CAREER and Sociology Grants

NSF Panel Review

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My experience

01. **Three NSF Proposals**

2 successful, 1 not

02. **Sociology Program Senior Panel**

Served twice on the Panel
Read ~20 proposals each time

03. **Ad hoc reviewer**

Reviewed proposals as an area expert

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NSF Priorities and Scoring

Excellent, Very Good | Good, Fair, Poor

Intellectual Merit

What is the potential for the proposed activity to advance knowledge and understanding within its own field or across different fields?

Broader Impacts

What is the potential for the proposed activity to benefit society or advance desired societal outcomes

Creative, Transformative

To what extent do the proposed activities suggest and explore creative, original, or potentially transformative concepts?

Sound Rationale

Is the plan for carrying out the proposed activities well-reasoned, well-organized, and based on a sound rationale? Does the plan incorporate a mechanism to assess success?

PI Qualifications

How well qualified is the individual, team, or institution to conduct the proposed activities?

This comes up surprisingly a lot.

PI Resources

Are there adequate resources available to the PI (either at the home institution or through collaborations) to carry out the proposed activities?

Proposal Rankings

Very/Highly Competitive highest chance of getting funded, only 3-4 proposals out of 60+ get this ranking.	**Medium/Moderately Competitive** very strong chance of getting funded, ~5-6 get this ranking	**Low Competitive** Kind of like a revise and resubmit, major flaws identified, but with revision could be a great proposal. Rarely gets funded but possible
Not Competitive Even with an excellent or 2 VG, discussion led to identification of fatal flaws that do not warrant funding.	**NDP** Not Discussed in Panel. These proposals did not get at least 2 VG or E, but can be rescued for discussion (I have only seen this happen once)	**If you receive 1 excellent or 2 very good, you'll receive panel discussion (in the Sociology Program). If not, you'll be triaged. Proposals with 1 excellent and 4 fair/poor will get less discussion.**

Who could be reviewing you:

Note: you will likely get all 3 and pleasing all 3 can be very challenging!

The Expert	The Generalist	Never Studied Your Topic	
They cite you, you cite them. They are squarely in your sub-sub field. You cant put anything past them substantively, but they are also likely to give you a thin but very positive review (rarely on the panel, often an ad hoc reviewer).	They are generally in your field in very broad strokes, understands key debates, but is not contributing knowledge to your sub-sub field. Focuses on design and big picture framing (often on the panel)	They are a sociologist, but are way, way outside your field, substantively/methodologically. Prone to middling opinions, focus on organization/clarity (often on the panel)	

+ things that come up in the Senior Panel

+ Mixed Methods (is Mixed)

Some consider this an intrinsic strength

- Be careful not to over-promise or say you will do too much, often mixed methods projects do this

+ STEM Training

A broader impact should be incorporating junior scholars in the research (grad or undergrad).

- Whether in coursework or RA-ships, this is almost always brought up

+ Preliminary data analysis

"Trust me" proposals are rated lower

- Showing that you have some sense of where things are going gives reviewers more confidence, but you don't want to do <u>too much</u> so the think it's not already done!

Other things seen as strengths:
- Very clear research questions that emerge from theoretical and empirical gaps (IM)
- Longitudinal analysis, data linkages (IM)
- Timeliness and urgency (COVID, climate) (IM)
- New public databases, new coding schema (BI)
- Multiple dissemination strategies with demonstrated experience doing so (e.g. webinars, workshops, briefs, op/eds, white papers, named and existing partnerships with letters of support) (BI)

Things to watch out for

Poor Motivation/Theory

Some people don't specify the specific motivation in the field or outline theoretical contributions; esp bad if there's a true expert on the panel or adhoc reviewer

Unclear Research Design

Sampling, Types of Questions, Case Selection, Recruitment, Measurement (less so modeling). Thin research design is common! Even in top rated proposals

Broader Impacts Fluff

If you say you want to have an impact on a group or population or set of policies, you want to outline specific strategies for it

Narrowness/Descriptive

A common comment: does this only apply to the case of X? Or, how will the project move beyond the descriptive?

Disorganization

You want to scaffold and repeat the key contributions throughout the proposal, very highly organized proposals prevail

(In)feasibility

Overpromising or overlooking potential challenges, especially in relation to the total years on grant