

NIFA Reimagined

Reflections of the Northeastern Regional Association of State Agricultural Experiment Station Directors (NERA¹)

January 28, 2020

NERA solicited its membership and sought ideas on reimagining NIFA. We used as the basis of the solicitation, 4 questions that were posed by NIFA Director, Dr. Scott Angle. Those questions included:

- How can NIFA improve its delivery of capacity programs for supporting research and extension?
- What changes will improve NIFA's implementation of its competitive programs?
- How can NIFA increase transparency and effectiveness of its organizational structure?
- What steps NIFA should take to enhance its customer experience?

NERA also added a final question:

- What else?

For each of the questions the Northeast directors share the following bulleted suggestions.

How can NIFA improve its delivery of capacity programs for supporting research and extension?

- The Annual Report and POW are overly detailed, time intensive, and cumbersome. For example, there is needless manual entry of information related to projects that is already captured and reported separately. We re-report it, manually. Again, this is extremely cumbersome. Solution: automatically populate fields using existing systems. Concentrate the focus of Annual Report and POW on what's most critical: the impact that the Land-grant programs are having, where we're going, why it's important. Also, the non-financial data essentially remains unchanged from year-to-year. The collective deliverable is basically hundreds of pages of rework. How is this helpful to us or NIFA? It's not.
- Capital expenditures—new guidelines and process are extremely cumbersome.
- Impact reporting does not adequately leverage results already documented in existing reporting systems. To a degree, this is a system issue and might include more strategic ways to elicit concrete, useable information of value. However, the bigger picture is that there is not a unified, centralized, effective mechanism that tells the story of the work that's being done. It starts with the PI reporting and should end in high level reporting that is digestible and accessible. It should be easily available to directors to survey completed work and more broadly to other institutions and the research community. Attempts have been made to centralize this, but my understanding is that there has yet to be an effective solution.

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- As NIFA configures its workforce, we suggest allowing cost allocations or pre-award spending to approved projects that precede the start date by 90 days. That would provide flexibility to NIFA and the LGUs. This is especially needed now as the LGUs face long delays in NIFA approval of initiated projects.

What changes will improve NIFA's implementation of its competitive programs?

- There are two big needs: 1) make programs consistent across priorities/ commodities/ themes. Some require a match, others don't, some require a letter of intent, others don't. Even the IDC rates are different.
- Eliminate mandatory match and capping of indirect cost return in competitive programs.
- If elimination of the matching requirement and the capping match cannot be accomplished, then we strongly suggest that the agency allow unrecovered indirect cost return to be included as part of the cost sharing or match requirement per *CFR § 200.306 Cost Sharing or matching: (c) Unrecovered indirect costs, including indirect costs on cost sharing or matching may be included as part of cost sharing or matching only with the prior approval of the Federal awarding agency. Unrecovered indirect cost means the difference between the amount charged to the Federal award and the amount which could have been charged to the Federal award under the non-Federal entity's approved negotiated indirect cost rate.*
- Keep priorities consistent for a couple of years and provide continuity in the review process from year to year.
- Identify and provide more expertise within the USDA Food and Nutrition Service to identify programs that impact consumer food needs.
- Create grant funding models where allocations are given to qualified researchers on a regular basis as an efficient funding model for promoting scientific innovation and progress.
- There is a diminishing return of very large grants compared to the small-to-moderate sized grants and to that end we seek balance in the grant funding portfolio.
- We suggest moving grant submissions to a rolling deadline model, similar to NSF, in some programs.
- NIFA should take full responsibility for crop improvement, including genomics, rather than relying on NSF's Plant Genomics Research Program.

- We suggest balancing the species of interest in RFPs and reduce the disproportionate orientation towards corn and soybeans. Likewise, balance the challenges faced by the different regions.
- We suggest that NIFA address the complete nutritional needs of consumers and the complete ag production system (beyond mid-western mega-farms) in its grant funding RFPs.
- Increase the autonomy for program directors to fund a balanced portfolio using NSF models of decision making and not just follow panel decisions.
- Allow and promote the use of model systems if they directly link or are the best options to solve questions that have significant agricultural relevance.
- Utilize the Executive Directors of the regional agricultural experiment station organizations in the identification of research needs and the development of requests for proposals. They have unique regional expertise and outlooks.
- Secure greater industry participation at all levels of the grant cycle: generation of funding priorities, development of RFPs, review of proposals, and decision-making on funding. This suggestion is especially relevant to the SBIR program. We have NE ag industry members who have expressed interest in serving as reviewers of SBIR proposals. Alternatively, our community stakeholders have expressed frustration over SBIR projects that consistently lack real-world potential to be implemented. Industry experts posit that they are in a position to assess the viability of a proposed project. Further, inclusion of industry reviewers of Phase I projects could be valuable.

How can NIFA increase transparency and effectiveness of its organizational structure?

- Establish a central go-to person for each Land-grant institution and an organizational structure that reveals specific contacts for specific categories of questions. The NIFA hierarchy is mysterious and at present, unknown. It should be available online and found easily.
- To date, station directors have yet to crack the code on navigating NIFA's web site. They report that that are far better off using a search engine to look for information or documentation rather than attempting to find it on the USDA/NIFA homepage.
- Strive to make Land-grant institutions true partners. It feels more like NIFA exists to micromanage and enforce policies.
- NIFA should consistently and continually consult a wide set of Land-grant university colleges of agriculture and solicit input on research directions with significant input

from the research/researcher community for establishing new programs and continuing extant programs.

- When reviewing the funded projects in the USDA SBIR program, there are very few projects that led to successful businesses 10 years down the road. Since SBIR is one of the only funding programs dedicated to the private sector, it would be advisable to promote greater industry participation.

What steps NIFA should take to enhance its customer experience?

- Include feedback mechanisms that operate in real time. For example, if you are a PI submitting a final report, ask for feedback at the time of submission. While feedback like this exercise is useful, it is second-hand and is removed temporally from the myriad cyclical systems that operate between many stakeholders/users over the course of the entire year.
- Embed a financial person within each of the NIFA grants program offices or program clusters to facilitate post-award budget negotiations and reporting. These functions are now conducted in understaffed, black-box accounting offices disconnected from the research mission.

What else?

- If NIFA seeks the input on reimagining NIFA, it would have been helpful to have a strategic vision articulated by NIFA. What is the strategic vision and mission of NIFA?
- Utilize the Executive Directors of the regional cooperative extension service and agricultural experiment stations to assist NIFA. These Executive Directors have unique regional expertise and outlooks.