

## A Researcher's Guide to the NIH Funding Opportunity Announcement Application Process

The following Frequently Asked Questions offers guidance for researchers seeking to apply to Funding Opportunity Announcements (FOAs) generated by the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). FOAs are used by the NIH to solicit research or training grant applications from the research community.

### **Q: Once I have identified a Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) I am interested in applying to, what should be the next steps?**

1. Carefully read the FOA in its **entirety** (not just the summary) online by visiting the [NIH Guide for Grants and Contracts](#) and searching by announcement number (i.e., PA-xx-xxx, PAR-xx-xxx, or RFA-xx-xxx). Reading the complete announcement allows you to accurately determine eligibility. Furthermore, failing to adhere to the rules and requirements outlined in the FOA could severely jeopardize the opportunity to receive funding. All of your hard work in preparing the application might go to waste.
2. Review the FOA's participating Institutes and Centers (ICs, featured under "Participating Organizations") and decide which best match your research proposal. Then, identify the targeted IC's designated program official and prepare to discuss your research proposal with the program official by following the next step.
3. It is encouraged, though not required, that you contact a program official as early as possible in the application process to make sure that your ideas for research are responsive to the FOA and of interest to the institute. Some NIH program officials are willing to review and provide feedback on brief concept papers (2-3 pages max). Should you opt to submit one for the program official's review, you should draft a concept paper that describes the research proposal but also

highlights how your research will contribute to the targeted institute's mission. It would be most helpful to include the proposed research question, research plan, specific aims, and methodology. The concept paper should be submitted **well in advance** of the application submission deadline (i.e., months) with a goal of affording the program official sufficient time to offer input that can help shape the research proposal thereby ensuring a responsive and attractive application.

If you contact a program official and do not receive a response, move on and continue developing the research proposal drawing on other resources available to you, a few of which are listed in this document.

**Q: Is OBSSR an institute I can target for funding?**

**A:** OBSSR is neither an Institute nor a Center, but rather a program office within the NIH Office of the Director. As such, OBSSR is primarily responsible for stimulating specific areas of research throughout NIH and for planning and supporting research and related activities. One way we accomplish these goals is to issue Funding Opportunity Announcements which are mostly funded by the NIH Institutes/Centers (ICs) with additional OBSSR support which is furnished through the ICs. In other words, OBSSR generates FOAs and usually supports resulting individual grants through the participating institutes, but does not fund grants directly as it lacks grant authority. This means *you should target an institute or center rather than an office for funding*. The office(s) listed in the FOA will support grants through the listed institutes/centers (i.e., send their funds to the institutes/centers for grants of interest).

**Q: Can I target more than one Institute/Center (IC) for funding?**

**A:** Yes, your application can be geared towards multiple ICs. NIH Institutes/Centers have different missions, budgets, priorities, and ways of achieving their goals. Some are organized by disease and others by stage of life. Many major topics involve overlapping or shared interests among several or more ICs. Hence, your research proposal may be appropriate for funding by more than one IC. Note that one primary IC assignment is mandatory but multiple dual assignments are possible on any given

application. You may request primary and dual assignments in a cover letter accompanying your application.

**Q: How do I identify the appropriate program official to discuss the research proposal?**

**A:** Each participating institute lists the designated scientific/research contact, a.k.a. program official, for the FOA in the announcement under “Agency Contacts”, “Scientific/Research Contact”. This person either will directly assist or may refer you to someone else within the institute in order to connect you with the most appropriate scientific program.

**Q: How do I contact the FOA’s program officials?**

**A:** It is usually more efficient to e-mail program officials than to call them. During certain times of the year, especially when study sections are meeting or when external advisory groups are convening, program officials are often out of the office. Many program officials are conscientious about replying to e-mails, even if it is at times when a telephone call is impractical. Further, e-mails are efficient in part because program officials can easily forward your request to the most appropriate person if they are unable to provide the guidance or information you are seeking. *However, it is critical to allow a generous amount of time for a response as availability widely varies and all program officials have relatively busy schedules.*

**Q: When contacting the FOA’s program officials, should I reference the FOA title or number?**

**A:** Some program officials think of initiatives in terms of their titles, some in terms of their numbers, and a small few do both. It is wise to include both title and number of the FOA in all of your communications.

**Q: I contacted a program official to discuss my research proposal but have not received a response. What should I do?**

**A:** Program officials have busy schedules and many competing demands on their time. The contacted program official may not be available to review a submitted concept paper and provide input. If the program official does not respond to your request for review of your proposed research project, you are advised to do the following: a) do not take it personally and do not interpret the lack of response as a negative criticism of the submitted proposal, b) move on and seek out additional resources for information – including those listed at the end of this document, and c) utilize your professional networks and especially peer review to gain input on the proposed research project. Ultimately, be resourceful and do not get discouraged by an inability to reach a program official.

**Q: What issues should be addressed with someone other than the program official?**

**A:** For most questions related to funding, stipends, overhead (F&A) charges, and similar issues, the most appropriate person to talk with is the grants management specialist at the targeted institute(s). Contact information for the grants management representatives is listed in the FOA in the “Agency Contacts” section under “Financial/Grants Management Contact”. General application submission and assignment inquiries can be directed to the [Center for Scientific Review](#) (CSR). Additionally, for questions related to the scientific review of an application *before* the review occurs, the most appropriate person to speak to is the Scientific Review Officer (SRO) at CSR.

**Q: What information should be included in a FOA’s Letter of Intent (LOI)?**

**A:** Certain types of FOAs encourage the submission of a Letter of Intent. Specifically, many Program Announcements with special Review/Receipt (PARs) and Requests for Applications (RFAs) request submission of a LOI. All announcements requesting LOIs will explicitly indicate what the LOI should contain and when it is due.

**Q: Can I suggest what Institute/Center my application should be assigned to when submitting the application?**

**A:** Though not required, you may suggest IC assignment at the time of application by including a cover letter (i.e., a pdf attachment) with your electronic application. If you

have discussed your proposal with a specific program director at the suggested institute/center, you could also include this information in the cover letter. Questions concerning application submission or assignment should be directed to the Center for Scientific Review (CSR), Division of Receipt and Referral: 301-435-0715 and [online](#) (this webpage has a wealth of useful information regarding the NIH application submission and assignment process).

**Q: What should I do if my research project best fits the mission of an Institute/Center (IC) that is not participating in the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA)?**

**A:** Proposals for research projects submitted in response to NIH Funding Opportunity Announcements need to be related to the program interests of one or more participating institutes/centers. However, if your research project is most relevant to program interests of a non-participating IC, you may consider pursuing the “investigator-initiated” route. Note that advance contact with an IC representative(s) is essential in this endeavor.

There are many reasons that an IC may not participate in a particular FOA and this is not necessarily indicative of the IC’s lack of interest in an application on the scientific topic described in the FOA. If your research project cannot be aligned with any of the participating ICs, the best thing to do is to contact program staff at the IC most relevant to your project and explore the possibility of submitting an investigator-initiated application, i.e., an application that is not submitted in response to any content-specific FOA published by NIH. You can identify the appropriate contact(s) by reviewing the IC’s scientific areas and funding programs which are typically described on [IC websites](#). For instance, visit this [webpage](#) for information on submitting an investigator-initiated R01 application.

**Q: I have identified a FOA of interest with only one month remaining to the application submission date. Should I quickly pull together an application?**

**A:** No, it is unwise to rush through the preparation of an application to meet the earliest submission deadline. One month is generally not sufficient to prepare a responsive, meritorious application. Indeed, you will usually require several months to produce a

quality application. Waiting until the next round, spending the extra time carefully crafting the application, is more often than not the best course of action. See “Planning Your Application” below for details.

**Q: What resources offer additional information on preparing an application?**

- Planning Your Application: Submitting an application for NIH funding is a major undertaking. Examine an overview of application planning instructions at: [http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/planning\\_application.htm](http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/planning_application.htm).
- Grant Writing Tips: Peruse the appropriate NIH Grant Writing Tip Sheets for guidance on preparing a responsive application. The Tip Sheets are available at: [http://grants.nih.gov/grants/grant\\_tips.htm](http://grants.nih.gov/grants/grant_tips.htm).
- Grants.gov: Review the FOA in conjunction with the application guidelines outlined in Grants.gov available at: [http://www.grants.gov/applicants/apply\\_for\\_grants.jsp](http://www.grants.gov/applicants/apply_for_grants.jsp).
- Applicant FAQs: Commonly requested information on application submission is provided through a set of answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) posed to the Center for Scientific Review (CSR) regarding applying to NIH funding opportunity announcements. The FAQs are available at: <http://cms.csr.nih.gov/ResourcesforApplicants/QuickLinks-AnswersforApplicants.htm>
- Institute/Center Websites: It can prove very useful to visit the website of the targeted institute/center, paying close attention to the designated program official’s branch to familiarize yourself with their scope, interests, and priorities. The websites of all NIH Institutes, Centers, and Offices are accessible via: <http://www.nih.gov/icd/index.html>.

- Frequently Used Links/Documents: Provided is an alphabetized list of frequently used links and documents utilized by investigators when preparing applications.  
<http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/documentindex.htm>
  
- Standard Receipt Dates: Information on general receipt dates is available at:  
<http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/funding/submissionschedule.htm>.
  
- General NIH Grants and Funding Information: The NIH Office of Extramural Research (OER) website is a comprehensive resource for grant and funding information. OER provides the leadership, oversight, tools and guidance needed to administer and manage NIH grants policies and operations. Visit the OER homepage at: <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/oer.htm>.
  
- NIH Grant Review Process: For those unfamiliar with how NIH grant applications are reviewed for technical and scientific merit, the Center for Scientific Review (CSR) produced a video of a mock study section meeting offering an inside view of the process. Access it at:  
<http://cms.csr.nih.gov/ResourcesforApplicants/InsidetheNIHGrantReviewProcessVideo.htm>
  
- Institute/Center Funding Plans: The NIH Office of Extramural Research (OER) website includes a webpage disclosing pertinent information on NIH financial operations such as current fiscal year resources and most notably, institute/center funding strategies. Access this OER webpage at:  
<http://grants.nih.gov/grants/financial/index.htm>.