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
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](http://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 project)
• 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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