



TIPS ON WRITING A SUCCESSFUL GRANT PROPOSAL

Over the last 20 years, national competitive grants programs have increasingly become a popular and important mechanism for funding agricultural research. C-FARE held a workshop to address competitive sources of research funding, and strategies that will increase the probability of writing successful grant proposals for agricultural economists. This is a summary of the points brought out by agency program directors, program reviewers and successful agricultural economists.

The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) of USDA administers the National Research Initiative (NRI) program. The NRI funds research on key problems important in biological, environmental, physical and social sciences. The peer-reviewed, competitive research must be relevant to agriculture, food and the environment.

The NRI supports a spectrum of research ranging from basic, fundamental questions relevant to agriculture in the broad sense to research that bridges the basic and applied sciences and results in practical outcomes.

Grant due dates vary by program area. If you have an interest in applying for a grant through the NRI, you should sign up for an electronic notice at their web site:

<http://www.reeusda.gov/nri/nricgp.htm> which also provides links to several other grants worth exploring.

NSF Grants

The National Science Foundation (NSF) funds research through grants, contracts and cooperative agreements. This accounts for about 20% of federal support to academic institutions for basic research. Awards include social, behavioral and economic research that builds the fundamental knowledge on human behavior, interaction, and social and economic systems. Research is supported through the Directorate for Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE) Divisions of Behavior and Cognitive Sciences (BCS), and Social and Economic Sciences (SES).

NSF research is often thought of as at the border between other social sciences and economics. The competition can be less intense for funding than in the long-standing programs in social sciences. Since most new funding has gone into initiatives, it is important to keep informed on new initiatives.

As of October 1, 2000 NSF will only be accepting electronic submission of grants. However, send a written copy as back up directly to the program officer responsible for the program you are applying to. To search the NSF website for grants with possible economics components look for "SBE" as part of the funding description on the NSF website at <http://www.nsf.gov>. NSF also provides a Grant Proposal Guide (GPG) that contains guidelines for preparing and submitting proposals at: <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2001/nsf012/start.html>

Other Possibilities

While the NRI and NSF tend to be the more frequented avenues for agricultural economists to apply for grants, also keep an eye open to the various other opportunities.

The Rural Business-Cooperative Service (RBS) agency of USDA has a special initiative with the primary objective to encourage research, funded through cooperative agreements instead of grants, on critical issues vital to the development and sustainability of cooperatives as a means of improving the quality of life in America's rural communities. Proposals are solicited from institutions of higher education or nonprofit organizations. These opportunities can be explored further at <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/coops/rrcop.htm>

One can also seek information from web sites, list servers, private foundations, and non-traditional government agencies, as well as other seed money supplied by organizations for proposal development. There is often the possibility of non-competitive cooperative agreement programs through such agencies as the Economic Research Service (ERS).

Working with your University

If you are a University employee, it is likely you have numerous resources available. Often there are personnel whose job is to assist faculty in writing successful proposals to obtain research grants. Several Universities are now organizing grant writers workshops or having graduate students submit proposals to familiarize them with the system. Utilize and explore these resources.

While writing the grant proposal, it is broadening to work with other universities. However it is also critical to realize your role in obtaining the grant and being the lead university. While grants are becoming more important to promotion and tenure, there are several ways to conduct them that can also benefit the grant writer's future. It is also very beneficial to work jointly with other faculty, having an advocate proves helpful when applying for tenure.

Should Researchers Focus on Specified Areas for Funds?

It is imperative for grant writers to remain flexible while taking the time to determine what research areas are in great demand. If there are issues getting exposure in the press, you will probably find several government agencies looking to fund research on them. Also explore areas not widely researched by economists, but where there is high demand.

Multidisciplinary Research

The question about multidisciplinary research arises more and more. Is this a good thing or bad? Just like any objective, it is all in how you approach it.

Multidisciplinary research addresses the component of the problems needing attention and it also better expands your opportunity set for research funding. Public funding for multidisciplinary research is growing relative to economic disciplinary research. Also, colleagues from related disciplines are often eager for economists to participate in their research. On the negative side, the turn-around time may be slower and it may be more difficult to have research results published in peer reviewed disciplinary journals. While this is not always the case it is something to be aware of and prepared for.

Life After the Grant

Obtaining a grant provides a valuable input into the research process that is not complete until the results are successfully published and disseminated through outreach programs. This also helps enhance the chance for future funding.

Be sure to encourage others to apply with their proposals. The more proposals Agencies receive, the more reviewers and grant writers are likely to be economists.

It is important to let agencies know your areas of expertise and that you will review proposals. Serving on a review panel will allow you to see many well-written successful proposals. This is also a good way to work with the program directors. If you are not selected as a reviewer, contact the program director, request to read their successful proposals from the previous year, and indicate a willingness to participate next year.

Tips on Writing a Proposal

1. Look at research areas that are in great demand by funding agencies.
2. Place yourself in the shoes of the reviewer. Make sure your proposal has a sense of clarity, adequacy, and a certain level of novelty to it.
3. Have objectives that are sufficiently independent, so if you hit a block in one, you can carry on with the others.
4. Work at it daily.
5. Appended manuscripts cannot substitute for sufficient detail in the proposal, especially in describing the methodology. Be as definitive as possible.
6. Have at least two of your colleagues in an allied area of research read your proposal. They can tell you what is missing.
7. If your proposal is turned down, make sure you read the reviewers comments. Remember that each panel looks and respects the suggestions and comments of the previous years panel.

8. Proof your copy!!
9. Investigate the grant. Often states have the opportunity for Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) dollars. Obtain a listing of these states from the agency you are applying through. Also special grants are often available for women and minorities.
10. Know the time line of proposals.
11. Work with others. Many successful grant-getters work in groups.
12. After getting a grant, make sure to publish findings in refereed journals as well as technical reports.

C-FARE is a non-profit and non-partisan professional organization of agricultural economists working to bring the results of economics research to key public sector decision makers in the Administration and Congress.

For a brochure copy of this information,
please contact: Tamara Wagester at:

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Acknowledgments

C-FARE would like to specially thank the following for their participation at the 2000 Preconference on grant writing held at the American Agricultural Economics Association Annual Meeting, which this brochure was produced from:

Walter Armbruster	Farm Foundation
Mark Bailey	CSREES, USDA
Peter Barry	University of Illinois
Barbara Craig	National Science Foundation, Oberlin College
Cathy Halbrendt	University of Vermont, University of Hawaii
Harry Kaiser	Cornell University
Mary Marchant	University of Kentucky
John Miranowski	Iowa State University