About NSF Grants

Berkeley Population Center - 2010

The Popcenter is funded by NICHD so we do tend to emphasize that particular source of external funding. That said, another viable source for social scientists is the National Science Foundation. There are two relevant divisions in NSF under the Directorate for Social, Behavioral & Economic Sciences for social science research: Social & Economic Sciences (SES) and Behavioral & Cognitive Sciences (BCS). The SES division has several subgroups: Decision, Risk & Management Science*; Economics; Innovation & Organizational Sciences*; Law & Social Sciences*; Methodology, Measurement & Statistics*; Political Science; Science Technology, & Society*; and Sociology. The asterisks denote interdisciplinary programs.

Dr. Jan Stets of NSF (jstets@nsf.gov) recently presented an introduction to NSF funding: this article condenses that talk. Her talk emphasized sociology but the lessons are applicable to other social sciences in SES as well. NSF supports theoretically-grounded research on systematic patterns of social relationships on the causes & consequences of human behavior, social structure, & social change. Studies range from micro to macro levels of interaction. Topics include: Stratification, labor markets, social change, organizations, networks, crime, race/ethnicity, social psychology, culture, education, family, gender, population, immigration, social movements, political processes, & globalization. In addition, this program also supports research using a range of social science methodologies: quantitative & qualitative including survey, experimental, & ethnography, and a combination of multiple methods for original data collection & secondary data analysis.

Proposals by full-time faculty are due by August 15 and January 15, and typically cover 2 years of support for data collection & analysis, survey costs, participant fees, graduate & undergrad assistants, summer salary, and travel for data collection.

In addition to dissertation fellowships (not covered here) two other programs worth mentioning are:
1. CAREER Award: Supports the effective integration of research & education: Eligibility: PhD; untenured, Assistant Professor in a tenure-track position; can compete in 3 competitions. Budget and Duration: $400,000 over 5 years. Deadline: July 23
2. Minority Postdoctoral Research Fellowship: Supports efforts to increase the diversity of researchers in the social sciences. Budget & Duration: $60,000 per year for 2 years; annual stipend of $45,000; research allowance of $10,000; institutional allowance of $5,000 for fringe benefits. Deadline: Third Monday in October.

Applying for NSF grants has some details that distinguish it from other grant applications but basically, they want to see a quality proposal. The process is straightforward.

1. Determine possible funding sources from Program Areas.
2. Read the Grant Proposal Guide carefully:
3. Determine whether your project fits program scope
4. Look over prior award abstracts (link at the bottom of the Program Areas)
5. Asertain evaluation procedures and criteria
6. Talk with NSF Program Officer
7. Work with your institution (me!) & sponsored research office
8. Ask PIs for copies of proposals
9. Determine budget: faculty & student salaries, data collection, equipment, travel for research, equipment, subawards and indirect costs.
10. Get IRB approval early
11. Provide suggested reviewers.

Weak proposals to NSF suffer from the kind of problems one sees elsewhere. They are worth while recalling as you review your own grant proposal efforts:

- Merit criteria are not met
- Not theoretically grounded or methodologically sound
- Not making a contribution (it’s already been done) or the contribution is incremental with no evidence of a breakthrough
- Disconnected – proposed research does not follow from the original idea
- ‘Trust me’ – lacks sufficient detail about proposed approach (particularly a problem from senior investigators).
- Unstated assumptions – proposed research presupposes the answer
- Unreasonable budget – budget items don’t follow from the research plan.

The NSF is a highly respected grant, so when considering a funding source, consider NSF.