



NIFA AFRI Grants: Opportunities, Review Process and Observations for FALCon

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What are NIFA AFRI Grants?

- Agriculture and Food Research Initiative
- Research (and possibly “integrated” including extension or education) to address problems within the scope of NIFA
- Multiple programs
 - Foundational program
 - Fellowships program
 - Challenge areas (new in 2014: water)



AFRI Foundational Program

- Six program areas: Plants, Animals, Food, Natural Resources, Systems/Technology, Ag Economics & Rural Communities (AERC)
- AERC programs in 2012
 - Small and Medium-Sized Farms (Integrated)
 - Entrepreneurship, Technology and Innovation (Int.)
 - Rural Families, Communities and Regional Devel. (Int.)
 - Economics, Markets and Trade (Research)
 - Environment (Research)
- Up to \$500,000 over 3-5 years



United States
Department of
Agriculture

National Institute
of Food and
Agriculture

Annual (usually) Competitive Process

- Anticipated release dates for FY2014:
 - October: Fellowships
 - December: Foundational; Food Security
 - January: Food Safety; Obesity; Water
- Programs change from year-to-year, but often similar from one year to the next (see archive)
- See www.nifa.usda.gov/funding/rfas/afri.html for schedule, link to archive, abstracts of funded projects, and grant FAQ)

Review is Multi-Phase Process:

Pre-meeting

- Administrative review. Proposals that don't fit required format are rejected. Example: Abstract too long.
- Conflict-of-interest forms
- Selection of Panel
 - Panel conflict-of-interest
 - Geographic diversity
 - Career stage diversity
 - Institutional type diversity
- Degrees-of-freedom problem in panel selection
- ~20 proposals per panelist
 - Lead (more intense review, summarize for full panel)
 - 2, 3 Read independently and upload comments prior to panel meeting. Other reviewer comments not seen until panel meeting.
 - 4 read and submit reviews; ultimately draft panel summary sent to authors.

Review is Multi-Phase Process: During meeting

- “Triage” – most or all reviewers ranked the proposal “fair” or “poor”. Not discussed.
 - 2011 panel experience:
 - 15 of 78 nominated for triage.
 - 2 pulled back for panel discussion but ultimately not funded.
- Remaining proposals:
 - Verbal summary by lead reviewer,
 - Add’l comments by other reviewers,
 - Q&A/discussion by full panel until agreement on consensus ranking

Common Shortcomings

- Writing for prior year's competition. (Rules/goals do change.)
- Confusing plan of research. Example: Narrative that variously lists 500, 200, and 150 survey respondents
- Reliance on jargon familiar only to those working in the same subfield.
- Out of date methods.
- Narrow geographic applicability. If a problem is unique to a small region, then it should be funded by the region.
- Reinvention of the wheel.
- Typos and incomplete sentences.
- Purely theoretical proposal (no on the ground impacts)—might play better at NSF
- Purely outreach proposal (no research)—might play better at a foundation or state agency

Best Practices

- Start early. Get an appropriate team.
 - Research capacity
 - Ability to deliver outreach (if RFA is integrated)
 - Teaching faculty (if you plan to design a course as part of an integrated pro
- Brainstorm ideas with the team.
- Do a logic model or flow chart of the project so that the full team understands it
- Follow outline in the request for proposals
- Use ONE person as lead writer. That person can request inserts of sections or reworking of paragraphs. Assigning X to write section 1 and Y to write section 2 leads to incoherent outlines that confuse panel.
- Write the first draft project narrative a month in advance. Send to your partners for review and editing
- Good graphics are nice but don't overdo the "look" of the narrative by doing fancy magazine-type formatting. The proposal should look scientific



Best Practices

- Get agreement on the overall budget about six weeks in advance.
- Start working on the paper work a month in advance, even if the narrative is not quite ready
 - Conflict of interest lists
 - Biosketches
 - Budget approvals
 - Institutional Review Board (human or animal subjects) approvals
 - Subrecipient forms
 - These all take time and you don't want to be doing it last-minute
- Get letters of support from *appropriate* stakeholders
 - Letters from senators etc. not valued by reviewers (everyone knows their staff write letters for whomever from their district asks)
 - YES Local stakeholders who might benefit from the results
 - EVEN BETTER evidence from stakeholders that they are putting resources into it



Observations Particular to 1994s

- Very few 1994s submit proposals
- These grants require a lit review, which is something not required for grants open only to 1994s
- Minority-serving institution as “lead” with all the budget to the larger institution. This is a HUGE red flag to reviewers.
- Majority institution proposing something to “serve” minorities without involving relevant minority-serving institution in the area also a HUGE red flag to reviewers

Possible 1994 Strategies

- Be the lead institution.
 - Identify your community needs
 - Assess your priorities as an institution
 - Set the agenda for the proposal
 - Fund your own people—make sure you keep at least 50% of the total award (better for you and it will review better)
- Give strategic subawards to get capabilities you don't have on your own campus.
 - Other 1994s
 - Your local 1862
 - Other institutions of higher ed
 - Possibly tribal members who are faculty members elsewhere
 - Former employees who know the community even if not tribal members
 - Private sector or non-profit capacity

More 1994 Strategies

- Use “meta-groups” to identify off-campus skill sets that you need—examples:
 - Regional Rural Development Centers
 - USDA Staff
 - Risk Centers
 - Extension Water groups
 - Multi-state projects (search on NIMMS system)
- Try serving on a panel for an area that interests you (contact program officer to volunteer)
 - Nothing like being in the room to understand the review process!
- Don’t give up if rejected! Fix problems and try again.

Contact Information

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