Understanding the USDA’s Peer Review Process - Views from the Peer Review Process

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The primary purpose of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) peer review process for competitive grants is to identify the most meritorious grant proposal for funding.

My comments will focus on the general perspective of a typical peer review panelist for the USDA Competitive Grant Program. Obviously, each peer review process differs but they all have some common threads. I believe all program managers attempt to place merit at the top of their priority list. I also, believe all of them attempt to integrate equity to the fullest extent possible in the evaluation and review process.
Selection of Panelist, Their Background, Qualification and Tasks

- Panelists have various backgrounds but they are relative to the respective grant program.

- Panelists are well qualified and have expertise in respective field. Someone on the panel will have full knowledge of the project’s subject matter.

- Panelists are made aware of task at hand in terms of time required and the time frame to complete the review process.
Panelist Preparation to Read Proposals

- Full knowledge of the contents of Notice of Funds Available (NOFA), Request for Applications (RFA), and Request for Proposals (RFP).
- Full knowledge of the purpose and objective of the respective grant program.
- Full Knowledge of the Agency’s mission within USDA.
Procedures Used by Panelist to Read Proposals

- Maybe skim through all assigned proposals to get a flavor for the contents or glance through only a few.
- Probably will not rank proposals at first reading.
- Full knowledge of evaluation criteria and have it available when reading.
- Underline highlights, strong points, weakness and other items that would have strengthened the proposal.
Major Items that are Given the Most Weight in Ranking. These are Based on the Evaluation Criteria or Guidelines.

- Outline – Is there an outline and is it easy to follow?
- Summary – does the summary identify the goal and/or objectives and methodology?
- Description – does the description provide enough details to describe the project, including the problem and proposed solution? Were stakeholders involved and was the justification for the proposal clear?

Continued -
● Goal and Objectives – are they clearly identified, achievable and fit into the purpose and goal of the agency’s grant program?

● Time table – is it reasonable?

● Budgetary details – are they reasonable and tied closely to goals and objectives?
• Evaluation component – must identify component to measure progress and results. What role do stakeholders play in evaluation process?

• Did applicant follow all submission procedures or guidelines?
Panelist Preparation for Proposal Ranking

- During quite time review proposals based on merit, the evaluation criteria and guidelines.

- Use the ranking procedure for the respective agency’s grant program.

- Review rankings before panel meeting and be prepared to justify your ranking.
Review Panel Utilization of the Team Approach to Evaluate and Rank Proposals Based on Merit

- Ranking panelist justify numeric score or ranking.

- Provide feedback based on identifiable facts rather than personal opinion or beliefs.
The End