

TIGER TIPS
RESOURCES FOR AUBURN RESEARCHERS
Program Officer: Gatekeeper or Asset?
You Decide!

The Program Officer holds the keys to what does and does not get funded. They are often involved with developing the program offering, guiding reviewers on what to look for when reviewing applications, and involved through the life of a funded grant. It is to your advantage to involve the Program Officer while you are developing your research plans/goals in regards to applying to a funding opportunity.

Subjects to discuss with your Program Officer:

- Is my research a good fit for his or her funding opportunity? Does he or she have any suggestions on how it could be modified to better suit the funding opportunity? You do not have to accept these suggestions but it is a great way to further the conversation so you hear more about what they are looking for. If your research is not a good fit they may be able to suggest other Program Officers that have funding opportunities that are a better fit for your research.
- When working on your budget, talk to your Program Officer to ensure that your budget is in the zone of what they are looking for. If it isn't, explain why it is over/under and see what they think. This will give you a better idea of if your budget is appropriate and help you decide if modifications are needed.
- Ask how many reviewers will be on the panel who will be knowledgeable about your specific area of research. Once the list of reviewers is released go over it and discuss any concerns (e.g., possible competitors / conflicts of interest, make sure there is at least one reviewer that will fully understand your research area, and any other reviewer concerns or questions). This list will also give you an idea of who your audience is. Even if you have two reviewers that know your area, you will have to convince the rest of the panel that your application is better than the others. Doing a little research on them isn't a bad idea to better understand your audience (but be aware that changes to this list will occur).

Email communication is okay, phone conversations are good, but a face to face conversation is the best.

Auburn University has a fantastic opportunity called the AU Shuttle Program. If available, you can use the AU jet for a one-day trip of up to 650 miles from Auburn to go visit your Program Officer (or other research-orientated task). For more information and requirements visit <https://cws.auburn.edu/OVPR/pm/shuttle>

Here is an article written in 2011 by an NIH Program Officer entitled “A view from the NIH bridge: perspectives of a program officer”

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3145542/>

NSF website link to overview of grant selection process, including program officer’s role, entitled “Quality & Transparency of the Merit Review Process”

https://www.research.gov/research-portal/appmanager/base/desktop;jsessionid=2L8XNj1PQwyJ978mykTClvRgsqqfpNwvzP1G2qVhF2FgMcypzbm7!862271102!-567262887?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=research_node_display&_nodePath=/researchGov/Generic/Desktop/WhatWeDoLearnMore.html

It makes sense to empower yourself with as much information as you can regarding the review process. Isn’t it logical to include the Program Officer when developing a research plan in order to apply to a funding opportunity? Program Officers are there to guide the funding process: this includes discussing funding goals with applicants in order to receive strong, competitive applications. They have a clear objective within their funding goals. Make sure you know what these are and address them within your application!