

The National Academies of
SCIENCES • ENGINEERING • MEDICINE



TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH BOARD

The Roles of NCHRP Panel Members and Liaisons

CRP panels have four major responsibilities:

- 1) Translate problem statements into Requests for Proposals with well-defined objectives;
- 2) Review proposals and select the most capable research team to undertake the work;
- 3) Provide guidance on the technical aspects of the research during the life of the contract, by commenting on Quarterly, Interim, and Final reports;
- 4) Serve as champions for implementation of the research results.

This document provides details on how these four responsibilities are carried out in a typical CRP project.

How panel members are selected

Subsequent to the annual selection of new research projects by each program's governing body, staff distribute a solicitation for panel members. Each project is assigned to a Project Officer who manages the panel selection process. Project Officers select panel members from among the nominees, or through other sources when necessary. Each panel numbers about eight persons and operates under the guidance of a Chair. The objective of forming a panel is to make sure it includes the expertise necessary to provide the appropriate technical oversight of the project. The panel should include representatives from a cross section of interest areas that can address all sides of the issue. The panel should also include key stakeholders who will be implementing and using the results. CRP also tries to achieve a balance of geographic distribution, gender, and ethnicity of its panel members.

Role of liaisons

Panels will typically include liaisons from the Federal Highway Administration, TRB's Technical Activities Division, and other agencies and industry associations as needed. These organizations maintain an awareness of relevant research needs and activity on a national level; their liaisons help to ensure that the panel addresses pertinent needs without duplicating other efforts. Liaisons participate fully in all panel deliberations but do not vote on issues before the panel. They are not on the panel to decide the project's outcome, but to help facilitate the work of the key stakeholders.

Role of the CRP Project Officer

The CRP staff member serving as Project Officer is responsible to make sure that the terms of the research contract are fulfilled. In doing so, he or she must make the best use of the technical expertise of panel members, and make sure the contractor is responsive to the panel's guidance and meets all contract requirements. The Project Officer will serve as the liaison between the contractor and the project panel.

Panel meetings

Panels will typically meet at least three times over the course of the project: once to develop the Request for Proposals, once to review proposals and select a contractor, and one or more times to review interim research products. You will be reviewing regular progress reports on your own time and submitting review comments by email, but the ability to travel and attend the scheduled panel meetings is extremely important. While travel has become more burdensome and difficult for many of our panel members, CRP panel meetings are scheduled at points in the project where face to face interaction is particularly critical to the success of the project. You should take this into account when you are first invited to participate on a CRP panel.

Drafting a Request for Proposals

At the first panel meeting, the panel will start with a draft problem statement that has been approved by the governing body and develop a Project Statement that forms the basis of a Request for Proposals. Your Project Officer will guide you through the RFP process. There are a number of things to keep in mind. Firstly, when a group of experts get together to discuss a problem of common interest, there is a natural desire to *solve* the problem. The role of the panel is not to solve a problem; that is the role of the research team that is contracted to undertake the work. At this point, the panel's main job is to *describe* the problem and the desired outcomes in sufficient detail that a qualified research team will clearly understand what is needed and expected. An outline with the components of a typical RFP will be provided to you. We always recommend that panels start with the objective statement. Once the panel reaches consensus on a clear, concise objective statement, the rest of the RFP should follow in a logical manner. Remember that CRP projects are intended to produce practical, readily implementable products that can address a specific problem. The objective should describe the desired product in detail, and the product itself should be tailored to the right target audience in the right format for most efficient implementation. The panel will determine the appropriate contract length commensurate with the budget and expected tasks.

Selecting a contractor

When the deadline for submissions has passed, CRP staff will send you copies of all proposals received – this will be about four to six weeks before the second panel meeting. You should review the proposals carefully and be prepared to offer your initial rankings of them (from best to worst) right at the beginning of the second panel meeting. Your project officer may ask you to submit your rankings before the meeting, especially if there are a large number of proposals. This is not considered a vote, nor is your ranking binding in any way. This is simply an effective way to focus the discussion on the higher-ranked proposals that have the best chance of being selected. The factors in reviewing proposals are described in a rating form provided by your Project Officer. When reviewing the experience of the team, take particular note of projects that dealt with a similar subject area and a similar target audience. If these projects were successful, it demonstrates that the research team understands the subject and the environment in which the results will be implemented. Many panels look favorably on a research team that includes one or more members with practical experience as research users. If a team member has experience in implementing or using research results, they should be in a good position to develop products that address real needs and are ready to implement. Similarly, a good research plan is one that is feasible, appropriate, and has a good chance of success. Innovative research methods can be a positive feature as long as the panel has confidence

that they can be achieved successfully. Also consider the data requirements for the proposed research plan. If data does not exist, it cannot be simply compiled and analyzed. In that case, the researchers may need to conduct field research or simulation to develop conclusions and recommendations.

Selection of a contractor requires a 2/3 majority of the voting panel members. However, it is very important that all panel members leave the second meeting with the belief that the chosen contractor has the experience and ability to successfully complete the project, even if it wasn't their first choice. In order to meet this consensus decision, panel members should raise any uncertainties or concerns they have with the first-choice proposal. Your Project Officer will record a list of all panel comments, question, clarifications, and suggested modifications. These will be forwarded to the research team for a point-by-point response. Hopefully, the research team will provide information and make adjustments to their research plan that will provide all panel members with a high level of confidence in the team's ability to successfully achieve the desired objectives.

We also ask that – if possible – you select a second choice contractor. The contracting policies of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine require detailed documentation of the review process and justification for selection of the winning proposal, in order to demonstrate that the selection was fair and thorough. In the extremely rare event that the panel's first choice is unable to accept the assignment, CRP can award a contract to the second choice agency without another panel meeting if the justification is well-documented. A second choice selection is not obligatory; if the consensus of the panel is that only one proposal can successfully accomplish the project objectives, then that should be stated and recorded by the Project Officer in the meeting notes.

Updated Work Plan

Within 15 days of contract execution, the research team must provide an updated Amplified Working Plan. It is essentially the original work plan from their proposal, modified as necessary to address the panel's comments. It will also contain an updated schedule starting on the contract execution date. Once approved by the project panel, this becomes a public document that can be shared with others. Along with the original Request for Proposals, this updated work plan is the most important reference for panel members to ensure that the research team's contractual obligations are being met.

Reviewing Quarterly Progress Reports

Once a contractor is selected and work gets underway, the most important way you will ensure that they are on track is by a thorough review of quarterly progress reports. The researchers are instructed to provide enough detail in the quarterly reports to enable the panel to understand what work that has been done and the results to date. It can be helpful to refer back to the Amplified Working Plan to make sure the research conducted in each quarter is consistent with the work that has been approved by the project panel. We typically ask that you review the reports and provide comments within three weeks. When comments are late coming in, the research team does not know if the panel is satisfied with their progress, and could have a legitimate reason to delay further work. When you receive the quarterly report, please set aside the time needed to provide your comments to the Project Officer in a timely fashion.

Reviewing Interim Reports

Interim reports are required at key project milestones. The interim meeting should take place after sufficient work has been completed to give the panel a good indication of the likely project results, but while there is still enough time and money in the schedule and budget to allow for any redirection needed to meet the project objectives.

The meeting will usually take place about four weeks after the panel has received the interim report for review. This is an extremely important meeting, and is usually the first time the panel meets face to face with the research team. If the panel has any concerns or questions about the project direction, this is the time they must be resolved. At the end of the interim meeting, the panel, research team and Project Officer should have a clear understanding of the next steps to be taken to address any concerns and conduct the next phase of research.

Reviewing Other Deliverables

Panels frequently ask for other interim products such as technical memoranda during the course of the project. These are another important way for you to evaluate progress. Please keep in mind that keeping the contract on schedule requires a timely review on your part of all interim products. Also bear in mind that while the report will be reviewed by professional staff editors before publication, they are not technical experts. You should therefore concentrate on the technical aspects of the work, including the content, structure, tables and graphics to make sure they convey information clearly and succinctly to the intended audience.

Reviewing Preliminary Draft Final Reports

This is the final opportunity for the panel to influence the content and format of the final report. You should review the report very carefully, taking into account direction that has been provided on interim reports and progress reports along the way. You will be asked to provide comments and answer several specific questions to evaluate the success of the project and the acceptability of the final report. Your answers to these questions, along with the research team's response to your detailed comments, will be used by staff to make a recommendation on whether or not the report should be formally published by TRB. The final publication decision is made by senior management as well as by an independent Subcommittee on NRC Oversight. Please give this final review the time and attention it deserves.

Contact with the Principal Investigator

Unless otherwise specified, all contact between the research team and the panel should go through the Project Officer. In some cases, the panel members may be important sources of information that the research team needs to conduct their work. In this case, the Project Officer may permit direct communication, but under no circumstances should the panel members or the research team get into a discussion of the overall research direction or method.

Your role as a “champion” for implementation

Research that is not implemented has little value. TRB does not own infrastructure, make regulations, or set policies. Therefore, it must rely on others to implement the results of its research programs. The panel members have an important role in this regard. From development of the objective and desired products, selection of contractor, and review of project deliverables, panel

members should keep the ultimate implementation of results in mind. When the project is completed, the panel members can help to facilitate implementation by communicating the importance of the research, the potential benefits, and ways that it can be put into practice. This may involve dealings with colleagues, other key stakeholders, senior management, and – on occasion - the media and the general public.

Travel Expense Reports

The Academies use an electronic travel expense report form that can be accessed through the internet or the Academies' web page. Your Project Officer will provide you with detailed instructions. In general, you will be reimbursed for your travel, lodging, and subsistence expenses up to the federal maximum per diem rates.

Evaluation of contractor and Program Officer

At the end of the research contract, you will be sent a form to evaluate your experience with both the research contractor and your CRP Program Officer. Your feedback is very important to us, and we strongly encourage you to complete the evaluation. Your input on our strengths and weaknesses will help us to continually improve our programs and services to ensure that we continue to meet the needs of our members and stakeholders.

A Note on Panel Fatigue

If your project stretches over two or more years to complete, it can be difficult to keep all panel members fully engaged in the review process. Panel members may move to other positions, or their workload may constrain their ability to devote enough time to CRP project panels. We want to stress the importance of all panel members remaining active and attentive through all phases of the project. If you cease to provide comments on progress reports and interim products, we lose the perspective of an important stakeholder, and the chances of delivering high-quality, implementable research are seriously compromised. Please remember that we rely on the commitment of our volunteer experts to maintain the level of quality that our community expects and deserves.