Proposal Review
Mark Oskin, A view from the other side
I may / may not have served on a CAREER panel

- It is confidential which panel you serve on
- It is not confidential that you served on a panel (in fact it is a government record subject to FOF)
The approximate path of a proposal

You write the proposal

A program manager (PM) spot checks proposal for area/possibly re-directs

PM calls you and says the code words "recommended for funding"

Panel is supposed to review proposals

Panel meets in person in DC, makes recommendations

PM dukes it out with other PMs for funding

It's official!

Money arrives!

You write the proposal

UW signs off on it

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How NSF chooses Reviewers

- Reviewers seem to be people who have successfully obtained funding from NSF/that program before
  - Must not have applied to the same RFP
  - PM’s seem to have a “favorite” set of people they always use
    - There is history in the process from year to year because of this
Step 1: Form opinion

Easy ways to end up here: poor grammar, incoherent, repetition, bad idea or been done before, off-topic for the panel.
How much time does a reviewer look at your proposal?

Step 2: Inscrutable
Quickly end the pain

Step 2: Weak, read trying to make sure your judgement was right

Step 2: Good
Make sure its good

Completely inscrutable
Weak, but might be ok
has a shot

Skim (10-15 minutes), if CAREER, try and help PI by providing advice on how to write a good proposal; if other program, quickly dispense with a short paragraph

Read/Skim, trying to decide which way to go (30 minutes)

Read, trying to make sure is a winner, and that it can be defended (45 minutes)
Is it callous?

- I've served on 5 or 6 NSF panels so far. Each and every one was a very positive experience.
- Reviewers are far more thoughtful than a conference program committee.
- NSF and reviewers try hard to be fair and select the right proposals.
- Panelists are from your community and they aim to extract more funding for your community => Motivated to like proposals.
- I have rarely seen a proposal unfairly rejected.
- I have seen good proposals go down for every reason under the sun, but in the end, it was fair, given the constraints.
- If you are rejected, pay particular attention to the panel summary. You were not rejected callously.
The Panel itself

Fly in

Discuss

Discuss

Dinner

Summary/Rank

Fly out

Eat together in the mall food court :-(

Typically do 1-2 bottom, then 1-2 top, then depending on PM either start from bottom, top, or “discussion order”

Typical panel ~ 30 proposals, try and have only 3-6 HC; rank sort 2-3 C’s, all the other C’s and NC’s are actually rejects

Initial judgements of HC, C, NC are made here
Panel Summary

- When your proposal is reviewed in the panel, a “scribe” is assigned to capture the discussion to text.

- The scribe may/may not have read your proposal

- The scribe is instructed to write the summary in a given format, and, even for the best and worst proposals, find good and bad things to say

- In day 2, these summaries are revised for the HC proposals, making the case for why NSF should fund them. For non-fundable proposals, the summary is checked to make sure it’s not too positive

- Summary is read aloud (laboriously) to the panel and everyone signs off on it. Even nitpicking its sentence structure.
Advice for PIs

• Make sure your proposal is well written -- hire an editor if you have poor writing skills
• Don’t send in a crappy proposal -- there is memory
• In my field, better to be far reaching than solid.
  • But you better have preliminary data
• Read the RFP closely. You WILL be rejected if you don’t address all aspects. Don’t just write about your idea
• Understand that reviewers are pressed for time, and need to make a quick decision => use document structure and good presentation to your advantage
• Don’t send in two proposals at the same time with nearly the same / same sounding content
Advice specific to CAREER

• In addition to the above requirements, you will be rejected if you:
  • Don’t take education seriously
  • Don’t take outreach seriously
  • Don’t write a proposal about an idea that is “CAREER worthy” (will it get you tenure?)
  • Yes we know $500K is not enough