

THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES

The National Academies are...

- Advisers to the nation on science, engineering, and medicine—chartered by the U.S. Congress
- Independent from the government
- Nonprofit, non-advocacy
- Able to draw on leading experts from scientific and technical disciplines

The National Academies consensus reports are...

- Independent and objective
- Peer-reviewed
- Authoritative
- Publicly disseminated

WORKING WITH THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES

A Guide for Prospective
Study Sponsors

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Advisers to the Nation on Science, Engineering, and Medicine

The nation turns to the National Academies—National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine, and National Research Council—for independent, objective advice on issues that affect people's lives worldwide.

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National Academy of Sciences
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National Research Council

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For more than 140 years, the National Academies have been advising the nation on issues of science, technology, and medicine. An 1863 Congressional charter signed by President Lincoln authorized this non-governmental institution to honor top scientists with membership and to serve the nation whenever called upon. Today the National Academies—**National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine, and National Research Council**—continue that dual mission.

Like no other organization, the National Academies can enlist the nation’s foremost scientists, engineers, health professionals, and other experts to address the scientific and technical aspects of society’s most pressing problems. Each year, more than 6,000 of these experts are selected to serve on hundreds of study committees that are convened to answer specific sets of questions. All serve without pay.

The National Academies are a unique resource. Their reports are viewed as being valuable and credible because of their reputation for providing advice with high standards of scientific and technical quality and independence. National Academies staff will work with potential sponsors to develop a specific set of questions to be answered by a committee of experts.

This guide is intended for prospective sponsors interested in requesting studies from the National Academies. It describes the process for producing these reports—from funding to report dissemination—and explains the sponsors’ involvement at each stage. This approach ensures that sponsors receive the best product possible. Checks and balances are applied at every step in the study process to protect the integrity of the reports and to maintain public confidence in them.

Defining and Initiating the Study

Before a contract or grant is signed, National Academies staff and board members work with the sponsor to determine the specific set of questions to be addressed. A formal “statement of task” is developed that defines the scope of the study and serves as the basis for determining the expertise and the balance of perspectives needed on the committee.

Typically, the following steps are taken to ensure that the project is clearly defined and that both the National Academies and the sponsor understand what is expected throughout the study process:

- 1. Sponsor and National Academies staff meet to discuss task, schedule, and likely costs.
- 2. When the staff and sponsor have come to a general agreement, staff prepares a prospectus for approval by the Executive Committee of the National Research Council Governing Board. This step ensures the appropriateness of the topic and the scope of the study before a formal proposal is sent to the sponsor.

Most studies are funded by those requesting the advice. Consistent with the congressional charter, experts serving on study committees volunteer their time without compensation. The cost of consensus studies can range from about \$200,000 to more than \$1 million, depending on the breadth and complexity of the issues being addressed and the

length of time needed to produce the desired report. The costs include the expenses of committee meetings, professional staff supporting the committee, report publication, and public dissemination.

Several funding options are available to sponsors. These include contracts, grants, cooperative agreements, and purchase orders. A project may have one or several sponsors. Studies typically take from 9 to 18 months to complete, although some urgent studies may be completed in a shorter time and some broader or more complex studies may take a longer time.

Because of their unique origins and status, federal sponsors interested in having the National Academies conduct a study can obtain their services on a sole source basis. The National Academies do not compete for federal contracts. Grants, contracts, and gifts can also be received from states, foundations, and other sources.

A project begins after formal commitments have been received for sufficient funds to complete the study.

Committee Selection and Approval

Selection of appropriate committee members, individually and collectively, is essential for the success of every study. All committee members serve as individual experts, not as representatives of organizations or interest groups. Each member is expected to contribute to the project on the basis of his or her own expertise and good judgment.

Once a project is funded, the National Academies seek nominees for members of consensus study committees from many sources, including the sponsors. However, the president of the National Academy of Sciences (who also serves as chair of the National Research Council) has the sole authority for appointing all members of study committees. Before a committee can be approved, a thorough balance and conflict of interest discussion is held in closed session during the first meeting, and any issues raised in that discussion or during the public comment period are investigated and addressed. Committee members are considered prospective until after this process is completed.

Committee Meetings, Deliberations, and Drafting Report

Study committees typically gather information through: 1) meetings that are open to the public and announced in advance through the National Academies’ Web site, 2) submission of information by outside parties, 3) reviews of scientific literature, and 4) investigations by the committee members and staff. In all cases, efforts are made to solicit input from individuals who have been directly involved in, or who have special knowledge of, the topic under consideration. Sponsors are typically invited to make presentations to the committee at its first couple of meetings to discuss the sponsors’ expectations for the study. Also, the sponsor is asked to provide as much information relevant to the study as possible.

SPONSOR INTERACTIONS



In accordance with federal law and with few exceptions, information-gathering meetings of the committee are open to the sponsor and the public, and any written materials provided to the committee by individuals who are not officials, agents, or employees of the National Academies are maintained in a public access file. National Academies staff do their best to schedule committee meetings at times and places convenient to the sponsor and their colleagues, and will provide an agenda prior to the meetings. However, the sponsor does not control meeting plans and agendas.

The committee deliberates in meetings closed to the public and sponsors in order to develop draft findings and recommendations free from outside influence. Brief summaries of these meetings are made publicly available on the National Academies' Web site. All analyses and drafts of the report remain confidential.

Report Review

As a final check on the quality and objectivity of the study, all reports must undergo a rigorous external review by independent experts whose comments are provided anonymously to the committee members. The National Academies recruit independent experts with a range of views and perspectives to review and comment on the draft report. The draft report and review comments are not publicly disclosed.

The review process aims to ensure the report addresses its approved study charge and does not go beyond its statement of task, the findings are supported by the scientific evidence and arguments presented, the exposition and organization are effective, and the report is impartial and objective.

Each committee must respond to, but need not agree with, reviewer comments in a detailed "response to review" that is examined by one or two independent report review "monitors" responsible for ensuring that the report review criteria have been satisfied. The names and affiliations of the report reviewers are made public when the report is released.

If the sponsor does not seek to have a prepublication version of the report, only a final printed report is made publicly available and published a few months after final sign off.

Report Release and Dissemination

The plans for release and dissemination of the approved report will be discussed with the sponsor. Sponsors are provided with copies of the report and offered the opportunity for a briefing in advance of the public release of the report. Pre-release briefings may also be provided to other key executive and legislative branch members. In instances in which there is great interest in the report and careful coordination of its release is necessary to be fair to all concerned, the time between delivery to the sponsor and public release may be short, as little as a day. In no case will sponsors receive reports more than two weeks in advance of their public release. Sponsors may make recommendations regarding dissemination strategies for the report, but ultimately the National Academies are responsible for the final products and their release.

Studies are published as printed books by the National Academies Press and are posted on the National Academies Web site for public dissemination. Often a prepublication version of the report is given to the sponsor and posted on the National Academies Web site soon after sign off by the committee and National Academies and in advance of the final printed report. This is to provide the information contained in the report as quickly as possible, even as final editing, layout, and publishing are proceeding. In other cases, only the final printed report will be published. In either case, printing of the final report generally takes a few months after final sign off.

For studies with broad interest, the National Academies may prepare separate report briefs or other derivative materials that are widely circulated. Also, committee members and project staff may testify or make public presentations about the content of the reports, once they have been released. Staff and committee members may assist in disseminating the report, such as by providing copies of the report or report briefs and making presentations. Sponsors should be aware that the time and resources needed for dissemination of the report will often be included in the project timeline and budget. Therefore, National Academies staff may recommend that contracts extend several months beyond the expected delivery of the report to allow for anticipated dissemination activities.