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Project Funding & the National Institutes of Health (NIH): Could You Be Eligible?

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This article is written to introduce readers to National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding and, for those with experience, to point out the changes that are being made in the grant application format and the grant review process.

Getting Started

The NIH is made up of over 25 individual institutes. Identifying which of these might be the best target for your application is therefore a good first step. Though it isn't mandatory to choose at the start, it will help guide the direction of the application. The institute websites are quite thorough and can provide information about the core mission and disease focus, research funding, training funding, programmes, and personnel.

The application must meld the science that is being explored with the application process, so that the reviewers and programme officials can understand the science and all the various administrators can understand their part.

The start of every application must be an idea for research that is new. Many of us have ideas and some of us have the resources to carry them out. The NIH can help provide more resources, but it will not build a laboratory for the investigator from the ground up and it cannot provide the ideas. Often NIH announcements will provide the inspiration to try to put a favourite project together for funding.

How can your Idea be Turned Into a Project?

Thus the first step has to be investigating how the idea for new research could be turned into a project. A literature search is the start. Save all the information that is found. Also look into what has been planned but not completed; this means a search of databases of funded projects such as CRISP and a search for clinical trials in ClinicalTrials.gov if the idea involves a clinical trial. The next step is to assess what kind of a team and resources are needed for the project. The team members will complement each other's knowledge, experience and skills. Young investigators can benefit from adding an older colleague, many projects can use the skills of a statistician, technical projects can use a clinician, and so forth.

Involve the selected team members in the planning, over a series of months, meeting and trading ideas about the research. This helps envision not only the science, but also the practicalities of writing the application and of carrying out the work. The project should start to coalesce during this period.

Seeking Funding

Search for the funding agencies that can help. Many start with small projects and local funding and progress to small grants from government agencies. Look at the announcements of Requests for Applications (RFA) and Programme Announcements (PA) that the NIH puts out in the NIH Guide, as well as at the more general announcements for such standing grant mechanisms as R01s. Non-US sites are not eligible for some of

these grants but the announcement will make that plain; if not, contact the listed programme officials for information. There is other information for non-US sites on the web. Look at the literature to see what agencies have funded projects that resemble yours. If they were funded by NIH, CRISP can be a source of the information about the specific funding source.

Contacting programme officials early in the process is important; they can read your proposed idea and counsel you on its focus and appropriateness for their programme.

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If you have no knowledge of any of these things, search for a mentor, who has been successful with the process. Such people can be found through your institutional grants and contracts office, through departmental contacts, through literature searches, or by contacting the programme officers at the relevant institute of the NIH to have them identify candidates for you. Ask your mentor to share insights and, if he/she is willing, actual copies of a successful grant application and its review. Study the application very carefully. Non-US sites must present full budgets, not modular budgets.

How Does the NIH Process Applications?

The process in general, is that the application is submitted electronically through the Grants.gov web site, with a particular FOA (funding opportunity announcement) noted for the submission, it is given a number and referred to a specific review panel for review and to a specific institute for possible funding, it goes through a peer review and receives a score, and the applicant receives a copy of the critiques. If the score is within the funding payline, he/she will be notified to provide information about other grant support and overlap, as well as relevant human subjects and/or animal welfare approvals, and the grant will be funded. The timeline for all of this amounts to six months to a year. If the application is not funded, it may be amended and resubmitted once, using the critiques to guide changes in the application.

The application must conform to all the rules and suggestions in the FOA, whether this be an R01 submitted in response to the parent announcement or a submission to a particular RFA or PA. Typical RFAs have one receipt date and specify the amount of money that might be expected to be granted, which is set aside for the funding. Typical PAs have several to many receipt dates and do not have set-aside funds. The announcements should be read carefully. Programme officials mentioned in the announcement can be contacted by email or telephone for answers to questions and helpful suggestions.

The application is submitted through Grants.gov; to effect this, the submitting institution must be pre-registered with Grants.gov and with the eRA Commons, and the investigator must be registered with the eRA Commons. The electronic registration processes are not difficult but they do take time, so one should not wait until it is time for grant submission to complete this process.

All of this said, the whole process is about to undergo an immense change. The impetus was a desire to simplify and streamline the process and to increase access for younger investigators. The announcements were for enhancing peer review at NIH (<http://enhancing-peerreview.nih.gov/>), provided for a change in the way applications are reviewed, starting in May 2009, and for limiting an investigator to one original submission and one amended submission. The "New Investigator" policy is being augmented with the "Early Stage Investigator Policy." The final step in the implementation will be a shorter application for most grant mechanisms.

The reader will need to watch the NIH web site to learn what the changes will be and how they will be implemented. It is expected that the R01 research strategy section will be shortened to 12 pages (from the current 25) for applications arriving after January 2010; six more pages will be allowed to describe a clinical trial. A slide set about the whole process can be found at http://enhancing-peerreview.nih.gov/training_communication.html

Please do not hesitate to contact me and the National Cancer Institute Cancer Imaging Programme (<http://imaging.cancer.gov>) if you have questions that we might be able to help answer.

Further Resources

- (1) Institute descriptions and web addresses: <http://www.nih.gov/icd/index.html>
- (2) CRISP (Computer Retrieval of Information on Scientific Projects): <http://crisp.cit.nih.gov/>
- (3) ClinicalTrials.gov: <http://clinicaltrials.gov/>
- (4) NIH Guide: <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/index.html>
- (5) Mechanism descriptions: <http://imaging.cancer.gov/researchfunding/mechanisms>
- (6) Foreign site budgets: <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-06-096.html>
- (7) Grants to Foreign Institutions, etc: http://grants.nih.gov/grants/policy/nihgps_2003/NIHGPS_Part12.htm
- (8) Grants.gov: <http://grants.gov/>
- (9) eRA Commons (Electronic Research Administration Commons): <https://commons.era.nih.gov/commons/>

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