

GPA-NCA Conference

Breakout Session C Making the Most of a Peer Review

Making the Most of Peer Reviews

Learning Objectives

- Develop an understanding of peer reviews.
- Explore definite no-no's to avoid and tips to use.
- Raise awareness of applicant rights.
- Recognize risks and benefits when engaging Congressional representatives.
- Understanding the municipal and county agency review process.

Making the Most of Peer Reviews

Learning Objective 1

Develop an Understanding of Peer Reviews

LO1: Peer Review Process

Uniform Guidance

- Affected how federal agencies review:
 - Proposals
 - Applicants

LO1: Peer Review Process

Uniform Guidance

- Federal agencies have protocols for reviewing applicants and their proposals.
- Most use the peer review process for the merit review of proposals.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Steps in the Process

- Confirmation of application receipt.
- Application screening.
- Merit review and scoring/ranking of proposals.
- Risk and integrity review of applicants.
- Preliminary offer of award.
- Negotiation of final terms.
- Final notification of award.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Screening Committee or Panel

- Look for technical errors to screen out proposals.
 - Missing components.
 - Wrong font.
 - Page count or filesize.
- Intent is to limit the number of proposals for review.
- Proposals that pass screening will go to peer review.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Peer Review Committees or Panels

- External reviewers supplement federal staff.
- External reviewers are considered peers of applicants.
 - Similar nonfederal organizations.
 - Prior awardees.
 - Experts in the field.
- Federal agency staff manage the process.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Peer Review Panels

- Panels are comprised of 3-5 peer reviewers.
 - Read assigned proposals individually.
 - Score proposals individually using merit criteria.
 - Meet as a panel to discuss and average individuals scores.
 - Re-review proposals if individual scores widely vary.
- Reviewers certify no conflict of interest.
- Reviewers sign confidentiality statements.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Peer Review Panels

- Sometimes there is a cut-off score (85 points).
- After panel reviews, federal agency ranks proposals.
- Recommended proposals are forward for risk review.
 - Risk review is about the applicant (not proposal).
 - High risk applicants can be awarded - specific conditions.
 - High risk applicants can be denied award based on risk.
- Award decisions made after merit and risk reviews.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Role of Federal Officials

- Provide general oversight.
- Select peer reviewers.
- Train peer reviewers.
- Ensure each application received objective review.
- Ensures all applicable laws, regulations and policies are followed.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Role of Federal Officials

- Examples of Duties:
 - Ability to manage teams in group settings.
 - Forms panels with balanced representation.
 - Assigns applications to reviewers.
 - Oversees administrative and regulatory aspects.
 - Ranks the scores for all proposals from all panels.
 - Prepares summary statements for all applications.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Role of Peer Panel Chair

- Examples of Duties:
 - Serves as moderator of the panel discussion.
 - Ensures individual reviewer scores do not greatly vary.
 - Tallies individual scores for an average panel score.
 - Often serves as a peer reviewer on the panel.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Role of Peer Reviewer

- Examples of Duties:
 - Declares no conflict of interest, signs certification.
 - Signs confidentiality statement.
 - Reviews and scores proposals before panel meets.
 - Participates in panel discussions/teamwork.
 - Adds comments about strengths and weaknesses.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Merit Scoring

- Scoring is based on merit criteria.
- Individual scores are averaged for the panel score.
- All panel scores are ranked.
- Funding goes to highest scores until exhausted (pending risk review).

LO1: Peer Review Process

Scoring Disparities

- In an ideal world:
 - Consistent scores among all panel members.
 - Minimal discussion needed since all agree.
- What usually happens:
 - About one-third consistent (very high or low).
 - About half moderately divergent.
 - Remaining proposal scores vary widely.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Scoring Disparities – Why?

- Different reviewers focus energy on different criteria.
- One or more will favor an innovative strategy even if the proposal is not well-written.
- One or more will favor a high needs applicant event if the proposal is not well-written.
- One reviewer may be a “harsh” scorer.
- Some reviewers may misread or misunderstand.

LO1: Peer Review Process

Reviewer Training

- Little training for reviewers who are not generally professional evaluators.
- An orientation
- Reviewer manual.
- Overview of any digital portal.
- Panel “etiquette.”

LO1: Peer Review Process

It's an imperfect process.

LO1: Peer Review Process

GAO Audit of Peer Review Process

- Report GAO/RCED-099-99
- Conducted at selected scientific agencies.
- Determined that proposal review process depended upon the quality and integrity of the screeners and reviewers.

LO1: Peer Review Process

GAO Audit of Peer Review Process

- Goals of the audit:
 - Define peer review.
 - Identify federal peer review policy.
 - Assess peer review practices at 12 federal agencies.
 - Review other quality assurance reviews.
 - Identify any research not subject to review.

LO1: Peer Review Process

GAO Audit of Peer Review Process

Participating Agencies	
USDA	HHS
DOC	NIH
NIST	DOI/Geological Survey
NOAA	NASA
DOE	NSF
EPA	DOT/FAA

LO1: Peer Review Process

GAO Audit Findings

- No uniform federal policy for peer reviews.
- The 12 agencies had their own guidance.
- No governmentwide definition of peer review.
- Peer review was used for several reasons.

LO1: Peer Review Process

GAO Audit Findings

- To varying degrees, the 12 agencies:
 - Assessed the merit of proposals.
 - Determined new or renewal awards.
 - Evaluated results of research prior to publication.
 - Established budget priorities.
 - Evaluated performance.

LO1: Peer Review Process

GAO Audit Findings

- There were variances in methods:
 - Reviewers were selected from academia, private industry and government.
 - Review comments were received by mail, during panel meetings, site visits, workshops and/or a combination of methods.
 - Agencies used federal officials in addition to peer reviewers.

LO1: Peer Review Process

GAO Audit Findings

- As a result, GAO found that the variances can cause differences in the quality of reviews.
- Applicants, therefore, may weigh a decision to dispute or appeal a review.

Making the Most of Peer Reviews

Learning Objective 2

Definite No-No's To Avoid and Tips To Use

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Why a Proposal Fails

- Many reasons why a proposal fails.
- Some are caused by no-no's on the part of the applicant.

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Generally Accepted Reasons

- Low merit score.
- Pre-award review of applicant risk.
- Competitive points that favored other applicants.
 - Prior experience
 - Veteran, tribal or at-risk population
- Geographic preference.
- Required cost sharing or matching challenges.

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Generally Accepted Reasons

- Technical errors that caused a screen-out.
- Full proposal submitted after “not invited” response from preliminary proposal.
- Missed preliminary proposal or required LOI.
- Duplicate proposal of a prior award.

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Generally Accepted Reasons

- Nonresponsive to proposal requirements.
- Late submission.
- Ineligible applicant.
- Unallowable costs in the proposed budget.
- Unreasonable costs in the proposed budget.
- No outcomes or deliverables.
- Overstated objectives.

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Tips To Use

- Avoid technical errors that cause screen-outs:
 - Fonts
 - Page limits, filesize
- Write close to, but under the page limit.
- Use the selection criteria to form the outline of the narrative.
- Write more for the greater point values.

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Tips To Use

- Write the narrative in the order of the criteria.
- Provide headers for each scored criteria.
- Provide subheads, if needed.

Make it easy for reviewers to locate required merit criteria and assign point values.

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Federal Reviewer Score Sheet

FUND FOR THE IMPROVEMENT AND REFORM OF SCHOOLS AND TEACHING
TECHNICAL REVIEW FORM

SCHOOL-LEVEL PROGRAM (CFDA NO. 84.211A)
SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS PROGRAM (CFDA NO. 84.211B)

APPLICANT _____

APPLICATION NO. R211 _____

SELECTION CRITERIA	MAXIMUM POINTS	ASSIGNED POINTS
I. Need for the Project	15	_____
II. Plan of Operation	20	_____
III. Quality of Key Personnel	10	_____
IV. Educational Value	20	_____
V. Budget and Cost Effectiveness	10	_____
VI. Evaluation Plan	10	_____
VII. National Significance	15	_____
Competitive Preference	25	_____
TOTAL:	125	_____

OVERALL COMMENTS:

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Reviewer's Name (PRINT) _____ Phone () _____

Signature: _____ Date _____

Reviewer Score Sheet

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Federal Reviewer Score Sheet

CRITERION		EVALUATION			
A. Potential for Advancing Quality of Education; Significance of the Problem (30 pts)		Comments: Acceptable? Yes Marginal or No			
B. Proposed Approach and Cooperative Linkages (25 pts)		Comments: Acceptable? Yes Marginal or No			
C. Institutional Capability and Capacity Building (20 pts)		Comments: Acceptable? Yes Marginal or No			
D. Key Personnel (15 pts)		Comments: Acceptable? Yes Marginal or No			
E. Budget and Cost-Effectiveness (10 pts)		Comments: Acceptable? Yes Marginal or No			
RECOMMENDATION – Record Points from Above. Check only one box. Print Name & Sign					
Points A (30 max)	Points B (25 max)	Points C (20 max)	Points D (15 max)	Points E (10 max)	Total (100 max)
Fund as Submitted (F)		Fund with Minor Revisions (R)		Do Not Fund (N)	
Reviewer's Name:					
Reviewer's Signature and Date:					

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Tips To Use

- Partners:
 - Provide specifics, names, addresses.
 - Are they contributing resources?
 - Will they require grant resources?
- Proof of partnership – MOU, letter

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Tips To Use

- Demonstrate knowledge of the uniform guidance.
 - Relate financial data to performance (§200.301).
 - Measure performance to improve outcomes (§200.301)
 - Use evidence-based strategies and promising practices explained with literature citations (§200.301).
 - Performance goals must be associated with a timeline for accomplishment (§200.210)

LO2: No-No's and Tips

Tips To Use

- Address risk criteria (§200.205).
 - Include prior awards, history of successful past performance.
 - Describe capacity of financial system to track federal funds.
 - Demonstrate ability to correct audit findings.
 - Address risk of partners.
 - Discuss financial stability.
 - Provide “reasonable assurance” to manage federal funds.

Making the Most of Peer Reviews

Learning Objective 3

Four Applicant Rights: selection of reviewers, reviewer comments, resubmission, appeal

LO3: Applicant Rights

Applicant Rights

- Federal reviews vary by agency.
- Some general rights among many, but not all agencies:
 - Selection of reviewers.
 - Review comments.
 - Resubmission.
 - Appeal or reconsideration.

LO3: Applicant Rights

Selection of Reviewers

- Some agencies allow applicants to request specific reviewers.
- Some agencies allow applicants to scratch specific reviewers.
- Prior written approval of federal agency.

LO3: Applicant Rights

Review Comments

- Applicants may request copies of review comments and score sheets.
- Score sheets are based on merit criteria.
- Review comments and scores sheets reveal strengths and weaknesses to better plan for future resubmission.

LO3: Applicant Rights

Resubmission

- Study reviewer comments.
- Engage in conversation with federal program contact.
- Resubmit:
 - Treated as new proposal.
 - No need to explain prior denial.
 - NIH, in fact, warns against revealing a resubmission.
 - Do NOT resubmit previous proposal with tracked changes!

LO3: Applicant Rights

Resubmission

- Common misconception is that once denied, always denied.
- Many proposals fail on first attempt.
- NSF statistics reveal:
 - One proposal wins for every 2.3 submissions.
 - Only 31 percent of PIs win first award on first attempt.

LO3: Applicant Rights

Reconsideration or Appeal

- If not satisfied the proposal was reasonably reviewed, applicants may request reconsideration:
 - Input beyond reviewer comments and score sheets.
 - Initiates a conversation.
 - Leads to valuable insights.
 - Prepares for resubmission.
 - Cultivates positive relationship with federal agency.

LO3: Applicant Rights

Reconsideration or Appeal

- If not satisfied the proposal was reasonably reviewed, applicants may request appeal, however:
 - Applicant would seek to have the proposal re-reviewed.
 - Federal agency would seek to confirm that the review process was fairly handled, reasonable, procedures followed.
 - Different perspectives.

LO3: Applicant Rights

Reconsideration or Appeal

- Appeal hearings are formal administrative proceedings to be disclosed under FAPIIS pre-award risk reviews.
- Appeals process varies by federal agency:
 - Some have date limits (30, 60 days).
 - Some don't offer appeals on discretionary funding.
 - Must seek guidance from federal agency.

LO3: Applicant Rights

Denied Proposals

- What are the options?
- Was the denial based on merit or risk?
- Was the denial for discretionary or nondiscretionary funding?

LO3: Applicant Rights

Denial for Nondiscretionary Funds

- Formula or mandatory grants derived from statute.
- Funds “reserved” for applicant.
- Denial would delay release of funds until deficiencies are addressed.
- Multiple revisions may be possible.
- Process will lead to an award of funds.

LO3: Applicant Rights

Denial for Discretionary Funds

- Harsh reality:
- All the awards have been announced.
- All the funding has been allocated.
- Unlikely funds are available even if a decision was reversed.

LO3: Applicant Rights

Denial for Risk

- Uniform guidance determinations (§200.212).
- Applicants denied due to risk are considered “not qualified” for federal funds.
- Applicants must be entered into FAPIIS.
- Posting remains for five years.
- Any subsequent proposal to any federal agency would be subject to this determination.

LO3: Applicant Rights

Denial for Risk

- Denial based on risk (§200.205) could prove much more serious than a denial based on merit (§200.204).
- Any protest or appeal that may ensue would benefit from the advice of legal counsel.

Making the Most of Peer Reviews

Learning Objective 4

Contacting Congressional Representatives: Risks and Benefits

LO4: Congressional Reps

Asking for Support

- Support for proposal submission.
- Support for an appeal.
- Risks and benefits.

LO4: Congressional Reps

Asking for Support

- Applicants sign federal assurances – no lobbying.
- Asking for support is seeking to influence Congressional action.
- Seeking to influence can be associated with lobbying.

LO4: Congressional Reps

Asking for Support

- Other issues:
 - Congressional representative may not like it.
 - Federal agency may not appreciate it.
 - Congressional representative may not have any influence with that particular federal agency or program.

LO4: Congressional Reps

Asking for Support

- Applicants can conduct outreach to raise awareness about the submitted proposal or denied award:
 - Keep the contact informational in nature.
 - Stop short of seeking to influence.
 - Congressional representative may voluntarily decide to take action.

Generally, if they feel they can help, they will do so without being asked.

Making the Most of Peer Reviews

Learning Objective 5

Understanding the Municipal and County Agency Review Process

LO5: Local Peer Review Process

Preparation for Submission

- Review county or municipal priorities in advance and participate in all technical assistance sessions.
- Connect with program officers or agency contact(s) to determine if you are eligible to apply; these are your long-term contacts, not the reviewers!
- Make sure you can respond to all reporting requirements
- Review attachments list to collect all the information in advance.

LO5: Local Peer Review Process

Checklist for Submission

- ✓ All required attachments.
- ✓ Submission in the correct format and meeting all requirements as outlined in the RFP.
- ✓ Save at least one day for printing (if needed) and physical drop off or mailing.
- ✓ Physical or electronic confirmation that application was submitted.

LO5: Local Peer Review Process

Review Process

- There may not necessarily be scoring criteria – sometimes only feedback is requested.
- Reviewers tend to be people who live and/or work in the community (and not necessarily well-versed in the grants process).
- If interviews or site visits are requested, make sure the program director has access to the application if he/she was not involved in submission.

LO5: Local Peer Review Process

Review Process

- Provide updated information if requested by the agency.
- Be responsive to inquiries and requests so you can ensure you are considered an active organization.
- Do not try to offer additional information beyond the application, unless requested by the reviewers.

LO5: Local Peer Review Process

Post-Review

- If you were not selected, reach out to the agency contact for additional information.
- Request your feedback form (if available) and review to modify approach for next year.
- Cultivate the relationships throughout the year and participate in county/municipal events to represent your organization.

LO5: Local Peer Review Process

Considerations

- The process is imperfect and can feel more objective vs. subjective.
- Ultimately, the funding awards are decided by the funding agency, although the reviewers' feedback is considered.
- It can be more difficult for non-renewal organizations to be funded, so cultivation and strength of application are important.

LO5: Local Peer Review Process

Hands on Activity

- What would you do as a peer reviewers? Let's review a sample application and actual evaluation form provided to the Montgomery County Council Grants Advisory Group

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Additional Q&A

Making the Most of Peer Reviews

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Making the Most of Peer Reviews

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