

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-533](#), a report to the Chair, Subcommittee on Research and Technology, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

NSF has identified potential benefits and challenges associated with its use of rotators. Benefits include fresh perspectives and close connections to the scientific community, while challenges include staffing turnover and higher costs for some rotators compared with permanent employees.

GAO was asked to review NSF's use and management of the IPA and VSEE rotator programs, among other things. This report examines (1) the number, costs, and uses of NSF rotators for fiscal year 2008 through fiscal year 2017; (2) the strategies NSF has used to manage rotator costs and the results of these efforts; and (3) the extent to which NSF has a workforce strategy for using rotators and has evaluated the results of its rotator programs. GAO analyzed summary-level data on NSF's rotators; reviewed key documents; interviewed NSF officials; conducted semistructured interviews with a nongeneralizable sample of rotators and permanent federal employees selected from different scientific directorates within NSF; and compared NSF's management of the program to key principles for effective strategic workforce planning.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NSF develop an agency-wide strategy for balancing the agency's use of rotators with permanent staff and evaluate the contributions of its rotator programs toward NSF's human capital goals and programmatic results. NSF agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-18-533](#). For more information, contact John Neumann at (202) 512-3841 or neumannj@gao.gov.

September 2018

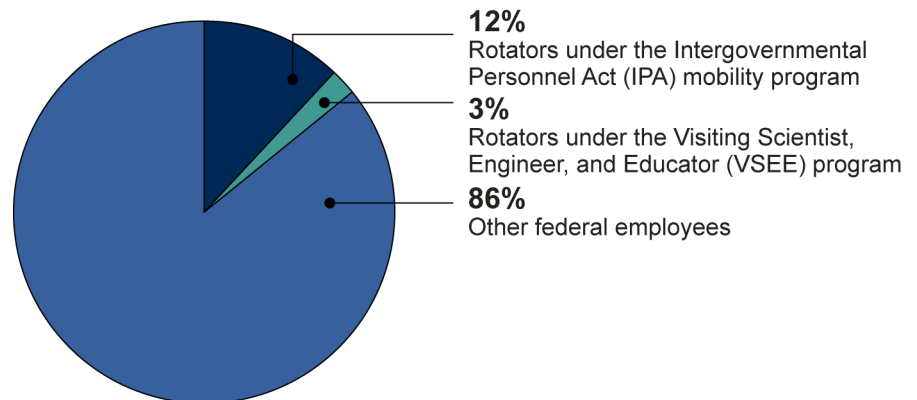
NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

A Workforce Strategy and Evaluation of Results Could Improve Use of Rotating Scientists, Engineers, and Educators

What GAO Found

The numbers of rotators—outside scientists, engineers, and educators on temporary assignment—at the National Science Foundation (NSF) and their costs in proportion to other staff remained relatively stable in fiscal years 2008 through 2017. Most rotators joined NSF under its Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) mobility program. IPA rotators comprised about 12 percent of NSF's workforce and 17 percent of staff costs on average and were not subject to a federal salary cap. They remain employees of their home institutions, with NSF reimbursing the institutions for most of their salaries and benefits. The remaining rotators are considered temporary federal employees under the Visiting Scientist, Engineer, and Educator (VSEE) program; their salaries could not exceed the federal maximum for their positions.

National Science Foundation (NSF) Average Workforce Composition, Fiscal Years 2008 through 2017



Source: GAO analysis of NSF data. | GAO-18-533

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Beginning in fiscal year 2017, NSF adopted IPA rotator program cost management strategies expected to achieve the greatest savings with the least harm to recruitment, but NSF officials said it is too soon to determine the full results. For example, for new IPA rotators who had not yet begun negotiating their assignments, NSF began requiring their home institutions to pay for 10 percent of the rotators' salary and benefits. NSF officials told GAO they expect to issue a report evaluating the strategies in December 2018.

NSF's IPA program steering committee recommended developing a workforce strategy for balancing the agency's use of rotators with federal staff, but as of June 2018, NSF had not developed a strategy or fully evaluated the IPA and VSEE rotator programs' results, as called for by GAO's key principles for effective strategic workforce planning. NSF officials said they recognized the value of a workforce strategy but were focusing instead on other workforce planning efforts, and they had not fully evaluated program results in part because rotators are blended into the agency's permanent workforce, making a separate evaluation difficult. Without a workforce strategy and evaluation of results, NSF is limited in its ability to manage and, if warranted, adjust its use of rotators.