

Notes from an “NSF DAY” - Submitting a Proposal to the NSF

Step 6. What to do if the NSF Doesn't Award Your Proposal

Welcome back to Notes from an NSF Day! This final article will give some guidance about how to recover if your proposal isn't awarded.

From the NSF's Merit Review Facts page:

“A common misconception is that once declined, you will always be declined. However, NSF statistics show that on average, Principal Investigators submit about 2.3 proposals for every award they receive. That is, many Principal Investigators who receive awards also have been declined.”

The NSF takes about 5 to 6 months to review proposals and decide on awards for each opportunity. After waiting that long for an award notice, it is hard to receive a “will not be funded” email from the program officer. But after you take a few days to reconcile your disappointment, you are now positioned to take some positive steps towards increasing your chances of getting funded in the future.

If you believe that your submission is a solid research proposal, then the NSF has just handed you a gift. Every unfunded proposal notice sent to the PI comes with the reviewers' comments attached. These critiques contain invaluable advice and commentary on the intellectual merits and broader impacts displayed in your narrative, the strength of your research plan, and the expertise of your research team.

Resubmission guidance from the PAPPG:

“A declined proposal may be resubmitted, but only after it has undergone substantial revision. A resubmitted proposal that has not clearly taken into account the major comments or concerns resulting from the prior NSF review may be returned without review. The Foundation will treat the revised proposal as a new proposal, subject to the standard review procedures.”

The NSF would like you to use the reviewers' comments to improve your proposal. Many opportunity announcements are repeated annually, giving you a chance to incorporate the reviewers' comments into a future proposal. The program officer expects you to demonstrate that you are open to constructive criticism and anxious to improve on your proposal.

You can also use their comments to reconsider what division you pursue funding from. Sometimes the reviewers indicate that they don't see a strong match between your research proposal and the opportunity you are responding to. Comments in that vein should lead you to investigate other RFPs that might be a better match for your research focus.

Gather your team together and go over the reviews together. Brainstorm about how you can incorporate the comments into your work and strengthen the next proposal.

Another good strategy is to look at the proposals that the NSF did award for the opportunity you applied to. Use the [Advanced](#) feature of the NSF's Awards page to narrow down your search based on the program information. You will be able to read the abstract for each awarded proposal and get a deeper sense of what the NSF is looking for when making its funding decisions.

You are also encouraged by the NSF to contact the program officer and discuss the declined funding notice with that person. Their email address is on the notice, and the program officer can help you interpret the reviewers' comments and possibly point you in a different, more promising, direction.

Keep refining your research idea and keep submitting!