Tips for Writing Successful Applications

Suresh Sureshwaran
Wesley Dean
Jeff Jacobsen

FALCON Grant Workshop
November 2018
1. Do not procrastinate

- Get started immediately
- Don’t wait for an RFA to publish before looking for research ideas
2. Adequate Planning is Key

- Need a long range plan that may take many years
- Particularly important for new faculty or those redirecting their activities

https://www.tecmidwest.com/2015/02/long-range-planning-still-relevant/
3. Stakeholders

Connect with the beneficiaries of your work

- Who are they?
- What challenges do they face?
- What are their ideas for improvement?
4. Find Partners

Find others who complement your skills

- Disciplines/technical knowledge areas
- Science functions: research, education, • extension/outreach
- Community/stakeholder organizations
Keep in mind

Don’t try to eat the whole elephant alone!
5. Focus on Outcomes

Begin with the end in mind

♦ What conditions do you (and your stakeholders and partners) hope to change?

♦ What actions – by whom – are needed to bring about that change?

♦ What knowledge is needed for those actions?
6. Do your Homework

Find out what’s been done, and is being done

- Search the literature (academic and “gray”)
- Search for information about funded projects-
  Data Gateway https://nifa.usda.gov/data
  CRIS/REEport https://portal.nifa.usda.gov
7. Funding

Explore funding sources

- Funding Opportunities (last RFA, Abstracts)
- Sign up for RFA alerts
- Contact the NPLs for Details or Clarifications
- The Devil Might be in the Details
8. Learn About the Review Process

• Best way is by experience – serving on panels

♦ Review RFAs to identify programs for which you have expertise

♦ Contact the NPL directly to volunteer – provide a very brief description of your expertise and CV

♦ Repeat annually, as needed
9. Find the potential programs for you and your idea

- Main purpose of program (funding priorities) – does idea fit in mainstream or on the fringe?
- Don’t waste time applying to the wrong program... square pegs don’t fit in round holes!
- Eligibility restrictions?
10. Become a “student” of the RFA

♦ Understand the main goals of the program.

♦ Understand the instructions outlined in the RFA on how to assemble the proposal.

♦ Don’t rely on previous year RFA: there are always changes.

♦ Read the RFA, Read the RFA !!! Attend webinars or other presentations about the program area.
11. Understand criteria for evaluating proposals and the review process

♦ RFA normally contains the criteria that will be used by reviewers to evaluate your proposal

♦ Understand these criteria BEFORE you begin preparing your proposal - provides better understanding of where to put greatest efforts during proposal preparation

Learn the rules of the game
12. Write the proposal logically and clearly

- Organize proposal according to outline in RFA or evaluation criteria, whichever is most logical
- Following the prescribed format makes reviewers happy and more generous
- Making reviewers work hard hurts you
13. Prepare budget with a strong justification

- Unreasonable budgets hurt proposals – create skeptics within reviewer ranks (credibility)
- Keep budgets within guidelines in the RFA – they are judged on the degree of reasonableness
- Balanced budget
  - Not too big not too little
14. If Applicable Use Rejection Constructively

- Rejection hurts, you have invested lots of time and effort, but there is not sufficient funds to support all the needed work.

- Use review comments to strengthen proposal

- Address criticisms & concerns in your Response to Previous Review section

- You are not required to modify the proposal, but you should explain your position relative to review comments.

- The panel reviewing your resubmission represents a new set of eyes, a new chance to win them over!
15. Obtain critical input from experienced and **successful** colleagues

- Someone who is honest and upfront
- Has little sympathy for your ego
- Someone who been successful in obtaining grants
- And many more!
16. Pay attention to Grants.gov Forms

- Use forms from the current year application package (not previous years)
- Fill out forms completely and correctly
17. Allow time for intramural administrative requirements – submit on time

- A deadline is a deadline is a deadline!
- A Deadline of 5:00 PM is 5:00 PM
- At 5:01 PM the application is rejected
18. What to Do if You Have Questions?

Contact the NIFA Program Staff!!!
Tips from NIFA Panel Manager for 1994 Programs
Follow the RFA

• Proposal emphasis – Education, Extension, Research
  • Integrated or blended, NOT add-on component
  • Budget should reflect the emphasis
  • Budget justification should be clear and match proposal

• Proposal narrative with sections that relate directly to the program and evaluation language in the RFA and in the order requested
Show the Capacity to DO the Work

- Clear evidence of the capacity to do the work either directly or indirectly with partners
- Describe past successes or failures….building upon prior work
- Direct relationship with Objectives and Materials and Methods
- Valid support letters from collaborators, partners, stakeholders
How to Make it Better?

• Have the proposal edited by someone else, preferably an experienced proposal writer
  • “Old” proposal concepts and resubmission
  • “Cut and Paste” evidence
• Tell the story, bring the challenges, culture, traditions, community into forefront
• Add literature citations
• IMAGINE being on the other side
Questions?

Thank you!