporting the thorough review of the pertinent portfolio rather than offering supplementary detail on their own work or related efforts. Contributors can include staff from the program under review, colleagues from other OSF programs and foundations, or, more rarely, consultants or outside experts. We have so far not encouraged the inclusion of grantees, because their presence may work against the atmosphere of candor we seek to establish. Of course, the findings and changes to strategy that stem from portfolio reviews could well be worth sharing with grantees in some fashion, where appropriate.

**Observers**  
A small group of observers attends each presidential review and, less frequently, staff- or advisory board-level reviews. They are tasked with supporting the portfolio review process, but may comment on substance when invited by the moderator or when their experience warrants it. Observers typically include one or two Strategy Unit staffers and a presidential fellow. The president’s board liaison may also join on occasion.

**Rapporteur**  
Programs should assign one staff person to take notes on the content of the discussion. These will inform the two main outputs of each portfolio review held at the presidential or board level: 1) a two- to three-page outcomes summary that recaps themes covered, questions to be pursued, and conclusions; and 2) adjustments to the program’s strategy that describe the approach to the portfolio as it evolves, and which may be recorded in the outcomes summary or elsewhere.