



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 operating procedures vary widely. Your task is submit your proposal to the program that “best fits” your research objectives.

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** http://research.unt.edu/admin03_researchdevelopment.htm can help you in this process. Support is available from the Office of the VPRED through “PEST” [See <http://research.unt.edu/intramural/intramural.htm>]. PEST are internal funds matched by your department or dean for you to travel to visit funding agencies.

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

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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: <http://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 great 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 process unfold. Yet, no matter how the PD sees him or herself, they are broadly accountable and their decision-making processes are transparent and reviewed. In their decision analysis, 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.

Many PDs, therefore, are cautious and will be careful what they say to you because their statements may be misinterpreted or twisted. 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. [In fact, they pay higher taxes, because Texas has no state income tax.]

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 and you should bring picture ID.

2. **Familiarize yourself with the RFP**

- a. **KNOW (REALLY KNOW!) the RFP(s)** for which you might apply (see for example the REESE program, read both the “synopsis” page and the “full RFP”
http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=13667&org=DRL&from=home
- 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 with the primary division. Also pay attention the range and types of past funding awards in order to see whether your research project seems 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. Follow the key elements of a Project Summary and include pertinent details listed in the NSF Proposal Preparation Guidelines “project description”- See:
http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/policydocs/pappguide/nsf09_29/gpg_2.jsp#IIC2b
 - 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 2-3 ppt slides** (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 review** if not planning to submit. PDs are often looking to diversify the perspectives on panels.
 - 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. See:
http://www.nsf.gov/od/broadeningparticipation/bp_workinggroup.jsp

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 understanding or to hear if it is the same. 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, if you know of common acquaintances, or 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 develops.
- iii. **Spend the next 15-20 minutes 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, 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. 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. **DON'T MISS THE DEADLINE!**

CAVEATS:

- a. Do not ask if the PD **likes** this idea/proposal
- b. Do not ask the PD to review your proposal before it is submitted
- c. Do not ask the PD for examples of funded proposals
- d. Do not ask the PD to recommend co-PIs
- e. Do not ask the PD to serve on your advisory board
- f. Do not invite the PD to campus at your expense
- g. Do not even invite the PD to lunch!