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HOME | FUNDING | AWARDS | DISCOVERIES | NEWS | PUBLICATIONS | STATISTICS | ABOUT | FastLane

Grant Proposal Guide

NSF 04-23 September 2004

Chapter III - NSF Proposal Processing and Review

Proposals received by the NSF Proposal Processing Unit are assigned to the appropriate NSF program for acknowledgement and, if they meet NSF requirements, for review. All proposals are carefully reviewed by a scientist, engineer, or educator serving as an NSF Program Officer, and usually by three to ten other persons outside NSF who are experts in the particular fields represented by the proposal. Proposers are invited to suggest names of persons they believe are especially well qualified to review the proposal and/or persons they would prefer not review the proposal. These suggestions may serve as one source in the reviewer selection process at the Program Officer's discretion. Program Officers may obtain comments from assembled review panels or from site visits before recommending final action on proposals. Senior NSF staff further review recommendations for awards.

A. REVIEW CRITERIA

All NSF proposals are evaluated through use of two National Science Board approved merit review criteria. In some instances, however, NSF will employ additional criteria as required to highlight the specific objectives of certain programs and activities. For example, proposals for large facility projects also might be subject to special review criteria outlined in the program solicitation.

The two merit review criteria are listed below. The criteria include considerations that help define them. These considerations are suggestions, and not all will apply to any given proposal. While proposers must address both merit review criteria, reviewers will be asked to address only those considerations that are relevant to the proposal being considered and for which the reviewer is qualified to make judgments.

What is the intellectual merit of the proposed activity?

How important is the proposed activity to advancing knowledge and understanding within its own field or across different fields? How well qualified is the proposer (individual or team) to conduct the project? (If appropriate, the reviewer will comment on the quality of prior work.) To what extent does the proposed activity suggest and explore creative and original concepts? How well conceived and organized is the proposed activity? Is there sufficient access to resources?

What are the broader impacts of the proposed activity? [33]

How well does the activity advance discovery and understanding while promoting teaching, training, and learning? How well does the proposed activity broaden the participation of underrepresented groups (e.g., gender, ethnicity, disability, geographic, etc.)? To what extent will it enhance the infrastructure for research and education, such as facilities, instrumentation, networks, and partnerships? Will the results be disseminated broadly to enhance scientific and technological understanding? What may be the benefits of the proposed activity to society?

NSF staff will give careful consideration to the following in making funding decisions:

Integration of Research and Education

One of the principal strategies in support of NSF's goals is to foster integration of research and education through the programs, projects and activities it supports at academic and research institutions. These institutions provide abundant opportunities where individuals may concurrently assume responsibilities as researchers, educators, and students, and where all can engage in joint efforts that infuse education with the excitement of discovery and enrich research through the diversity of learning perspectives.

Integrating Diversity into NSF Programs, Projects, and Activities

Broadening opportunities and enabling the participation of all citizens, women and men, underrepresented minorities, and persons with disabilities, are essential to the health and vitality of science and engineering. NSF is committed to this principle of diversity and deems it central to the programs, projects, and activities it considers and supports.

B. PROPOSAL FILE UPDATES

It is the responsibility of the proposing organization to thoroughly review each proposal prior to submission. On occasion, however, a problem is identified with a portion of the proposal after the proposal has been submitted electronically to NSF.

The FastLane Proposal File Update Module allows the organization to request the replacement of files or revision of other Proposal Attributes, associated with a previously submitted proposal. A request for a proposal file update must be submitted by an individual who is authorized to submit proposals on behalf of the organization, and electronically signed by

the Authorized Organizational Representative (AOR). An update request must contain a justification that addresses:

1. why the changes or file replacements are being requested; and

2. any differences between the original and proposed replacement files.

A request for a proposal file update automatically will be accepted if submitted prior to:

- the deadline date specified in a program solicitation;

- initiation of external peer review in cases when a target date is utilized; [34] and

- initiation of external peer review in the case of an unsolicited proposal.

A request for a proposal file update **after** the timeframes specified above will require acceptance by the cognizant NSF Program Officer. Such requests may be submitted only to correct a technical problem with the proposal (i.e., formatting or print problems). Changes in the content of the proposal should not be requested after the timeframes specified above. When a request is accepted, the proposed files or revisions to proposal attributes will immediately replace the existing files and become part of the official proposal.

PIs can access the Proposal File Update Module via the "Proposal Functions" section of FastLane. Authorized individuals in the organization's Sponsored Projects Office (or equivalent) can initiate or review requests for proposal file updates using the "Submit Proposals/Supplements/File Updates/Withdrawals" Module via the FastLane "Research Administration Functions." [35]

NSF will consider only one request for a proposal file update per proposal at a time. It is anticipated that it will be a rare occurrence for more than one file update request to be submitted for a proposal.

C. REVISIONS TO PROPOSALS MADE DURING THE REVIEW PROCESS

In the event of a significant development (e.g., research findings, changed circumstances, unavailability of PI or other senior personnel, etc.) that might materially affect the outcome of the review of a pending proposal, the proposer must contact the cognizant Program Officer to discuss the issue. Submitting additional information must not be used as a means of circumventing page limitations or stated deadlines.

Before recommending whether or not NSF should support a particular project, the NSF Program Officer may, subject to certain constraints outlined below, engage in discussions with the proposing PIs.

Negotiating budgets generally involves discussing a lower or higher amount of total support for the proposed project. The NSF Program Officer may suggest reducing or eliminating costs for specific budget items that are clearly unnecessary or unreasonable for the activities to be undertaken, especially when the review process supports such changes; however, this would generally not include faculty salaries, salary rates, fringe benefits, or tuition. Note: indirect cost rates are not subject to negotiation. The NSF Program Officer may discuss with PIs the "bottom line" award amount, i.e., the total NSF funding that will be recommended for a project. NSF Program Officers may not renegotiate cost sharing or other organizational commitments.

When such discussions result in a budget reduction of 10% or more from the amount originally proposed, a corresponding reduction should be made in the scope of the project. Proposers must use the FastLane Revised Proposal Budget Module to submit this information. A revised proposal budget also must include a Budget Impact Statement that describes the impact of the budget reduction on the scope of the project.

Note: Revised proposal budgets must be electronically signed by the AOR. Paper copies of the revised budget should not be mailed to NSF.

D. AWARD RECOMMENDATION

After scientific, technical and programmatic review and consideration of appropriate factors, the NSF Program Officer recommends to the cognizant Division Director whether the proposal should be declined or recommended for award. Normally, final programmatic approval is at the division level. Because of the large volume of proposals, this review and consideration process may take up to six months. Large or particularly complex proposals may require additional review and processing time. For example, proposals for large facility projects also might require review in accordance with NSF's Guidelines for Planning and Managing the Major Research Equipment Account. If the program recommendation is for an award and final division or other programmatic approval is obtained, then the recommendation goes to the Division of Grants and Agreements for review of business, financial and policy implications and the processing and issuance of a grant or cooperative agreement. The Division of Grants and Agreements generally makes awards to academic institutions within 30 days after the program division makes its recommendation. Grants being made to organizations that have not received an NSF award within the preceding two years, or involving special situations (such as coordination with another Federal agency or a private funding source), cooperative agreements, and other unusual arrangements may require additional review and processing time.

Proposers are cautioned that only an appointed NSF Grants Officer may make commitments, obligations or awards on behalf of NSF or authorize the expenditure of funds. No commitment on the part of NSF or the Government should be inferred from technical or budgetary discussions with an NSF Program Officer. A PI or organization that makes financial or personnel commitments in the absence of a grant or cooperative agreement signed by the NSF Grants Officer does so at its own risk.

E. COPIES OF REVIEWS

When a decision has been made (whether an award or a declination), verbatim copies of reviews, excluding the identities of reviewers, and summaries of review panel deliberations, if any, are provided to the PI. A proposer also may request and obtain any other releasable material in NSF's file on his/her proposal. Everything in the file except information that

identifies either reviewers or other pending or declined proposals is usually releasable to the proposer.

[33] Examples illustrating activities likely to demonstrate broader impacts are available electronically on the NSF Website at http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/gpg/broaderimpacts.pdf. . Back to Text

[34] The status of a proposal may be found via the "Proposal Functions" section of FastLane. Back to Text

[35] Detailed instructions on submitting Proposer-initiated proposal file updates are available on the FastLane Website at: https://www.fastlane.nsf.gov/documents/pfu/pfu.jsp. Back to Text

Print this page

↑ Top

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