

CHAPTER 16

BUDGET AND BUDGET JUSTIFICATION

The Budget and Budget Justification are anachronisms in most grant proposals. Applicants work diligently on all other parts and, then, when they come to the Budget and Budget Justification, they delegate preparation of them to a secretary or administrative assistant. After the award is made they wonder why their budget request was cut. If you follow the tips and strategies that follow, in our experience it is unlikely that your request will suffer that fate.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

A detailed Budget for each year of requested support must be prepared. The usual duration of a standard NSF grant is three years. However, it is possible to request as many as five years. If either four or five years are requested there must be compelling scientific justification provided for such a request in the Budget Justification. In our experience, if more than three years are contemplated, it is extremely helpful to have the relevant Program Officer informed and accepting of the idea before the application is submitted.

There are two levels of budgetary review. The first is by your peers – reviewers who are sufficiently experienced with the kind of research proposed that they know what it should cost. Reviewers make budgetary recommendations to NSF program staff as part of their evaluation of the proposal. The second level of review is by program staff: how does the quality of the project and its programmatic relevance relate to the priorities of the program? Based on all such appraisals and recommendations, possibly complemented by negotiations between the applicant and an NSF Program Officer (see discussion of negotiated budgets, below), an amount is awarded for a specific scope of work. All of these potential levels of review must be taken into consideration when formulating your budget request.

The research that you want to do should drive the budget, never the other way around – unless either a formal or operational cap has been placed on the amount that can be requested. A formal cap could be found, for example, in the program solicitation to which you are responding. With respect to an operational cap, you might be made aware of one through discussions with the relevant Program Officer: operationally, the program doesn't fund over a certain amount. If you have either kind of authoritative feedback, you must offer a scope of work that can be accomplished within that capped amount. If no such restriction is identified you should design the project to accomplish your objective, prepare a hard-nosed budget, and then propose what the research will cost – nothing less. "Low-balling" a budget request as a means of increasing the likelihood that a proposal will be funded is not only wrongheaded thinking (it doesn't help, in our experience), it is potentially dangerous to your subsequent fundability; what happens if the request is granted? Inability to complete all of the research proposed because of self-inflicted budgetary shortfalls will almost surely undercut the success of your subsequent renewal application.