

CSREES Economics Initiative Webinars on

Serving the Needs of the Next Generation of Agricultural and Resource Economics Leaders

Summary: The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) conducted a series of economics initiatives, including Webinars, to foster and strengthen its partnership with the agricultural economics profession. Mandated by the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 (the 2008 Farm Bill), CSREES will transition to the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) in October 2009. Given the upcoming changes and opportunities, the Webinar's goal is to share and explore ways to increase the effectiveness of partnerships with the next generation of agricultural economists and to improve routine contact with faculty, e.g., informing funding and presentation opportunities in Washington, D.C., short term assignments, etc.

Session: With co-sponsorship by the Northeastern Agricultural and Resource Economics Association (NAREA), the Webinar was conducted on April 1, 2009. Potential participants were identified through a broad communication channel, including listservs of the NAREA, the agricultural economics department heads, several multistate research committees, marketing and trade, Project Directors, and other contacts. The Webinar invitation was also posted at the Web site of the Association of Environmental and Resource Economists. An effort was also made through personal phone conversations with respective department heads to encourage faculty's participation.

The Webinar included brief presentations about CSREES, grant opportunities, a faculty perspective on participation in CSREES programs, written questions and comments from stakeholders, and further discussion of the comments. The Webinar agenda and purpose were included in the presentation as well.

Format: We conducted a web-based seminar, i.e., Webinar, utilizing Macromedia Breeze Meeting by Adobe to enable prompt and easy online sharing of presentations and discussions with stakeholders on the Economics Initiative.

Feedback: Feedback received from the Webinar includes:

1. Desire to know more grants opportunities for new faculty, e.g., new investigator grants, strengthening grants, etc.

No less than 10 percent of the Agricultural and Food Research Initiative (AFRI, then NRI) funding is for Food and Agricultural Science Enhancement (FASE) Awards. There are three types of FASE grants: (1) Postdoctoral fellowship grants; (2) New Investigator grants; and (3) Strengthening grants, which include (a) Sabbatical grants; (b) Equipment grants; (c) Seed grants; and (d) Strengthening Standard grants.

For New Investigator grants, eligibility is (a) an individual at his/her beginning career; (b) does not have extensive scientific publication record; (c) less than 5-year postgraduate or career-track experience; (d) may not have received competitively-awarded Federal research funds (except

pre- or post-doctoral research grants or AFRI seed grants). The individual faculty needs to submit application to relevant AFRI program by its due date.

2. What is fundamental research?

Fundamental research tests scientific hypotheses and provides basic knowledge, which enables advances in applied research and from which major conceptual breakthroughs are expected to occur.

3. Have there been any issues regarding the disciplinary makeup of the review panels of the competitive programs?

Economists have been invited to other multidisciplinary program panels. They can provide significant influence on the outcomes. The more economics faculty that sign up to serve in the reviewer panel, the more opportunities we can have. If faculty are interested in serving in the review panel, please send Suresh an email at ssureshwaran@csrees.usda.gov.

4. Have you found problems with funding limits for multiple investigators in multidisciplinary proposals?

CSREES has increased grant size from \$300,000 to \$500,000 for multidisciplinary and integrated projects. For Marketing and Trade (M&T) Program, since it is for research only, the limit is \$400,000; but average grants for M&T are around \$250,000.

5. It was recommended that faculty attend the Project Director (PD) Workshops to see a variety of funded projects discussed by the PDs and learn their insights on successful grantsmanship.

Several PD meetings are scheduled at the pre-conference at the AAEEA meeting in July. There is also a grantsmanship workshop at the AAEEA pre-conference in the afternoon of Saturday, July 25, 2009.

CSREES also conducts other grantsmanship workshops. There are two scheduled for November 10-11, 2009 (Kansas City, Missouri) and November 18-19, 2009 (Washington, D.C.) See details at: <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/business/training/cpworkshops.html>

6. Instead of 1 to 2-year grant, how about considering longer-term projects, e.g., 3 to 4-year or even 6+ years, in order to get better outputs, such as journal articles or outreach materials? Or having a alternative process to get project renewed.

Faculty can submit longer-term, e.g., 5-yr, proposals. The Coordinated Agricultural Project (CAP) is for 10 years. However, given limited funds in social science programs, long-term proposals will reduce the number of grants.

7. Will multistate proposals have better chance to be funded?

Multistate proposal is not necessarily required. M&T does not require multistate proposals. However, some programs may require integrated proposals.

8. Debates on the potential advantages or disadvantages of multidisciplinary or integrated projects, especially for junior faculty.

Multidisciplinary research can be a disadvantage, such as for publication. For some institutions, it can be a barrier for promotion and tenure (P&T). At other institutions, this may not be a barrier at all. However, the institutions can resolve it by clearly indicating in their review process whether they support multidisciplinary or integrated activities. Also, AAEA and other professional organizations can help because they provide a multidisciplinary component within a setting that is traditionally associated with the field of agricultural economics. This helps promote multidisciplinary activities.

To incorporate education, faculty can propose to place graduate students in K-12 classrooms once a week or for summer school. Example of integrated project: in Maryland, there was a project sending out different styles of educational materials to different groups, then conducted survey about feedback of education materials; based on survey results, design more effective educational and outreach materials.

Within CSREES, increasing percentage of competitive funding is being reserved for multidisciplinary and integrated projects. Economists may need to be more responsive to be competitive.

9. Matching funds issue:

Only a few programs require matching funds. But very few programs allow un-recovered or waived overhead charges as matching funds. Faculty commented that researchers can approach the Research Dean to explore the possibility for borrowing against the overhead generated, should the proposal be funded. For example, using salary matching funds, i.e., volunteering one-month of your time to the project, then your salary can be considered as matching funds. "In-kind" match funds should be allowed.

10. Other comments to enhance CSREES programs:

Anything CSREES NPLs can do to reduce the burden on the investigator writing or re-writing detailed proposals to get through the high competition rate (e.g., 15% or 30% successful rate) will be very helpful. It takes time to perfecting the proposal (input), which takes away time to produce research outputs. There are refereed literatures (e.g., Richard Just, Wally Hoffman) on incentives for managing good research organization showing that competitive grants processes raised transaction costs high enough to lower research outputs.

Next Steps: The feedback from stakeholders reflects the input from those who participated in the Webinar. In an effort to gain additional input from those who were not present at the Webinar, a symposium will ensue at the NAREA annual meeting in June in Burlington, Vermont. A symposium is also scheduled at the AAEA annual meeting in July 2009, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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Link: The entire Webinar presentation—approximately 90 minutes in length, is at:

<http://csrees-breeze.csrees.usda.gov/p32107856/>