

# PROPOSAL WRITING

10



Helpful Hints  
& Fatal Flaws



# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



1

## ***Read the Program Announcement***

- **NSF has no hidden agendas. It's all there in the program announcement.**
- **Talk with a program officer to make sure that your ideas fit in the program. If the program officer tells you that your ideas are too narrow or don't fit a program, look for other sources.**
- **Make sure that your project is worthwhile, realistic, well-planned, and innovative.**



# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



## 2

### *Work on Projects You Care Deeply About*

- Let your commitment come through in the proposal.
- Make sure reviewers can understand the importance of this work to your institution and to others.
- Caveat: But don't become such a one "song" person that you can't listen to others.



# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



## 3

### *Build on What Others Have Done*

- Like any research project, you must build on what others have done before you and then add to the base of knowledge. Don't reinvent the wheel.
- Read the literature, go to workshops, talk with others.
- Be current.
- Discuss the value added of your project. What are you adding to the knowledge base?



# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



## 4

### *Think Global, Act Local and Global*

- Your project must have more than just a local impact. It must impact more than just your students and your institution. How can others use and build on your work?
- But, we really do want you to be a “prophet in your own land.” If the project is not good enough for you and your institution to use, why should others?



# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



## 5

### *Have Measurable Goals and Objectives*

- **Enhancing student learning, improving undergraduate education, and other similar things are lofty, but not measurable. Make sure that you have measurable goals and objectives. What will be delivered? What is needed to convince others that this works and is worth supporting or emulating?**



# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



## 6

### *Think Teamwork*

- **Successful projects are team efforts, although individuals matter too. Your project team should be greater than the sum of the parts.**
- **You work in a department. Department efforts are more likely to be successful than 1 person efforts.**
- **You must have support of administrators. Keep them involved, make them look good, give them credit, find out what they need to support you.**
- **Get a good group of internal and external advisors and an outside evaluator (or evaluation team).**





# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



## 7

### *Use Good Management Skills*

- **Have a realistic time line and implementation schedule from the beginning and stick to it.**
- **Have milestones and specific deliverables (with dates)**
- **Use carrots when you can (but be prepared to use the baton when you must). Don't reward until people deliver.**
- **Assign responsibilities, but also give folks needed authority to do them, and then hold them accountable.**



# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



## 8

### *Evaluation is Impact and Effectiveness*

- You do need numbers. How many students are impacted? How many faculty? How many students succeed in the next course?
- You need evidence that your project is having an impact and that it is effective. How do you know the project is working and that it is worthwhile?
- Ask who needs to be convinced and what evidence will they accept.
- You cannot evaluate yourself. You have to have outside validation.
- Build in evaluation from the beginning.



# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



9

## *Spread the Word*

- **Work with other faculty and support them as they try to implement your materials. Doing new things is not easy.**
- **Try to get a team of folks who have used your materials to help spread the word.**
- **Work with not only faculty in your discipline, but reach out to other disciplines.**
- **Have a proactive dissemination plan. A website is necessary, but not sufficient.**



# 10

# HELPFUL HINTS for proposal writing



## 10

### *Pay Back Time*

- **Keep NSF or your funder informed. They have to report too. It's all a cycle.**
  - Send in reports on time. Use the required format.
  - Send in “highlights”, information about awards, student impact, pictures, *etc.*
- **Give credit to NSF or other funders, your administrators, your team members, your department, *etc.* Giving credit to others makes you look better and get you better support later.**
- **Offer to be a reviewer and to help others.**



FATAL FLAWS

10

WAYS TO WRITE A  
GOOD PROPOSAL  
That Won't Get Funded



# FATAL FLAWS

# 10

## WAYS TO WRITE A GOOD PROPOSAL That Won't Get Funded



### ***1 Assume deadlines are not enforced***

***Instead...***

- **Work early with your Sponsored Research Officer (SRO).**
- **Test drive FastLane and make sure your SRO knows how to drive too!**
- **Set your own final deadline a day or so ahead of the formal deadline to allow time to solve problems.**



# 10

## WAYS TO WRITE A GOOD PROPOSAL That Won't Get Funded



## 2

***Assume page limits and font size restrictions are not enforced***

***Instead...***

- **Consult the program solicitation and the GPG (Grant Proposal Guide) carefully.**
- **Proposals that exceed page and/or font size limits are returned without review.**



# FATAL FLAWS

## 10

## WAYS TO WRITE A GOOD PROPOSAL That Won't Get Funded



### 3

### *Substitute flowery rhetoric for good examples*

*Instead...*

- Minimize complaints about students, other departments, the administration, *etc.*, and describe what you will do and why.
- Ground your project in the context of related efforts.
- Provide detailed examples of learning materials, if relevant.
- Specify who you will work with and why.
- State how you plan to assess progress and student learning.
- Detail the tasks and timeline for completing activities.
- Specifically address intellectual merit and broader impacts and use the phrases explicitly in the project summary.





# 10

## WAYS TO WRITE A GOOD PROPOSAL That Won't Get Funded



# 4

*Don't check your speeling, nor you're grammer*

*Instead...*

- Check and double check; first impressions are important to reviewers.
- State your good ideas clearly. Ignore the bad ones.
- Have a trusted colleague who is not involved in the project read your drafts and final proposal.

**Note:** Don't use complimentary when you mean complementary or principle investigator when you mean principal investigator, etc.



# FATAL FLAWS

## 10

## WAYS TO WRITE A GOOD PROPOSAL That Won't Get Funded



### 5

***Assume the program guidelines have not changed; or better yet, ignore them!***

***Instead...***

- **Read the current solicitation completely and carefully.**
- **Address each area outlined in the solicitation that is relevant to your project.**
- **Check the program solicitation carefully for any additional criteria, e.g. the Integration of Research and Education, or integrating diversity into NSF Programs, Projects, and Activities**



## 10

WAYS TO WRITE A  
GOOD PROPOSAL  
That Won't Get Funded

6

***Assert: "Evaluation will be ongoing and consist of a variety of methods"***

***Instead...***

- **Plan for formative and summative evaluation.**
- **Include an evaluation plan with specific timelines and projected benchmarks.**
- **Engage an objective evaluator.**



## 10

WAYS TO WRITE A  
GOOD PROPOSAL  
That Won't Get Funded

7

***Assume a project website is sufficient for dissemination***

*Instead...*

- A website may be necessary, but who will maintain it and how in the long run?
- Engage beta test sites. “Early adopters” can serve as natural dissemination channels.
- Plan workshops and mini-courses; identify similar projects and propose sessions at regional and national meetings.
- Learn about and use NSDL and other digital repositories.



# FATAL FLAWS

## 10

## WAYS TO WRITE A GOOD PROPOSAL That Won't Get Funded



### 8

***Assume your past accomplishments are well known; after all NSF may have funded them***

***Instead...***

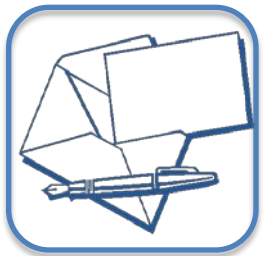
- **Provide results from prior funding – this includes quantitative data and information on impact.**
- **Describe how new efforts build on this previous work, and how it has contributed to the broader knowledge base about educational improvement.**
- **Recognize that the review panelists are diverse and not all familiar with your institutional context.**



# FATAL FLAWS

## 10

## WAYS TO WRITE A GOOD PROPOSAL That Won't Get Funded



9

***Provide a template letter of commitment for your (genuine) supporters to use. (They will!)***

***Instead...***

- **Ask for original letters of support that detail what your collaborators will do and why involvement in your project will help them.**
- **Letters from administrators are stronger if they demonstrate real commitment, e.g. release time, faculty development funds, new course approvals, *etc.***



# FATAL FLAWS

## 10

## WAYS TO WRITE A GOOD PROPOSAL That Won't Get Funded



## 10

***Inflate the budget to allow for negotiations***

***Instead...***

- **Make the budget reflect the work plan directly.**
- **Provide a budget explanation that ties your budget request to project personnel and activities.**
- **Make it clear who is responsible for what.**
- **Provide biographical sketches for all key personnel.**





