

NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program

(insights)

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I- Preliminaries

By now, you should be familiar with the NSFGRF. If not, review the official program announcement. Familiarize yourself with the basic guidelines early in the application process to avoid any last minute questions closer to the deadline when the Help Desk will be jammed. Be aware that different disciplines have different deadlines. Make sure you have all your deadlines entered in your calendar. There is absolutely nothing worse than getting disqualified because you did not follow the guidelines.

Why apply?

There are loads of reasons, chief among them is: practice. Writing a competitive grant will give you valuable experience over your peers (for your graduate school applications, other grants, and your academic career). Additionally, regardless of the outcome you will get some feedback on your proposal from respected academics. While the feedback might be minimal, it is still better than those generic rejection letters you get from graduate schools and other fellowships. More importantly, the application will help you develop a very undervalued skill: the ability to concisely articulate a complex idea and convince others it is worth spending time and money on it.

Finally, applying for an NSFGRF will prepare you for a common element of graduate studies and academic life: rejection. How you handle and learn from failure is another skill that is rarely promoted. Besides, if you succeeded in all your endeavours, when and where will you ever learn? In the classroom?!

How to win an NSFGRF

The NSF is looking for a certain type of student to fund:

- students who can articulate a hypothesis and show how they will go about proving it;
- students who display the same passion and creativity for teaching as for research;
- students who want to be involved outside your institution, your laboratory, your office.

If you feel that's you, then congratulations the NSFGRF is yours to lose! As you can see 2 out of 3 of the criteria are about you, and not your research project. This is a fundamental difference between an NSFGRF and an NSF grant. **In an NSFGRF, the NSF is looking to fund you not just a research project.** You have 2 essays, your academic record, and letters of recommendation to show them who you are and why you are a worthy candidate.

What if I am not what the NSF is looking for?

We have to be honest here. If you don't feel connected to the 3 traits highlighted above, you are better served not applying for an NSFGRF. First, if your heart isn't into it you will just waste your time applying (and failing). Second, if you are not dedicated to those ideas you might take the funding from someone who actually does care and has a better chance of succeeding in the long-term. Finally, life is too short. Do what you love and if academic research isn't it--then go for what really drives you emotionally and intellectually (not financially).

How are we going to improve your application?

Your proposal is judged based essentially on two criteria: intellectual merits, and broader impacts. Address these criteria, craft ALL of your essays, and guide ALL of your Letters, and you'll already have a competitive application. The remainder of this guide will show you how to tailor your essays to fit a format that seasoned academics look for when they review grant proposals.

First year graduate student Vs. senior undergrad

The NSFGRF is open to senior undergraduates and first year graduate students. We are often asked how will reviewers judge my application based on my academic standing. From our experience, there isn't much of a difference. You will be evaluated based on the same criteria. However, there are a couple subtle differences: (i) First year graduate students are almost expected to have done research the summer before starting graduate school; (ii) graduate student research proposals should be more polished given that they would have had access to research faculty at their graduate institution, while undergrads at liberal arts colleges might have not.

Why follow this guide?

Besides the desire to submit a competitive application, you want to respect the reviewer's time and energy. These faculty members are reviewing hundreds of extremely dense applications as a service. Submitting a professionally written application that meets the standards and expectations of reviewers will definitely increase your chances of being successful.