Grant Writing Workshop (Hopkins April 2020) – On-line Questions and Answers

Sponsor/Co-Sponsor questions:

1) Are there any circumstances in which having a cosponsor would be distracting in your application?
    a. Not necessarily. As long as you provide sufficient justification for why the co-sponsor is being included (e.g., expertise that may be out of sponsor's realm of expertise), the inclusion of a co-sponsor is okay. The reviewers MAY question why a senior, highly accomplished sponsor includes a co-sponsor, but that is very rare.

2) Does it help to have a co-sponsor if your main sponsor is a junior faculty?
    a. Absolutely. In fact, junior faculty will almost certainly require a co-sponsor. I'll refer you to the last few slides of the third session where I discuss whether you need a co-sponsor or not.

3) If you did not elect a co-sponsor in the first submission, can you elect to have a co-sponsor for a second submission?
    a. Yes absolutely, especially if the reviewers asked for one. If they didn't explicitly state you needed a co-sponsor, but their comments suggest that you would be better with one, then it's also a good indication. Or, even if there is no indication that a co-sponsor would be helpful, but you and your sponsor feel the training would be improved, it is also okay to include one. You need to address the inclusion of a co-sponsor in the Introduction to the resubmission and include the co-sponsor in the following sections: 1) Goals for Fellowship; 2) Selection of Sponsor and Institute; 3) Biosketch Personal Statement, 4) Sponsor and Co-Sponsor Information.

4) What exactly goes into a Training Plan, and how do you recommend formatting it -- I've seen a few different examples and I'm not sure which to follow!
    a. This was covered in Part 3 of the webinar "Sponsor/Co-Sponsor Information". I refer you to the slides in this part for more details.

Preliminary Data/Research Strategy questions:

5) "How much of our own data should we include in the RTP? Does the expectation differ if we're submitting this April (in my case, as a second year) versus in August (when I would technically be a 3rd year)? Are RTPs from 2nd and 3rd year graduate students reviewed and perceived differently?" "How much preliminary data do we need?"
    a. You should include as much data as you need to sufficiently support your hypothesis and/or to demonstrate that you have the model system in hand and are able to successfully use it. This section is not meant to be a data dump of all the data you have. You therefore need to carefully select your data to adequately support your conclusions and assertions.
    b. The expectation for the amount of data that you include may be a little stronger the more senior you become. The reviewers will expect you to be continually generating data. However, the difference between an April deadline and an August deadline is not to really be worried about.
    c. Research training plans are not reviewed and/or perceived differently based on the year of your training. The Research Training Plan needs to be thorough and logically laid out regardless of what year you are in your training.

6) What are Research Strategy best practices? Are tables okay? Should we list out tasks? How detailed should it be (such as writing, "Will submit an IACUC protocol")?
    a. Yes, Tables are perfectly okay to include in the Research strategy. In fact, many times they are very helpful for detailing and/or organizing data or timelines that may be difficult to write clearly in the text.
    b. Yes, it is also helpful to list out tasks in the "Activities Planned" section of the Applicants Background. However, it is not necessary to go into exquisite detail. If you are using animal models it is understood that an IACUC protocol will be written, if it hasn't already.

General questions:

7) "Are there examples of successful submissions we can see?" "Where are the best models for what successful grants look like?"
    a. To my knowledge there are none that are present on the NIH web page. My best suggestion is that you talk to other trainees at your institute who have been funded and ask to see their applications. It's also possible that Dr. Phelps' office can start a collection of successfully funded F-series applications (of course having the permission of the applicant to make it publicly available) to serve as a resource.

8) Who would you recommend as good people to review our grants before we submit? That is, reviews who will provide constructive feedback.
    a. First, I provide editing and review services for trainees who are submitting these applications. If you're interested in using my services contact Dr. Phelps' office since I always go through there to organize this service for each deadline.
    b. Secondly, you need to find someone that you trust will do a good job. I've had people "read" and "critique" my applications in a way that showed they really hadn't done either. Then I had a person who read, critiqued, and worked with me to improve what I wrote. It is hit or miss, honestly, to find someone to do the job correctly. So, that being said, find someone (best to be a faculty member) that you trust and have a good relationship with, they should most likely give you the best pre-review of the application.

9) Are we expected to write the letter of recommendation from our PI and have them review it?
    a. Absolutely not. I know for a fact that this does happen, but it shouldn't. Also, since you are able to see the entire Sponsor/Co-Sponsor section it doesn't have to be confidential (like the official letters of recommendation). However, that entire section is the responsibility of the Sponsor to write. It is not necessarily your job to critique yourself to give your PI something to use as a template.

10) Do you recommend a certain year of postdoc to apply? Is year 3 too late for example?
    a. No, year three is not necessarily too late. Most postdoctoral positions are 5 – 6 years in this day and age. It would definitely be pushing the later end of the time period I would recommend submitting, but definitely enough time for the reviewers to evaluate and determine that you still have a significant amount of training time left.

11) How are resubmissions viewed differently from initial submissions?
    a. This topic is the primary focus of Part 5 of the webinar series. I refer you to the slides from that part of the webinar.

12) How early in the grant writing process should we connect with the program officer at the NIH?
    a. It's not always necessary to do this. However, if you have a question about the focus of your application and whether it is appropriate for a particular study section or a particular institute, then the earlier in the writing process the better. It's better to have direction from the PO to guide your writing process rather than later, which would result in significant rewrites.
    b. NOTE: it usually isn't necessary for applicants to contact the PO for these training grant applications.

13) How explicitly do you need to address availability of resources needed to make your plan sound successful?
    a. You need to think about exactly what you discuss in your Research Strategy (the science) and then provide all of the resources that you know are required to successfully complete the work.
    b. This would include, but is not limited to laboratory equipment, tissue culture facilities, animal care facilities, core facilities. Also, since this is a training grant you need to include all of the intellectual resources available to you: other neighboring or regionally accessible institutions, institutional focus groups on topics that may pertain to your research, professional development facilities, etc.
14) How to properly mark the change in the supplement documentations without creating more visual hazard?
    a. If by supplement documentation you mean letters of support and letters of collaboration, then you don't need to properly mark changes in them. If these documents were missing from the original submission and were explicitly requested by the reviewers, then you need to state in the Introduction to the resubmission that you have included them.

15) I currently have a green card application submitted and am married to a US citizen. Can I apply for an F-32 without current permanent residence status?
    a. These are the specific guidelines for US citizenship status:
        i. "To be eligible for a Kirschstein-NRSA individual fellowship (F30, F31, F32, F33), the fellowship applicant must be a citizen or non-citizen national of the United States or of its possessions or territories, or must have been lawfully admitted to the United States for permanent residence by the time the award is issued."
        ii. HOWEVER: "**If you are a non-U.S. citizen with a temporary visa applying for an award that requires permanent residency status, and expect to be granted a permanent resident visa by the start date of the award:** If the fellowship applicant has applied for permanent residence and expects to hold a permanent resident visa by the earliest possible start date of the award, please check this box to indicate that permanent residence status is pending. A notarized statement will be required as a part of the pre-award process."

16) If one part of the F31 application could be ranked the most important what would it be?
    a. These is no one part of the application that is more important than any others. Every single part of the application is read, scrutinized, and evaluated to the same high level. This is the reason why you have to bring your A-game to writing every single section of the application.

17) Is a unique, personal style ever a good thing? I feel standing out could be beneficial, but it seems very formal typical "boring" writing style is encouraged everywhere.
    a. The writing of a grant application, like the writing of a manuscript, uses in essence a very defined and set format with a particular writing style with specific rules of writing that must be followed.
    b. This is similar to some foms of poetry that have defined styles (e.g., the sonnet) where you have explicit rules that must be followed. That being said, within these rules that govern the style a writer's voice will come through loud and clear. Just as you can differentiate a Shakespeare sonnet from a Keats sonnet, so, too, can a reader differentiate the voice of individual grant writers.
    c. Therefore, if you vary too much from the expected format and rules of writing a grant application it may rub the reader the wrong way. However, it is most definitely good to develop your own voice that makes you stand out within these rules and structures.

18) Is there a centralized source from which to get the information required to describe institutional environment? What is the best way to acquire the necessary information for this portion of the application?
    a. This was covered in the webinar, Part 5. I refer you to those slides for the details about this section.

19) Should we include surveys or sample qualitative interview questions in the appendix? Is it required?
    a. If these are novel survey or interview questions, then yes, it would be beneficial to include them in the appendix.
    b. The official guidelines for appendices and what is allowed in the appendix is as follows:
        i. "A maximum of 10 PDF attachments is allowed in the Appendix. If more than 10 allowable appendix attachments are needed, combine the remaining information into attachment #10. Use filenames for attachments that are descriptive of the content.A summary sheet listing all of the items included in the Appendix is encouraged but not required. When including a summary sheet, it should be included in the first appendix attachment.
        ii. **Content:** The only allowable appendix materials are: Blank data collection forms, blank survey forms, and blank questionnaire forms - or screenshots thereof, simple lists of interview questions
        iii. **Note:** In your blank forms and lists, do not include items such as: data, data compilations, lists of variables or acronyms, data analyses, publications, manuals, instructions, descriptions or drawings/figures/diagrams of data collection methods or machines/devices. blank informed consent/assent forms. Other items *only if* they are specified in the FOA as allowable appendix materials
        iv. No other items are allowed in the Appendix. Simply relocating disallowed materials to other parts of the application will result in a noncompliant application."

20) What is the general consensus and attitude towards an application with future plans to go into industry?
    a. In general, the F-series grants are intended to provide a training preparing an individual to enter academics. However, there is nothing written that exclusively states that you are ineligible if you plan to go into industry.

b. I would not recommend stating explicitly that your goals are to go into industry, since this may negatively impact a reviewer's opinion. Instead I would write something like; "My long-term goals are to run an independent laboratory that investigates the development of novel drugs for the treatment of human disease."
c. This statement is the truth, because that is, indeed, what you intend to do. You have simply left out the statement that you wish to do this in industry.
d. In my mind the training that you will receive from any one of these applications will prepare you for whatever research endeavor you plan to follow in the future.

21) Would it be detrimental to apply for a F32 before starting?
    a. I don't remember ever reviewing and/or discussing an F32 application submitted before an applicant has officially joined the lab. In my mind it may not necessarily be beneficial to do this, since you have not officially joined the lab yet and are not fully immersed in the environment. Being fully immersed in the environment will help you write some of the non-science portions of the application.
    b. That being said, there is absolutely no problem starting to write an F32 application before you officially start. You can definitely start working on the Research Strategy, which will help you organize your project and outline the experiments that you intend to do.

22) What is the best way to start working on one of these applications?
    a. This will be different for each individual. For example, one person may want to start working on the easy parts of the application (e.g., vertebrate animals, facilities, etc.) in order to get their head into the mindset of writing a grant application. Another person may want to start with the Research Strategy since that is probably the hardest part to write.
    b. What I recommend is that you start with the Research Strategy. As I just said it is probably the hardest part to write since it takes the biggest amount of brain power to clearly outline the logic that supports your project, detailing the experiments that you propose to use, and writing what you expect and what you intend to do if something goes wrong.
    c. If you get this written first it will give you plenty of time to let it sit, give your brain a rest, and then go back to it a few days later with fresh eyes to edit and revise what you wrote.
    d. Also, working on the Research Strategy is brain power intensive. Therefore, when you have no more brain capacity left for a day you can then switch to sections of the application that are don't take as much brain power (e.g., Activities Planned, Previous Research, etc.).
    e. By doing this you are still being productive on the entire grant application after your brain has shut down on the hard writing.