



Smithsonian Institution

Cristián Samper
Acting Secretary

May 6, 2008

Mr. Mark L. Goldstein
Director, Physical Infrastructure Issues
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Goldstein:

On behalf of the senior management of the Smithsonian Institution, I want to thank the Government Accountability Office (GAO) for its thorough and thoughtful review of governance reform at the Smithsonian. Over the last year, GAO staff members have devoted considerable time and energy to understanding the complex nature of the Smithsonian, the challenges it faces, and the improvements we have made. We appreciate the fair and detailed inquiry you have conducted and are pleased to join the Board of Regents in accepting the recommendations made by this report. While all four of the report's recommendations are directed to the Board, the senior leadership of the Smithsonian will play a role in the implementation of two of those directives, specifically by improving communications with stakeholders and by ensuring that sound governance remains a priority in our operations.

Communications

One area of the report on which we would like to add more detail is the great progress we have made in improving communication with our internal and external stakeholders during the past year. We have greatly increased the frequency and depth of information that is shared with staff, Congress, advisory board members and the public. More importantly, we have created more opportunities to listen to our stakeholders and have actively solicited their input on important issues. We have also collaborated with the members of the Board of Regents to increase their visibility and accessibility by the staff, members of the press, and the public. We work together to ensure coordination of announcements, preparations for public meetings, and dissemination of important information to staff and key stakeholders, such as Congress. The implementation of our new communications strategic plan in the coming months will build upon and enhance these improvements even further.

One of my proudest accomplishments in the year I have spent as Acting Secretary is having laid the foundation for an open dialogue between the senior management and the entire Smithsonian staff. Internal communication will take on added importance in the

Smithsonian Institution Building
1000 Jefferson Drive SW
Washington DC 20560-0016
202.633.1846 Telephone
202.786.2515 Fax

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next few years as the Smithsonian embarks on an active new chapter by welcoming a new Secretary, initiating an Institution-wide strategic plan, and launching a national fundraising campaign. Through Smithsonian-wide email communications, articles in staff publications, all-staff meetings, and webcasts we have updated employees more regularly on major decisions and events with Institution-wide impact. More frequent and more candid meetings with directors and managers have also improved the flow of information between the senior leadership and the units they serve. To ensure the dialogue with staff continues and evolves as needed, we have named a new Director of Internal Communications who will be dedicated to this important effort.

We have also improved the type and quantity of information that we make available to Congress and the public. Through additional meetings and communications with our Congressional committees and their staffs and more frequent consultations on key issues, we hope that Congress has the thorough and timely information it needs to make funding decisions and exercise its oversight role. The policy that governs how the Institution responds to requests for information is now contained in a new directive and we have enhanced the contents of our website to offer timely and relevant information. We work with the Office of the Regents to ensure materials are posted quickly and are comprehensive enough to meet public expectations of transparency.

Another significant priority is engaging and communicating with the hundreds of devoted volunteers who give of their time and expertise by serving on one of the Smithsonian's advisory boards. Although the relationships between these boards and the individual museums, research centers and programs they serve has always been strong, it is clear that we can do more to involve them in the guidance of the Institution overall. As the Regents consider ways to reach out to the advisory boards, the senior management is doing the same by seeking out advisory board members for advice, requesting their participation in pan-Institutional initiatives, and by attending and participating in board meetings more frequently. I also convened a meeting with the chairs of all our advisory boards last January to share information and experience across boards.

Governance

While many of the governance reforms recommended by the Board of Regents last June were directed to the Board itself, the majority of these actions were the responsibility of Smithsonian management to implement. In some cases, as GAO points out, we deliberately revised the deadlines on some of the recommendations to be sure we were generating sound, workable policies and procedures. Reforms in the areas of financial, contracting, travel and spending policies in particular presented challenges because of the decentralized nature of Smithsonian practices in these areas. Adequately anticipating the

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implications of a new requirement, training staff to carry it out, and installing controls to ensure it is properly enforced are all worthwhile but necessarily time-consuming exercises. In addition, many of these reform efforts presented the opportunity to revise and improve outdated or inefficient rules and practices which extended the time necessary to complete them. Only with the assistance and guidance from staff around the Institution – many of whom participated on the teams that were tasked with leading this effort – was it possible to meet the deadlines that were established by the Regents. In those cases where deadlines were revised, it was done so to ensure the end result was stronger and more likely to succeed.

In closing, the Smithsonian has taken this opportunity to strengthen its governance and improve itself in ways not necessarily anticipated by the Regents' 25 recommendations. We think this has made us a stronger Institution, and we look forward to working with the Board of Regents in the months and years ahead to assess whether we have achieved this goal. We appreciate your insights and will work to ensure the recommendations outlined in this report are successfully implemented.

Sincerely,

Cristina Samper K.