

News from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS)

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A REQUEST FOR APPLICATION (RFA) AND A PROGRAM ANNOUNCEMENT (PA)? WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF EACH?

Many institutes of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) participate in Requests for Application (RFAs) and Program Announcements (PAs) from time-to-time. Both of these are invitations to submit applications in areas of particular interest to a specific institute. Generally, both RFAs and PAs are prepared by institute staff after careful review of a scientific field and sometimes a scientific meeting, which may be held to identify and define the research needs of the field. Sometimes there are other reasons, for example, there may be congressional interest in funding research in a particular area, and so a mandate is attached to an authorization or appropriations bill. The goal is always to inform the scientific public of opportunities to apply for funding, and to attract the most high quality, competitive proposals to address the questions being posed. However, there are some important differences between these two mechanisms:

—RFAs have a set-aside of money and are in effect for specific receipt and review dates. Your application must come in on time, be clearly marked, and must follow the budget guidelines for the particular RFA. A pre-application letter of intent may be required. Frequently, there will be a special review panel convened for the express purpose of reviewing the applications in response to the RFA. Sometimes the number of awards to be made will be specified at the outset. Funding decisions are made until all of the available money is spent. Always contact institute staff to determine if your application is responsive to the scientific aims of the RFA, and to learn of any last-minute information regarding the competition.

—PAs normally do not have a set-aside of money or specific receipt and review dates. Many times PAs are in effect for years, and they often do not have strict budget guidelines. Usually, the applications are reviewed in the regular study sections of the Division of Research Grants (DRG), according to the scientific expertise that is required (so applications may go to different study sections). The number of awards to be made is rarely specified. Funding decisions are made on a rolling basis. Frequently, the impact of the PA is such

that applications that are at the margins of being funded through regular channels receive an extra edge in the competition due to the institute's interest in the area. Again, contact institute staff to determine if your application is responsive to the goals of the PA, and to learn of any updated information that is available.

How Do You Find Out About RFAs and PAs?

RFAs and PAs are published, along with other notices and announcements of interest to grantees, in the NIH Guide to Grants and Contracts. This guide is sent regularly to the Grants and Contracts Office at your institution. You can also access this information electronically, by checking the postings on the NIH WWW Home Page (<http://www.nih.gov>) or on the home page for a particular institute. You can also subscribe to the guide electronically by following instructions in the October 1995 issue of Peer Review Notes (available upon request from the Grants Information Office at (301) 435-0714 or GIRG@DRGPO.DRG.NIH.GOV).

What Determines Whether an RFA or a PA is Written?

Several factors contribute to this decision, including the amount of money available, the time frame, the needs of the field, and the culture of the NIH institute (they all operate quite differently!). If you decide to pursue an RFA or PA, read it carefully to determine whether it is aimed at regular research grants (R01s, R29s), or whether it is intended for other mechanisms, for example, small business grants (R43) or program project applications (P01).

Investigator-initiated, non-solicited, non-restricted grant applications will likely remain the mainstay of the NIH Extramural Programs and the research they support. But it never hurts to become associated with an RFA or PA if there is one that is an exact scientific "fit"; there may be future activities of interest in which you might like to participate (e.g. meetings, workshops). Occasionally, several institutes jointly sponsor RFAs or PAs. Always consult with NIH staff to learn if there is a program that is particularly interested in your work, because a poor scientific "fit" can do you more harm than good, especially if there is a better home for your application in another institute. Remember, RFAs and PAs are tools to accomplish the mission of the NIH, which is to fund research in the pursuit of improving human health.

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Future topics for this column: reinvention activities at the NIH, modular grants, small business grants, training opportunities. Comments to: LONGR@GM1.NIGMS.NIH.GOV.