

ARRA – NIH Challenge Grants Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What are the NIH Challenge Grants in Health & Science Research?

A: The NIH Challenge Grants are a result of funds given to the NIH from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Essentially, funds are to stimulate high impact 2-year research projects. Projects should propose novel research in areas that address specific knowledge gaps, scientific opportunities, new technologies, data generation, or research methods that would benefit from an influx of funds to quickly advance the area in significant ways. Funding is for two years and up to \$1M (up to \$500,000 per year). It is expected that about 200 projects will be awarded. These applications concern new projects that address 15 broad challenge areas of interest to the NIH. If you apply, you must address one of the 15 specific areas of interest and a challenge topic within that area. See the link for challenge categories and topics.

Applications are due April 27, 2009.

While each institute is different, it is expected funding will go to established investigators with a proven ability to manage a grant effectively. All funds must be spent within two years. In other words, if you have never received funding for research or are new to research, this probably isn't the opportunity best suited for you. Significantly, **you will lose your new and early investigator status if you receive an ARRA R01, and these grants are not renewable.** So if you've never had an R01, think very carefully about jeopardizing this status. If as a new investigator your research is good enough for one of these Challenge Grants, it's probably good enough for a normal R01. Consider being a co-investigator rather than the PI.

Q: What is my likelihood of securing funding?

A: This is a new venture for all parties – for investigators and for the NIH. While we can't say with certainty, it is expected these funds will be extremely competitive; it is likely competition will be more rigorous than for an average R01. The NIH plans to award 200 of these proposals. Think of all the PIs you know that plan to submit one or two proposals each and multiply that many times over: that will be your competition. While we do not discourage anyone from applying, we want you to understand how competitive funds will be.

Keep in mind that if this opportunity does not seem to fit your project, many institutes will issue their own institute-specific Challenge Grants, as well as administrative supplements, and fund previously unfunded, but highly meritorious R01s, among other initiatives. More information will be forthcoming in the next few weeks. Check your institute's website to see if they have updated information. Your likelihood of securing funding will probably improve if you write a very clear application that hews tightly to the guidelines in the RFA. It will be key to address everything they ask for, especially timelines and milestones.

Q: What is the application format?

A: The application format for the Challenge Grants will also be new. The format resembles the new format the NIH will be moving to for ALL applications in 2010 – 12-pages. You must use the new 12-page research plan format with a one page specific aims (13 pages total). There are four parts of the research plan:

1. Research Area
2. Challenge and Potential Impact
3. Approach
4. Timeline and Milestones

The timeline and milestones section of the RFA is where you will be able to demonstrate your knowledge of the reporting requirement, which will be important for getting funded. Since the reporting burden is very high, demonstrating this knowledge will improve your odds. You will need to track spending every quarter. Reports will be due quarterly beginning in early January 2010, so your timeline should work backwards from the quarterly reports. If your application plans for hiring and for equipment purchases in October and November 2009, it would be ideal, since that would demonstrate economic impact right away. You may also want to discuss in your Approach section how you will go about collecting data that will reflect progress and impact, if that seems appropriate to the proposed project.

Budgets for these projects cannot be combined with other projects and rebudgeting will not be welcomed. They are more like contracts than grants. So plan accordingly.

The proposal will not include an introduction, background and significance, or preliminary studies section that standard NIH applications include. Additionally, supporting documents like biosketches can only be 2 pages, literature cited is limited to one page, and there are restrictions in the amount of information listed in the PI's biosketch as well. For all the details and application submission requirements, read section IV, number 6 of the RFA.

Q: Are there any other significant changes in the application?

A: Yes, special attention will be given to the timelines and the broad impact proposed in your proposal. The RFA specifically says that you should not include a detailed experimental plan or scientific plan. While the science is very important, reviewers will be interested in the impact your project has to generate jobs and advance the science. You will need to explicitly describe the impact your research will have on the community and how it will advance the science in two short years. Since you only have two years, the NIH needs to have complete faith in you that you can spend \$1M quickly and appropriately while providing the highest impact possible. You can show that through detailed timelines and a very clear description of how you will use the money. Think about what you will be able to do in two years that you cannot do now because you need \$1 million to do it.

Q: Is there any guidance about what to do after the stimulus funds are over?

A: Stimulus funding will last for two years. All funds must be spent by September 2011. The stimulus money is separate from the base budget of the NIH and the specific institutes, which is appropriated and approved each year by Congress. There will not be any renewals or no-cost extensions on your stimulus fund grants. NIH officials are anticipating that 2011 will be a very tough year to secure funding from any institute at the NIH. While it is hopeful that the base budget of the NIH may increase in years to come, the NIH is unlikely to see a boost in spending comparable to the funds from stimulus package. It is wise to plan accordingly.

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID) recommends writing your grants for 2010 on a different but related topic so that you can secure funding before 2011 and not have to renew during that funding cycle. They anticipate the payline will drop significantly in 2011. Other strategies include securing funding from other agencies like private foundations and professional societies to carry you through—though funds there are lower as well. Read the NIAID guidance for more information.

Q: How will projects be reviewed?

A: These projects will be reviewed using the new 1-9 scoring criteria and special criteria for these applications. The NIH Center for Scientific Review has not yet released information about how applications will be distributed for review, except to say that it won't be adding study sections. Make life easy on program officers and reviewers—whomever they turn out to be—by writing a very clear application. Reading the tea leaves, it appears that CSR might use the challenge areas as a method of sorting. You may want to indicate in the cover letter what kind of expertise would be helpful for reviews. Don't name names.

Q: How do I conduct a two year project?

A: Applicants must think a little differently about how to construct and conduct a two year research project. Keep in mind that, unlike a standard R01 of four years, these projects must yield significant impact. If you are doing basic or translational science, think in terms about the number of years of work you will be able to conduct off the two year project. Remember that not all projects lend themselves well to a quick turn-around time like this. For your project to be competitive, make sure you can make a strong argument that your research has the likelihood for high-impact results. Also, read the specific challenge area carefully—it will help guide you.

Q: Some of these challenge areas seem like they overlap. Can I respond to more than one in the same application?

A: We do not recommend this. The RFA says to respond to the specific challenge number.

Q: Will there be a detailed budget?

A: Yes, applicants must submit a detailed budget. No modular budgets will be accepted. Reviewers will be checking to make sure the budget is appropriate for the research proposed.