

Tip Sheet on Characteristics of NIFA Award-Winning Grants

General Proposal Writing Recommendations

- Familiarize yourself with and follow all guidelines in the Request for Applications (RFA) (also referred to as a Request for Proposals—RFP—or a Notice of Funds Availability—NOFA). Follow the outline in the RFA, using titles and sub-titles that match those in the RFA.
- Check to be sure your proposal idea supports the agency mission and fits within the RFA program priorities – consider the relevance of your project to the program priorities and whether expected short-term and/or long-term impacts relate directly to the program goals.
- Review abstracts of recently funded projects in programs where you want to apply. Use the CRIS database. (<http://cris.nifa.usda.gov/>) Consider obtaining a successful proposal to study from a colleague. (*Note: asking a federal agency for a copy of a funded project involves a Freedom of Information Act request and sanitizing the proposal of proprietary information, which take time.*)
- Make sure your project addresses relevant programmatic issues of concern in the food and agricultural sciences and related fields and that you can provide a specific solution to a specific problem.
- Develop your project to potentially serve as a model for State, regional, multi-institutional, national or world-wide programs.
- If your proposal idea is high risk, describe the risk, design a project for high potential impact, and include plans for all contingencies. Provide sufficient information to convince the peer review panel and the funding agency that you have a well designed and timely project with a potential for success.
- Prepare a well written proposal that flows from clearly stated objectives, contains well described activities, and is, therefore, easily understood.
- When preparing a proposal summary, include only highlights of the most essential points of your proposal and give the reviewers a clear understanding of what it is you plan to accomplish. Include overall project goals and supporting objectives, plans to accomplish those objectives, and a statement of the relevance of the project to the goals of the agency.

- Ask your colleagues and partners to do a critical review of your proposal before submission.
- Call the “program contact” (specified in the RFA) when you have questions.
- Obtain all necessary signatures, complete all required paperwork and forms, and submit the proposal using the correct method to be received by the funding agency ***on the deadline specified*** in the RFA.

Preparing Your Project Description

- The title of your proposal should “describe” what the program outcome will be. Use action words like “reducing,” “improving,” “assuring,” “decreasing,” or “enhancing.” *Example: “Decreasing the Incidence of Diabetes through Diet Change.”* Try not to make the title longer than seven words.
- The “Situation Statement” should reflect the local, regional or national problem or issue that needs to be addressed. Include documentation about what has already been done, what needs to be done in the future, and how your proposal will address unmet, or unique, needs.
- Clearly state the project’s goals and objectives. Present these in a way that is practical, logical, sequential, realistic and appropriately designed to achieve expected outcomes. Be sure your objectives are well developed and are attainable within the time and manpower allotted to accomplish the work. Relate elements of your proposal back to your goals and objectives, demonstrating how you intend to meet them.
- Provide a well designed project approach and identify all project plan facets. If you plan to implement an integrated (one that combines research, education and/or extension) project, clearly describe all elements of your project. (See http://www.nifa.usda.gov/funding/integrated/integrated_resources.html for guidance.)
- Clearly state expected outcomes and impacts.
- Provide a thorough, explicit and reasonable timetable for each element of your plan of action, including start and end dates.
- Anticipate and address potential pitfalls, such as shortcoming of test results, technology or equipment failure, and unexpected personnel changes. Suggest ways to work around unexpected pitfalls and keep the project moving forward.
- Present a thorough and well designed evaluation plan. Describe how you plan to measure progress toward meeting your objectives. (Resources: “Enhancing Program Performance with Logic Models” at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/lmcourse>.)

Context-Input-Process-Product (CIPP) Evaluation Model” at <http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/checklists/cippchecklist.htm>.)

- Include, where appropriate, future plans for continuity and sustainability of the project beyond award period.
- Include resumes of key personnel and be sure they are current, well written, relevant, and show a track record of experience and qualifications required for the project. Explain who will do what, when, how, where and for how long. Provide a clear picture of how institution faculty and staff will be adequate to carry out the proposed project.
- Include a list of partners and clearly describe the role and planned contribution of each partnering agency or institution. Include partnerships with scientists and educators from other 1862, 1890 and 1994 land-grant institutions, other colleges and universities, federal and state governments and the private sector. Partnerships enhance the capabilities of the scientific/educational team.
- Include documentation of partnerships through letters attached to the proposal. The letters should describe the partner’s intent and the value of the support offered specifically for the project.
- When requested in the RFA, include the objectives and the accomplishments toward meeting those objectives for projects previously funded. Previously funded proposals that are submitted to the same funding source for continuation and/or supplementation must include a progress report on the agree-upon objectives with accomplishments to date.
- Include a plan for dissemination of results, which may include an electronic mail system, Web pages and publications. Include plans to share results with the scientific and educational communities, stakeholders, partners, students, the public, etc.
- Eliminate redundant statements and information.
- Be selective in the information and documentation provided in the appendices – do not overload.
- Understand that reviewers will be using the evaluation criteria cited in the RFA to assign points to your proposal and evaluate it against other proposals received.

Preparing Your Project Budget

- Refer to the RFA for allowable expenses. Know whether indirect costs are allowed and whether the RFA requires matching funds.

- Explain in detail in the budget narrative each budget entry and make sure per diem rates and other costs are reasonable for your area. Refer to the RFA for allowable expenses.
- Justify equipment needs. Explain how they are necessary for the successful completion of the project. Explain, if appropriate, how equipment would be used cooperatively in specific tasks and projects.

Additional Recommendations for Proposals Containing a Research Component

- Clearly describe the significant problem or opportunity the research is designed to address and what investigators hope to accomplish.
- Clearly state hypotheses or research questions.
- Explain how the research project is likely to make a contribution to science and produce results of practical use with immediate real-life applications. These may include:
 - finding solutions to issues of a relevant or significant regional, national or international nature;
 - producing valuable data that addresses growing problems relating to human or animal health or the environment;
 - producing important economic benefits;
 - significantly increasing food safety;
 - increasing food security;
 - adding to nutritional policy or health;
 - helping an industry adopt a new cultural practice in the field of agriculture;
 - making a major contribution toward understanding a significant social problem.
- The experimental design should detail the hypotheses to be tested; for example, how human subjects, if used, will be recruited; how animal or plant subjects, if used, will be selected; what experiments will be conducted.
- Be aware of federal requirements regarding the protection of human subjects, the humane treatment of animals and monitoring the use of recombinant DNA.
- Clearly describe what is novel or innovative in the proposed approach; describe new techniques that may be cost-effective and lend themselves to research breakthroughs.
- Develop and describe quality control methods to address circumstances such as difficulty in obtaining certain data, assuring compatibility of data from different cooperators, and addressing potential experimental failures.

- Demonstrate an acute awareness of the local culture, environment and economics of the samples to be investigated.
- Include an appropriate literature review showing similar or comparative studies and briefly point out how your proposed research approach will take a unique turn for enhancement or innovation. Describe library and information retrieval services, as appropriate.
- Select an interdisciplinary team that possesses complementary qualifications and skills. Demonstrate that there is a proper mix of technical and scientific skills necessary for the research project to be undertaken. Include students in the project.
- Include a plan to transfer research results through Cooperative Extension and other channels (describe). Plan to report research results in scientific literature.

Additional Recommendations for Proposals Containing an Education Component

- Demonstrate that you have thoroughly identified ways to draw on the wealth of subject-matter disciplines, both on and off campus, to truly establish partnerships in developing course offerings. Show that a critical mass of faculty exists to staff programs envisioned in your proposal. Where appropriate, supplement course offerings with off campus experts.
- *If developing curriculum or a new degree program* – Present strong justification for the new curriculum or program. Include, if appropriate, a survey of potential employers and relate the development of the curriculum or program to employment trends. Include an advisory committee in the development process. Give specific class examples and times, identify the targeted audience, and provide dates for the expected graduates. Identify the training that will be provided and the range of scientific instruments that will be used by the students. Explain the extent of hands-on experience and what is expected of student output. Include plans for student presentations, such as oral presentations and posters, at major events.
- *If enhancing student recruitment and retention* – Clearly demonstrate how the project holds the potential for contributing a positive stimulus to attracting, graduating and placing students. Explain how the project will attract more underrepresented graduates to a certain field. Provide information on previous graduates, such as the courses they took and employment they found.
- *If developing instruction delivery systems* – Make a strong case for the critical need for adequate data base systems in an information age. Draw on computer departments on campus. Describe the outreach implications of library enhancement.

Additional Recommendations for Proposals Containing an Extension Component

- Program objectives should be what you expect from your targeted audience and/or participants, not what you are developing to address the issue. These are referred to as “client-centered” or “client-based.” By formulating client-based objectives, you automatically establish a foundation that will facilitate sound evaluations no matter which evaluation model you use.
- Do not write your objectives without first considering the methods of evaluation. Consider three levels of outcome success that you might expect to produce from your project. First is the “learning level” or “knowledge gained.” This can be measured from delivering educational programming and conducting a survey after the activity to determine what the participants have learned. Next is the “behavior changed” level. This can be determined by observation and post-education surveys asking if the individuals changed their behaviors as a result of the activities in which they have participated. Finally, answer the “So What?” question. So what if the participants learned something and changed their behavior? Did this change in learning levels and change in behavior translate into solving the problem you identified?
- Include a complete description of your target audience, but avoid lengthy details that do not pertain directly to the individuals that will be the focus of your project.
- Include an advisory committee with broad community representation in the development of your proposal and throughout the implementation of your project.

Common Reasons for Low Ratings by Peer Review Panelists

- Project is of little or no relevance to NIFA mission and/or program priorities.
- The proposal contains insufficient preliminary data or evidence from literature.
- The writer does not follow RFA directions.
- The proposal exceeds the page limit. Fonts used are too small because writer tries to fit as much information as possible on the applications forms, making the proposal more difficult for reviewers to read.
- The proposal is poorly written; objectives and/or hypotheses are unclear.
- The proposal duplicates previous work or is not innovative.
- Methodology is inappropriate or too vague.
- The proposal contains a weak evaluation plan.

- The proposal contains a poor progress report or summary of results from previous funding.
- The proposal is not as exciting as other proposals (i.e., it may be worth funding, but funds have run out).

Note: Talk with the program director/leader to discuss reasons for proposal rejections. Ask if it would be worthwhile for your institution to resubmit the proposal for future funding. Some applicants resubmit a proposal – *which they have taken care to revise to address peer reviewers' comments* – several times before the proposal receives funding. So don't give up if your first proposal is not recommended for funding!

Additional Suggestions

Attend grantsmanship workshops – some scholarships are provided (See <http://www.nifa.usda.gov/business/training/cpworkshops.html> for details).

Also, volunteer for peer review panels and get an inside look at how proposals are evaluated. To be considered as a potential reviewer, send an e-mail message with the name of your department, institution, organization, or business and area(s) of expertise (limit to 4 or 5 keywords) to newreviewer@nifa.usda.gov.

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