

Communicating with Program Officers at NIH: Recommendations for Individual NRSA's (F30/31s)

Program officers (sometimes referred to as program officials) exist within all institutes at the NIH that have granting authority. They have several duties, but among the most important is to provide administrative and technical assistance to applicants in preparing and submitting NIH grants.

Applicants are sometimes reluctant to call or write program officers, for whatever reason. But working with a program officer is an important part of the process, and one that will always help the chances of funding. Program officers frequently come to serve as the principal liaison between an investigator and NIH at more general levels, as well, so establishing a good working relationship with one or more through the years can be quite meaningful.

Contacting program officers before submission and after review of virtually all grant applications, including F30 and F31 applications, is highly recommended.

Contacting a program officer before the first submission of an F30/F31

The rationale:

- A program officer can advise you about an institute's potential enthusiasm for what you're proposing. This is incredibly important, especially if you're applying to an institute with a relatively low success rate, or one that might reorder rankings by the study section based on its (the institute's) priorities. The program officer will be honest about such priorities, and can steer you toward another institute if appropriate and necessary.
- A program officer can provide insight on what aspects of the proposal or the research area/approach are currently drawing special attention in study sections. Recent examples include "rigor" and statistics. The officer can provide you with suggestions on how to handle such elements in your proposal.
- A program officer can provide advice on sometimes detailed requirements, for example in the areas of animal or human subject research.

The procedure:

- First things first – do not wait until a week or two before your proposal is due to contact a program officer! The time to contact the officer is when you have a reasonable draft of your specific aims, even though the aims might change some.
- Identify your program officer. This is easy: search for 'F30 FOA' or 'F31 FOA' on the web (FOA is 'funding opportunity announcement'). You'll come up with something that has the title 'Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Award (NRSA) Individual Predoctoral Fellowship'. Look at Key Dates to make sure you haven't inadvertently pulled up something that has expired. Scroll down to Section VII (Agency Contacts) and follow the link(s) to the program officer contact.
- Compose an email starting with a (very) few sentences of description highlighting your central question and the hypothesis you are proposing to test, so that the program officer has easy access to the context of your work. Note in this brief introduction that you have attached your specific aims (see below). Then:
 - Move quickly to the questions you have, phrased as clearly and briefly as possible. Your most important question will be about the institute's potential enthusiasm for your proposed

work. Other questions can ask for advice on what to emphasize in relation to perceived study section trends, technical aspects of the proposal, etc.

- If you have a complicated question, or if there exist nuances that are difficult to get across in writing, by all means suggest in your email a follow-up by phone.

-Attach your specific aims.

•Ask your mentor to review the email before you send it. He or she has considerable experience in communicating with program officers and can certainly make valuable suggestions.

•At this preliminary stage you can contact program officers at two or more institutes, if you wish, so long as they fit your proposal programmatically.

•Give a program officer a week to respond, then e-mail a gentle reminder. A delayed response does not mean they are disinterested; they are simply busy. And, to be honest, some are more difficult to engage than others. If you encounter difficulties, your advisor can help.

Contacting a program officer when you receive the summary statement

Your goals in a conversation at this point will depend on whether your proposal scored highly, was somewhere in the middle, or was “unscored”. If your proposal scored highly, for example, you’ll want to focus on almost all the following points. If it was unscored, you will want to devote your attention mostly to the points relevant to the summary statement itself.

The rationale:

•You want, and should, ask the real question: “how close is the proposal to being funded?”

•If your proposal is on the cusp of funding, this is the time to talk about the institute’s programmatic priorities to determine how strongly your proposal coincides with them. Such a discussion might help the program officer consider moving the proposal up in priority or suggest how you can make the proposal better fit the priorities for resubmission.

•Some reviews contain factual errors. It is important to discuss these, if they occur, with the program officer in the context of whether they had an impact on scoring, and what you might do on resubmission to clarify. It is not appropriate to discuss the reviewers’ opinions (as opposed to factual errors).

•Your program officer probably attended the study section review and, if so, will have taken notes of the discussion. These can be invaluable. The summary statement contains two (or three) points of view, sometimes converging on similar points, sometimes not. The program officer will have witnessed the conversation – the agreements, the arguments, the other elements at play – and will help you to focus on the most salient issues for resubmission.

•Even if the program officer was not present at the discussion, he or she has considerable experience in reading reviews. The officer can help clarify an ambiguous point made by a reviewer, or provide advice for how to treat a contradictory statement between two reviewers.

•If your proposal was unscored, or otherwise not near the funding line, you should realize that the program officer will most certainly (definitely) want to help you.

The procedure:

•When you receive the summary statement, take the time with your advisor to go through it carefully. Try to understand it from all the different angles. Allow time for your emotions to settle. Make a list of major and minor issues.

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- Your program officer and contact information will be listed in the summary statement. A phone conversation will be the most productive form of communication, as there will be much to cover through a back-and-forth. Set up a time by email to call the officer.
- Use the points in the 'rationale' above to guide your conversation. It is imperative to discuss each of these points with your mentor beforehand. Take notes during the phone call!
- Don't let emotions rule. This is business.

Contacting a program officer before resubmission

The rationale:

- You'll want to make sure that the institute's potential enthusiasm remains high for what you propose, that the institute's funding outlook has not changed drastically, and that the institute's priorities have otherwise remained the same.
- It's good form to let the program officer know that you are submitting a proposal whose changes are responsive not only to the reviewers' comments but to his or her comments.

The procedure:

- The procedure is essentially the same as that for the first submission.