Tips for a Successful Proposal

Learn About the Funding Agency and Tailor Your Proposal

➤ NSF has different goals than the local Rotary. Read application materials carefully to identify what is important to the funding agency; many organizations are quite forthright about their objectives and priorities. Using the information you gather in your research, tailor your proposal to highlight aspects that make you a good fit for the fellowship. You don't want to overdo it, but it makes sense to show the reader that funding your proposal will further the agency's objectives.

Prepare Your Materials Thoughtfully and Carefully

➤ Your proposal reflects on you as a scholar. Think carefully about what you want to say and buttress your points with appropriate references. Remember to explain why your project is important; don't assume that the reviewer will make the connection. Cover the basics: who, what, when, where and why. Help the reviewer visualize your project; they should be able to form a picture in their mind's eye of what it is you will be doing during the fellowship term.

➤ Ask others—your advisor, your Director of Graduate Studies, and other students in your field—to read and comment on your application.

➤ Don't underestimate the importance of presentation. Use an appropriate font with reasonable margins. Proofread your materials carefully—and more than once.

➤ The Graduate School maintains a notebook of past successful applications. You are welcome to come to 143 Caldwell Hall between 8:00 a.m. and 4:15 p.m., Monday through Friday, to review the materials.

Help Your References

➤ Select your references carefully. If you have not asked your advisor to serve as a reference, explain why in your materials. In general, if there is someone at Cornell who is the recognized expert in your particular area of research, the agency will expect you to use that person as a reference. If you don't, explain why.

➤ Once you have identified the people you would like to serve as your reference, ask them if they are willing to help. Remember that faculty are very busy. Provide them with sufficient advance notice; one month would be appropriate.

➤ The best letter of reference speaks about you as an individual. A reference should know your strengths and weaknesses and how your project fits the objectives of the agency. Help your references write strong letters: give them a draft of the research plan you are submitting to the agency, a copy of the fellowship announcement, and a cover letter explaining why you think the fellowship is a good fit for you. Follow up with the reference a week before the due date to check on the status of your materials.