Community for Advancing Discovery Research in Education

New DRK-12 Awardee Welcome and Orientation Webinar: Notes

The following tips for developing and implementing education research projects—on partnerships and collaborations, budgets, reporting, and project team management—were shared by experienced NSF awardees during the webinar. Please refer to NSF's PPAG for official guidance.

Establishing and Maintaining Partnerships and Collaborations

1. **Effective Outreach**: Cast a wide net when reaching out to potential partners, such as schools or districts. Initial conversations may seem promising but can change over time, so it's a good idea to have multiple options.
2. **Support Partnerships from Project Start**: When forming new partnerships, consider involving partners in the project's co-design and planning phases to ensure alignment and engagement from the outset.
3. **Understand Partner Goals**: Understand what potential partners, like school districts, hope to gain from the collaboration. Tailor your approach and value proposition to align with their goals.
4. **Relationship Management During the Contract Phase**: When working with partners, such as schools or districts, prioritize efficient and timely contract execution to maintain positive relationships and mitigate negative assumptions about research intentions.
5. **Engagement and Interaction**: Create opportunities for active engagement and interaction when working with teachers or school partners. Interactive activities can be more inviting and keep participants engaged.
6. **Teacher Recognition**: Recognize and reward teachers' contributions throughout the project. Consider offering stipends or incentives at appropriate intervals (e.g., more than once a year) to sustain their motivation and commitment.
7. **Flexible Partnerships and Participation**: Whether your project involves school partnerships or work with individual teachers, recognize that teacher turnover can be high. Plan strategies to address this challenge, and be flexible and adaptable when teachers leave or new ones join the project. Maintain good relations with departing teachers to increase your educator network and connections.
8. **Alignment with District Practices**: Ensure that stipends and incentives align with compensation practices typical of the district(s) you are working with to avoid creating disruptions or inequities among participating teachers.
9. **Clear Communication**: Maintain open and clear communication with all partners throughout the project. Address any concerns or hesitations upfront and work collaboratively to find solutions.

10. **Partnership Sustainability**: Plan for the sustainability of partnerships beyond the immediate project. Consider how relationships with schools, districts, or other collaborators can continue to benefit all parties.

11. **Problem-Solving Approach**: When challenges arise in collaborations, approach them as problems to be solved rather than insurmountable obstacles. Collaborative problem-solving can strengthen partnerships.

12. **Regular Updates**: Keep partners informed about project progress and outcomes. Regular updates help maintain trust and engagement.

13. **Assess District Needs**: Continuously assess the needs of school districts or partners and be flexible in adjusting the project to address those needs.

14. **Celebrate Achievements**: Celebrate milestones and achievements within partnerships to show appreciation and recognize the collective effort of all participants.

15. **Long-Term Vision**: Develop a long-term vision for your project and its potential impact on education. This can help attract and maintain partnerships with a shared commitment to a common goal.

Remember that effective communication, adaptability, and a commitment to shared goals are key to building and sustaining productive collaborations.

Navigating Budget Preparation, Revision, and Associated Considerations

1. **Understand Reporting Mechanisms**: Familiarize yourself with your institution's reporting mechanisms for budget expenditures. Know how frequently financial updates are provided and track your spending accordingly.

2. **Be Prepared for Changes**: Be aware that budget adjustments may be necessary due to factors like indirect rate renegotiations, changes in personnel costs, or shifting project needs. Be prepared to adapt your budget as needed.

3. **Efficient Contract Execution**: If your project involves contracts or sub-awards, understand the bureaucratic processes within your institution for executing these agreements. Efficient contract execution can prevent delays in project progress.

4. **Hiring Considerations**: Pay attention to hiring processes outlined by your institution's HR department. Ensure that you meet deadlines for posting job ads, managing graduate student tuition remission, and aligning salaries with the budget.

5. **Rebudgeting**: If necessary, request rebudgeting within the allowable limits (usually up to 20%) to allocate funds to critical project needs. Consider NSF's preference for not reallocating funds solely for personal compensation. Be sure to check NSF award and budget guidelines.

6. **Consider Project Goals**: Don't be overly frugal at the expense of project goals. Sometimes, investing in necessary expenses can prevent complications and make project implementation smoother.
7. **Institutional Ownership**: Remember that NSF grants are awarded to institutions, and any changes or communications regarding budgets must go through your institution's sponsored research office.
8. **No-Cost Extensions**: Understand the concept of no-cost extensions, which allow you to extend your project timeline if needed. Ensure that the extension aligns with the remaining project work.
9. **Transition of Grants**: Be aware that if you change institutions during a project, the grant typically remains with the original institution unless special arrangements are made.

Remember that careful budget management is essential to the success of your project. Stay proactive in monitoring expenditures, be prepared to adapt to changes, and always prioritize the alignment of your budget with your project's goals and objectives.

Writing Project Reports

1. **Timely Submission**: The single most important aspect of reporting is submitting reports on time. Delays in reporting can have consequences for your project and its associated institutions. Your report must be submitted *and* reviewed by the program officer by the report deadline.
2. **First-Year Reporting**: In the first year, you may report on fewer months of project activities, considering the time it takes to set up the project after funding.
3. **Familiarize Yourself with Research.gov**: Get comfortable with using Research.gov for reporting. Log in and spend some time exploring the reporting section, so you know where to access and submit your reports.
4. **Start Date vs. Reporting Date**: Be aware that the official start date of your project, as listed on Research.gov, may differ from when the funding actually reaches your institution. Your report is typically due 364 days from the official start date.
5. **Submit Early**: To avoid delays and potential issues, aim to submit your report at least 30 days before the official due date. This gives your program officer ample time to review and sign off on it.
6. **Collaborative Approach**: Consider using a collaborative tool like Google Docs for report writing. Divide and conquer with your team, with different team members responsible for specific sections.

7. **Character Limit**: Be mindful of character limits in each section of the report. Research.gov may have stricter character counting than some other writing tools, so ensure your content fits within the limits.

8. **Consistency with Proposal**: The first section, typically about objectives, should closely mirror what you proposed in your project. This section remains relatively constant across all report years, unless your objectives change.

9. **Section Breakdown**: Understand how different sections are broken down in the report. While the first section focuses on objectives, subsequent sections may vary based on your project's specifics. Also, the report form is used across NSF and includes sections that may not be relevant to your project.

10. **Evidence for Impact**: In the impact sections, provide evidence for the impact your project has had. This evidence can include citations to your published work, conference papers, or links to relevant resources.

11. **Formatting**: Polish your report ahead of time and format it appropriately. Research.gov may not have the most user-friendly interface, so ensure your content is well-prepared before pasting it in.

12. **Collaborative Editing**: Encourage your team to read and copy-edit the report collectively, ensuring a high-quality submission.

Remember that different projects and teams may have slightly different approaches to reporting, so it's valuable to consult with colleagues who have experience and share knowledge. Reporting is a crucial part of managing an NSF-funded project and communicating its progress effectively.

Managing a Project Team

1. **Management Structure**: Clearly define the management structure within your project. Specify roles and responsibilities for each team member, including leadership roles and responsibilities.

2. **Early Communication**: For new projects, establish clear lines of communication right from the start. Regular updates and meetings are crucial for maintaining cohesion among team members.

3. **Documented Agendas**: Use documented agendas for meetings and ensure minutes are taken. This helps in tracking progress and action items.

4. **Introductions and Clarifications**: Start by having team members introduce themselves, confirm project details (e.g., new or ongoing), and briefly outline project goals. This helps ensure everyone is on the same page.

5. **Communication Balance**: Find the right balance between regular communication and avoiding overwhelming your team with too many meetings and emails. Different teams may have different communication preferences.

6. **Consistent Updates**: Ensure that your team has regular updates on project progress, goals, and any shifts in objectives. Keep everyone informed about what is happening.
7. **Project Timeline**: Create a detailed project timeline that includes milestones and deadlines. Make adjustments as necessary to meet your goals and expectations.
8. **Adaptability**: Recognize that projects can evolve, and team dynamics may change. Be prepared to adjust plans and personnel accordingly.
9. **Personnel Changes**: If there are significant personnel changes (e.g., graduate students leaving or joining), consider notifying the program officer and adjusting timelines if needed.
10. **Budget Considerations**: Carefully evaluate the budget against the allocated effort. Adjustments may be necessary if certain tasks are postponed or if additional funds are required.
11. **Leadership Responsibilities**: Leadership should not rest solely on one individual. Distribute responsibilities among team members, especially when there are co-PIs or senior personnel.
12. **Professional Development**: Recognize that professional development for your team is an implicit part of the project. Plan for it and align it with project timelines.
13. **Graduate Students**: If you have graduate students on your team, plan for their development and contributions. Consider their workload and allocate tasks effectively.
14. **Early Review of Proposal**: Regularly revisit your project proposal to ensure alignment with the project's current direction and goals.
15. **Flexibility and Adaptation**: Be flexible and adaptable in your approach, considering the unique needs and dynamics of your project team.

Remember that managing project teams is an ongoing process that requires effective communication, adaptability, and clear leadership. Regular check-ins, updates, and adjustments will help ensure the success of your project.

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