

Advice for Meeting Directors at NSF

Richard Nader

Richard (Rick) Nader is Director for Research Development in the Office of the Vice President for Research and Economic Development at the University of North Texas. Nader just completed a 3-year term as Program Manager at the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Office of International Science and Engineering. Prior to that Nader was at Texas A&M for about 16 years in various capacities, including as Director of the Institute for Pacific Asia, Co-Director of the TEES Center for Community Support at the Public Policy Research Institute, and as a lecturer, teaching a graduate level course on proposal writing for the TAMUS Health Science Center, School of Rural Public Health.

Setting up a meeting

Once you have determined that NSF is a good agency to target for your research, there are several fundamental considerations before planning a visit with a Program Director (PD). First, you should have 2-3 discrete ideas in mind to discuss. You should have examined your ideas in light of your own research strengths, and compare these to the funding priorities/requirements of the NSF program and/or division to which you plan to apply. Second, you should be prepared to visit multiple programs due to the likely possibility that your research ideas may be applicable to multiple programs. Third, keep in mind that NSF reflects different scientific disciplines and programmatic histories, and therefore processes might vary widely. Your task is submit your proposal to the program that “best fits” your research objectives, while learning the “priorities” of the multiple programs that may have an interest in your work.

Read the detailed descriptions about what each program funds to target your meetings appropriately. See the “About” side panel of most major programs within divisions you plan to visit (for an example see: <http://www.nsf.gov/ehr/drl/about.jsp> .

Early discussion with your department chair and Proposal Development staff can help you in this process. Generally, a Program Director (PD), also referred to Program Officer or Program Manager, is available and welcomes [early] interaction with potential PIs. Once you are committed to travel, you should first approach PDs with an email containing the following information:

- State the nature of your research and specific interest (cite the RFP# or divisions by name). State that you wish to discuss your ideas with the PD ahead of submission.
- Propose your preferred date(s) to meet – generally say you have “blocked” the whole day, or morning or afternoon to meet with the PD. Prioritize your meetings so that you confirm the most important meetings first.
- Request a response by X date (normally within 3-5 days), after which you will call to follow up.

Generally, there are no particularly bad times during the year to request a meeting. However, you might avoid Fridays or Mondays on long holiday weekends, and avoid 2-3 weeks prior to and after the PDs deadlines, as the PDs are busy preparing for panels,

processing incoming proposals, or assigning reviews. Other times to avoid include late summer (usually late July and August) as PDs are very busy processing award actions before the close of the fiscal year. Sometimes PDs (who finish early) go on vacation as well and will be out of the office at that time. The only other consideration is whether a PD is a rotator, that is, a faculty member on temporary assignment to NSF with an arrangement to be back at his or her home institution for independent research and development leave. If PDs are back at their institution, do not expect an immediate response, as they are tending to neglected research or graduate students. If you don't get a reply within a week, give a call to ascertain the status of your inquiry. PDs get MANY inquiries as you might imagine. However, do not let that stop you. They are paid by your tax dollars to serve the NSF mission to fund basic research. Once the meeting is set, get prepared.

Before the meeting

1. Understand NSF's role and mission & the backgrounds and responsibilities of PDs you are meeting by looking at the organizational chart:

www.nsf.gov/staff/orgchart.jsp and the academic and research backgrounds of the program directors (if available) (See for example:

http://www.nsf.gov/staff/staff_bio.jsp?lan=cvanhart&org=DGE&from_org=DGE.

Sometimes you need to look beyond the NSF website, for instance, in publication indices or at the PD's home institution, since many PDs do not list extensive information on the NSF website.

Understand the PD's perspective as that of a "manager of a process for recommending proposals to fund". The PD has latitude at several points in the process. First, PDs may encourage/discourage particular research themes/topics. Second, PDs select reviewers to evaluate submitted proposals. Third, after the reviews are in, the PD can use the information provided by the reviews, plus add his or her own analysis, in recommending which proposals to fund. There are PDs who see themselves as catalysts and priority setters, and others who "wait and see what comes in" i.e., let the marketplace of ideas unfold. Yet, no matter how the PD sees him or herself, each is broadly accountable and decision-making processes are transparent and reviewed. In making decisions, PDs must often make fine distinctions between many excellent proposals. In fact, an internal study found that NSF could double the funding it currently offers without a drop in quality. Therefore, you should be prepared to maximize your chances of success under both NSF-wide review criteria: Intellectual Merit and Broader Impacts. See the NSF website for more information about these two criteria. Many PDs are therefore cautious and will be careful what they say to you because there are many variables to overcome in successfully navigating the review process and PD's statements may be misinterpreted (or twisted by optimistic PIs). Yet, don't feel intimidated, PDs are public servants, have mortgages, maybe small children at home, and otherwise pay taxes just like the rest of us.

Plan your arrival by knowing NSF's location and check-in procedure-- so you are not late! <http://www.nsf.gov/about/>. NSF is a government facility but luckily has minimal

security procedures. For example, the Program Director hosting you needs to be sure you are logged in to the visitor system. Remember to bring picture ID.

2. Familiarize yourself with the RFP

a. **KNOW (REALLY KNOW!) the RFP(s)** to which you might submit.

b. **Read over recently funded abstracts** usually found at the bottom of the synopsis page, in order to get a clear sense of past funding history. Be aware that NSF divisions try to make their funding investments go as far as possible and will internally ask other programs in other divisions for co-funding, should your project's focus overlap. Also pay attention the range and types of past funding awards in order to determine whether your project's budgetary and time estimates seem to "fit with past awards".

3. Inform the Program Directors about your research ideas before you show up

a. **Email a ¼ page (<250 words) description ahead** of your visit, unless the PD asks for more, or less. In crafting these short summaries, you might wish to follow the key elements of a Project Summary and/or include pertinent details listed in the NSF Proposal Preparation Guidelines "project description." Remember:

- i. Be flexible in approaching your research-If you are conceptualizing your project in multiple ways and meeting multiple PDs, prepare separate summaries accordingly
- ii. If you are still unsure that your research fits within any specific area, leave it general enough to be re-worked after getting PD's feedback
- iii. Bring a couple extra copies of these summaries along with your business card and/or a flyer for your department/program.

b. **Prepare short ppt presentation** (in electronic and hard copy) that outlines the key points (as in 3a. above) of your research and offer to "show" this to the PD [Don't forget to charge your laptop battery].

c. **Jot down several specific questions** about your project's fit with the RFP and any talking points you wish to convey. Keep these at hand while taking notes of your meeting.

- i. Questions you might include: 1. What were the funding rates from the last few calls? 2. How are proposals typically reviewed (ad hoc, panel or both)? 3. Who reviews (for example a mix of scientifically literate laypersons and subject experts, junior/senior faculty)? etc. You may wish to offer to be a reviewer if not planning to submit. PDs are often looking for new reviewers.
- ii. Talking points you might include: 1. Notable research publications from your lab (sci citation index-impact factor); 2. Research accolades; make note of other unique features that distinguish your work or your research team, without seeming braggadocios. 3. If the demographics are favorable, offer a "picture" of the students in your labs, highlighting successful students from underrepresented groups, or institutional efforts at broadening participation. Many more RFPs are specifically asking for "Broadening Participation Plans" as part of proposal submission requirements.

During the meeting:

4. **Inform AND LISTEN** – You should expect no more than 30-minutes so use your time wisely. Do not assume that the PD had time to read your email closely. Even if s/he did, s/he may wish to hear it directly from you to confirm his/her understanding. In summarizing your project, stay away from details unless asked. Rather, focus on novelty, transformational aspects or significant benefits likely to derive from the work. It's the ideas that intrigue. Save the methodological details for the proposal.

Be concise, cogent and build rapport & understanding— Although most PDs are very pleased to discuss project ideas, each PD has significant time pressures and a large volume of tasks in managing a proposal process “from A-Z”. Often the support staff for PDs is sparse or relatively ineffectual, and the work load on PDs is expanding. Be efficient, but don't rush so that you lose the PD along the way. PDs exhibit the same various personalities one might find in universities, and often are faculty on rotation temporarily from a university. Therefore, be prepared to adjust your approach in order to communicate your messages effectively.

a. Your goals for a PD meeting are to:

- i. Determine if your project(s) is a good fit for the RFP(s)
- ii. Gather information to help steer your proposal to be competitive, and
- iii. Receive “encouragement” to apply from the PD [HINT: the word encouraged is code for an invitation to submit, and if uttered, is probably an indication that your project has reached a minimum bar from the PDs perspective (i.e., that your proposal is appropriate).] Of course, this is NO guarantee of funding. If you cannot gauge the PD's enthusiasm, and you're still unsure, you could simply ask that question directly [i.e., “Would you encourage me to submit this proposal for the next deadline?”].

b. Suggested sequence of meeting

i. **Spend 2-3 minutes discussing what you have in common.** Say something about your pedigree and background so the PD can trace your path to this point in time (i.e., applying for NSF funding) and just to find friendly connections, highlighting the things you may have in common. For example, you share the same research interests, you have common acquaintances, or you are aware of other PIs funded through the program, you might mention that fact and how your work connects. Be careful not to sound like you are “name dropping”.

ii. **Spend 5-6 minutes introducing your project.** Ask if the PD would like to have a brief ppt about the project, and hand the PD the slides on paper and/or the abstract (as discussed above) while you present it on your laptop. Watch for looks of puzzlement, and allow ample opportunity for questions as the conversation naturally develops.

iii. **Spend the next 15-20 minutes asking a few of your prepared questions/talking points, and most importantly, letting the PD react and ask you questions.** If the PD is engaged and asks questions, let the conversation flow. If the PD asks a question you cannot answer, do not guess. Remember to exercise the caution of a serious investigator

and also be willing to self-critique. A PD will be impressed if you have an understanding of the weaknesses, challenges or barriers of your own research. PDs may challenge you if they want the idea to be successful. In anticipation of the hard questions, think about potential flaws and how you might address them. Accepting valid criticism is the sign of a good researcher. Remember, you know your own work – but a PD is just learning about it.

Sometimes during conversations, PDs will recommend you talk with another PD about this topic. This could be good, be prepared to do so. The PD will often call the PD in the other division and walk you to his/her office. Accept the help. It is very tricky navigating the halls if it is your first time to visit.

iv. **End the meeting with thanks.** A good sign the meeting went well is if it turned into an hour.

After the meeting

5. Before going to sleep-Take a moment to reflect on the content of the day's meetings. Think about what the PD actually said (pulled from your notes) as opposed to what you wanted to hear. Follow-through on any leads, advice and suggestions gleaned from the conversations and find ways to let the PD know you did so.

6. Integrate lessons learned and debrief with Research Development, your chair and other collaborators.

7. CAVEATS—DON'T Ask:

- a. if the PD likes this idea/proposal
- b. the PD to review your proposal before it is submitted
- c. the PD for examples of funded proposals
- d. the PD to recommend co-PIs
- e. the PD to serve on your advisory board

DON'T invite the PD to campus at your (or the university's) expense, or even to lunch! If you pay for it, this creates a conflict of interest and the PD is barred from funding yo