Frequently Asked Questions Regarding NSF Proposals

1. I don't remember my FastLane login and/or password: Who can help me find that information?
   You have three options:
   - Use the FastLane tools to look up your userid and reset your password (you'll need to have your NSF ID to make the password reset work, so do that first).
   - The Grant Manager can also look up your NSF ID and provide you with a temporary password that will allow you to log in once, after which you will have to choose a new password for yourself.

2. I need to do something in FastLane and I don't remember how: Can you help?
   We have step-by-step instructions available for some of the more common FastLane operations. If that doesn't cover what you need to do, you can try the FastLane help system or contact the Grant Manager for assistance.

3. How much salary can I ask for?
   It depends. For senior personnel, NSF changed its salary charging policy effective January 2009. As a general rule, per the Grants Proposal Guide (GPG), "NSF limits salary compensation for senior project personnel to no more than two months of their regular salary in any one year. This limit includes salary compensation received from all NSF-funded grants." The Foundation will allow compensation for senior personnel in excess of the two months if the need for the additional compensation is adequately justified in the proposal budget. If NSF allows the extra compensation, it will be specifically approved by the Foundation in the award notice.

   For all other personnel on a grant, the compensation should be in proportion to the amount of effort the individual(s) in question contribute to the project. As with all direct costs, the salaries or other forms of compensation must be reasonable, directly allocable to the project, and consistent with our usual practices. Please note, however, that consistency requires that we use current rates of
compensation as a baseline, and that significant deviations from that baseline will need to be justified both internally and to the Foundation. (For example, if a PI has applied for promotion and expects a favorable decision between the time the proposal is submitted to NSF and the time an award is made, then the anticipated new salary should be used. Conversely, we cannot pay a graduate assistant more than s/he would make on a TA appointment simply because s/he is working on a research grant: we would have to use the same base rate.)

4. **Do I have to budget for tuition for graduate assistants?**

Generally all proposals seeking external funding for graduate research assistants should also include a request for tuition costs (tuition remission), except when the sponsor's guidelines or policies expressly prohibit recovery of tuition. Most NSF grants and contracts normally allow for tuition recovery. Full in-state tuition (24 credit hours total; 18 semester hours for fall and spring semesters combined, and 6 semester hours for each adjacent summer term) will normally be included in a proposal budget for each RA identified. Please note, however, that associated student fees will not be included in the budget, per federal guidelines. Tuition costs will be pro-rated accordingly for RAs who are supported for less than a full academic year.

Some exceptions do apply:

- In cases where an RA is employed on an extra-help basis only during summer months, no tuition is budgeted, as the RA would be able to use the summer portion of his/her regular assistantship to cover tuition costs.
- In cases where an RA is employed on a project for very short periods of time (i.e., less than half a semester), no tuition is budgeted.
- In cases where the sponsor places a cap on the amount of funding available, or in other situations where including tuition remission in a proposal budget would place a hardship on the PI.

5. **What is the difference between a subcontract and a collaborative proposal?**

The difference is primarily in the way NSF funds the work. Both situations involve performing some part of the proposed research at an institution other than TUC. In a subcontract situation, NSF makes a single award to TUC for the proposed research, and we issue a subcontract to the partner institution for their portion of the work in accordance with the detailed budget request they sent to us. TUC is then responsible for seeing to it that the partner institution performs the work it agreed to do and abides by all the applicable federal rules and regulations that come along with the awarded funds. Since we have to do additional work, we are allowed to recover indirect costs (F&A, overhead) on the
first $25,000 of each subcontract. In cases where there is a cap on the amount of funding available to the project, that additional overhead means that there is frequently less funding available for project research.

In the case of a collaborative proposal that is separately submitted, the lead institution sends in a full proposal to NSF, but with separate proposals linked to it from each of the partner institutions. The partner institutions contribute to the writing of the project description and the project summary, but do not submit it. They only submit their separate institutional budgets, biographical sketches for their senior personnel, and other pertinent elements of the proposal that are specific to their institution. If the proposal is funded, NSF makes separate awards to each of the participating institutions, so there is no additional work for the lead institution and no additional indirect costs are charged. Some program solicitations do not allow for separately submitted collaborative proposals, and there are additional restrictions associated with such awards that may cause problems if a PI changes institutions or withdraws from the project after a collaborative proposal has been funded.

6. **What does NSF mean by “broader impacts?”**

   As defined by the Foundation, the “broader impacts” of a proposed activity “…are important considerations in advancing the NSF Mission: ‘To promote the progress of science; to advance the national health, prosperity, and welfare; to secure the national defense; and for other purposes.’” NSF has provided some examples of common activities claimed as broader impacts for NSF proposals, and also some guidance on how reviewers will be instructed to look at such claims. The NSF list is not exhaustive, and was not intended to be. Nor will all broader impact activities fit well with every proposal. The goal is not to claim as many examples as possible, but rather to focus on the one(s) that most clearly and reasonably can be expected from the research you are proposing to do. If you can reasonably claim half a dozen, then do so—but be sure to back up those claims. If you can only reasonably claim one or two, then claim those and don’t worry about the rest.

7. **What does NSF mean by “equipment?”**

   As defined by the GPG, “equipment” means “an item of property that has an acquisition cost of $5,000 or more (unless the organization has established lower levels) and an expected service life of more than one year.” The acquisition cost of an item includes all the accessories, modifications, and attachments needed to carry out the proposed work or to make the item usable for the purpose(s) for which it was purchased. If what you need is not available as an off-the-shelf item, we can purchase the parts and components needed to build it and allocate the cost to the equipment line, so long as the
total cost of all the necessary components is at least $5,000. Items that cost less than $5,000 are normally budgeted as "materials and supplies." Please note, however, that general-purpose items such as computers, fax machines, printers, and the like, even if they meet the acquisition cost threshold of $5,000, are normally not eligible for inclusion as direct charges on a grant unless they are "primarily or exclusively used in the actual conduct of scientific research." (For example, if you need to collect data in the field where you are unable to use the computer that TUC provides in your office.) Where such items are charged directly to the grant, you will need to complete a Request for Exception form and return it to the Grant Manager in OSP before the purchase will be approved from grant funds.