

Questions and Answers from the PRFB Webinars 2019

Q: Can I propose a project for the PRFB that is entirely based abroad? And can that be a 36-month tenure?

A: Yes, but only for Area 3. For Areas 1, 2, and 4, the project duration should be two years, as there is no relocation involved and time needed to get up to speed at a new site.

Q: Would it be viewed negatively if we moved to a new institution, but proposed to use some resources from our PhD institution? What about using a co-sponsor from previous institution (not the primary sponsor)?

A: Explain how this strengthens your project in terms of resources and expertise. Don't forget to also emphasize the new training you will get in the main sponsor's lab.

Q: For Area 4, should there be additional letters of support from a co-mentor (in addition to the 2 letters of reference)?

A: No this would be part of the sponsoring statement.

Q: Is it alright to include pre-prints in our biosketch?

A: Yes, especially if you have them posted on a pre-print server like bioRxiv. But, make sure you identify clearly that this is a pre-print, not a published article, list it under an appropriate heading.

Q: Could you clarify how the current and pending support information is used? Is pending support viewed positively (you've had the initiative to apply for other things) or negatively (you may wind up committed to some other funding opportunity)?

A: This is 'neutral' for review purposes. It will come into play if an award is made and there are related applications, but that is an administrative consideration.

Q: Is there a way for outreach partners to be submit letters of support (outside of scientific reference letters)?

A: Yes, but make sure you follow the NSF guidelines for letters in the PAPPG (https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/policydocs/pappg19_1/index.jsp).

Q: If during our PhD we were a visiting student at a different institution for a summer, would having that professor as the primary sponsor be frowned upon by the review panel? That is to say, would they prefer a completely unrelated PI?

A: This would likely add strength to a proposal as you already know the research group, but have not trained there extensively, so there is still much to learn from this sponsor.

Q: What about collaborators who are not necessarily a mentor/sponsoring scientist?

A: This is fine. Most sponsors, and applicants, know other scientists, whose expertise will be valuable, but will not contribute extensively enough to be considered a co-sponsor.

Q: If we are working at an international institution, does our work to increase underrepresented groups in biology need to be with people in the united states?

A: It is more practical to provide local activities, and these would contribute to a global effort to diversify biology.

Q How much preliminary data is expected/typical?

A: If you have not begun the work, no preliminary data are expected. You may be able to use data (unpublished) from your sponsor's lab, or just use the literature if you want to make a point that, for example, an approach you propose is feasible.

Q: What happens if you get funded, but end up graduating slightly later than expected? Could you defer the fellowship?

A: Deferment is not possible, but there is a large time window in which you can start. For this competition – you may start your fellowship between June 1, 2020 -March 1, 2021.

Q Will these slides be available?

A: Yes all the webinar slides are posted as a narrated video and as a set of slides with notes.

Q: Could some of the research allowance go towards funding an undergrad assistant?

A: It is not advised to be an employer as there are risks and responsibilities (including accident liability). If possible try to work out another way with your host institution to compensate research assistants.

Q: For Area 2, what needs to be in the letter from the collection director and do I still need a letter if it's a publicly available database?

A: The letter needs to say you have permission to use the specimens in the way proposed. If it is a public database, you could upload a document saying that and providing the URL. Also give this information in the proposal narrative.

Q: For Area 1 - how are the possible broadening participation activities for this Area distinguished from broader impacts that you might include in any other proposal? Is it about the focus (particular underrepresented groups), or the amount of time/effort invested in these activities, or both?

A: Broader impacts come in many forms, including broadening participation. For Area 1 broadening participation is a key solicitation requirement and should be a substantial activity. See the slide on Broader Impacts for more details on other types of activities. Even in Area 1, your project could include additional broader impacts.

Q: Do first generation college students count as an under-represented group?

A: First generation college students are not included in the defined groups mentioned in the solicitation. Contact us if you have a question.

Q: The solicitation says ~65 applications will be funded, are these equally split across all 4 Areas, or is there a specific number of funded fellows in each category?

A: This is not known yet and will depend on the proposals in each Area. It is advised to choose an Area based on alignment to your project, rather than other considerations.

Q: What section would one put their career goals?

A: In the 'How to Apply....' document, you will see the requirements. It is section (d) in this list- 'an explanation of how the fellowship activities will enhance your career development and future research directions as well as describing how this research differs from your dissertation research, thus providing you an opportunity to broaden your scientific horizon'.

Q: If there are two sponsoring scientists, is there a strict format on the sponsor letter? For example, can they each have their own 1.5 pages, or is it preferred that they incorporate their statement together?

A: No strict format, but the lead sponsor should coordinate this according to the directions in the solicitation and the document 'Sponsoring Scientist Statement Instructions' linked from the program page. The most competitive Statement is one that seems truly interdisciplinary and coordinated across mentors and institutions.

Q: Approximately how many people apply to this fellowship every year and what is the approximate funding rate?

A: These statistics will be provided by the BIO directorate sometime in November.

Q: Would it hurt the review of an applicant's proposal if one of the sponsoring scientists is an early career scientist (just recently opened a lab) but has a strong research background related to proposal and the skills for mentorship?

A: Beginning investigators can ask senior colleagues to be co-mentors, either formally as a co-sponsor, or more informally as part of a mentoring committee.

Q: If your work straddles two competitive Areas, is that OK? For example, can you submit a proposal to the RoL Area that uses biological collections?

A: Yes, this is fine. Choose the Area to which you think your proposal is most closely aligned.

Q: Are collaborators sponsors? How do you differentiate?

A: A sponsor would have a significant role in the research and training. A collaborator may, for example, just contribute to one aspect of the science.

Q: Can current postdocs be a co-sponsor?

A: More likely current postdocs would be collaborators, as they are essentially you peer when you start the fellowship.

Q: Do co-sponsors also need to write or contribute to a letter of support?

A: No, co-sponsors contribute to the Sponsoring Scientist Statement.

Q: Can your collaborators be at a separate University from your sponsor?

A: Yes, having the key expertise is the crucial factor.

Q: Is it possible to change institutions during the fellowship?

A: Yes, for example, applicants can propose training at an international site. Propose what makes the best case for the research and training.

Q: Does the sponsoring scientist statement need to be written only from the sponsor's point of view? The section on how the proposed work will expand on their own work?

A: Your training and the research are the focus of the statement. Including how this will also complement ongoing work is fine, but should not be the motivation for the fellowship.

Q: Is it OK to use collections in part of the project but not in all objectives?

A: Yes, this is fine. Provided collections are integral to the project, it is fine to propose other related aims, stemming from the use of the collection.

Q: For international collaboration, how is best to convey the importance of an additional year (3rd year) in your proposal? Is just including a third year in your timeline enough?

A: The timeline should provide a summary (title) for what you plan to do in each period.

Q: How strict is the <9-month postdoctoral experience cap? For example, if I am graduating soon, and start my postdoc in mid-February, would I still qualify to apply next year?

A: Contact us with your specific case. These are targeted for beginning postdocs, but there may be some flexibility.

Q: For the justifications regarding choice of location, sponsoring scientists, collaborators, do they belong in the project description or the sponsoring scientist statement?

A: Most likely in both.

Q: Can we add references to our own publications in the dissertation abstract?

A: You have a page, use it as you think works best. Any papers will also be in your BioSketch, so reviewers will see them.

Q: I saw a web-link for more information about Area 3 on a previous slide. Can you please post the link in chat?

A: The links are all in the slides posted on the program page and in the solicitation.

Q: Does the 'timetable' actually need to be a table? How detailed should this be?

A: A table is probably the most efficient way to provide the information. The timeline should provide a summary (title) for what you plan to do in each period.

Q: Does 'Current and Pending Support' include the mentor's?

A: No this is just your list of funding, but they will mention their research support in the Sponsor Statement.

Q: If we have two PhD supervisors can we get a letter of recommendation from each supervisor to meet our two letters of recommendation requirement?

A: Ask them to write a joint letter, so you can get one from another scientist, who is not a thesis adviser.

Q: If the sponsoring scientist is your thesis advisor, should the second letter of recommendation be a different person.

A: The program is designed for students who propose new sponsors and to conduct research at another institution. If you have a situation that means you will not be moving, justify this (reviewers understand that personal factors weigh in). If you are considering doing a postdoc with your thesis mentor, contact us.

Q: Are all Competitive Areas considered independently?

A: Yes, proposals in each Area are reviewed in separate panels.

Q: Having submitted this through FastLane, do we also have to submit it through the system or grants office of the host institute as well?

A: You are the institution and the grant's office! So you will press the button to submit to NSF. Please contact FastLane HELP if you have any questions about this. And DO NOT leave this to the last minute, so you have time to work out any snags.

Q: Is it okay if your sponsoring scientist was a postdoc with your Ph.D. advisor?

A: Yes in principle, but make sure you make the case that you will get significant new training and research.

Q: Where do you talk about gaps in your resume? Or leaving a previous postdoc early? For childcare for example

A: Letter writers can help with this. The example you give will also appear on your BioSketch, so you could address it there. In the body of the proposal, you will describe your career goals, it could also be addressed here.

Q: When we email you to discuss the appropriateness of our proposal to a specific Area should we send a draft of our project summary or would you prefer an outline?

A: Yes, this is very helpful--short and clear is the most effective.

Q: Do you have a general guidance we should provide our reference writers for the length of reference letters?

A: Two is probably the average. But your letter writers will have their own standard. Just make sure you give them all the details they need to write an informed letter. (Including a project summary, or a draft of the whole proposal is very helpful.)

Q: When referring to increasing diversity of scientists in Area 1, does that refer to the applicant, to outreach to communities or both?

A: Applicants do not have to be members of underrepresented groups. The broadening participation activities, however, should target these groups.

Q: Does the ROL Area need an evolutionary focus or is it enough to have genome to phenotype?

A: Ideally it should be placed in an evolutionary context, even if the work is not explicitly evolutionary biology.