K99/R00 Grants: insights into the review process and what reviewers look for

J. Gary Meszaros, PhD
Northeast Ohio Medical University
Rootstown, OH
Department of Integrative Medical Sciences

American Heart Association Early Career Symposium
Scientific Sessions 2015
Get your game plan in place

• When to submit – timing is critical – small window
  • Leave time for A1 resubmission if possible
  • Several “chefs in the kitchen” – select carefully

*You* need to feed the chefs!
Question: What are the key sections of your proposal?

• Candidate/PI
• Career Development Plan/Career Goals & Objectives
• Research Plan
• Mentor(s), Co-Mentor(s), Consultant(s), Collaborator(s)
• Environment & Institutional Commitment to the Candidate

Answer = **ALL** sections receive emphasis during the review and discussion!

*Actually read the instructions and **criteria** for each section!*
Candidate/PI

• Biosketch – collect examples from PIs and peers
  • *Productivity record* – quantity vs quality
    • First author and contributing author
    • Avoid large gaps if possible

• Include any leadership positions or activities

• *Reference letters* – meet with your referees, bring your CV and career goals for discussion and *highlight key points*
Career Development Plan (applicant)

• Your plan for guidance and expanding your skill set (K99 phase)
  • *Scheduled meetings with mentor and mentoring team*
  • Ongoing presentations – lab or department
  • Other learning/didactic opportunities (workshops, courses)
  • Conference presentations planned – be specific
  • Grant agencies/mechanisms you will seek (R00 phase)

*Important*: Communicate this plan with your mentor and team well in advance and make sure you are all on the *SAME PAGE*
Career Goals & Objectives (applicant)

• Your vision of your future during your K99 and R00 years

• How you will develop the skills to transition to independence?
  • Developing writing, presentation and managerial skills
  • The type of position you will ultimately seek
  • Clearly and confidently state your vision of your independence and share the vision with your mentor(s)
“Comprehensive” training plan in mentored K99 phase

• How will applicant benefit from mentor’s lab, as well as departmental or institutional resources

• How will the members of the mentoring team assist in the development of the applicant? (be specific!)

* Assurance that the applicant is working on a project that can be *independently developed as a new PI* *
Research Plan

• Simple and logical – *Experts and non-experts* all contribute to the review and discussion
• Outline *big picture* – effective use of schematics, models
• Clearly separate and organize the aims, hypotheses and approaches *into distinct portions for K99 vs. R00 years*

• Proofreading
  • Written English/grammatical errors can be very distracting 😞

• Aesthetics - formatting of figures, legends and sub-sections
  • make these consistent, logical and easy to follow

**Ask several people for help in advance**
Mentors, Co-mentors, Consultants

- Biosketches – Mentor and Co-mentors must submit
  - Ample support for applicant during K99 years
    - *Grant funding, space, environment for career development of candidate*
    - Productivity record
    - Collaborations to support candidate
  - *Track record of mentoring, previous trainees*
Environment and Institutional Commitment

• Having tons of equipment and lab space is nice, but...

  • Support for animal experimentation, core facilities, administrative assistance (grants office)

  • Intellectual environment

• *Letter of commitment from Chair/Director is essential*
Review Process and Meeting: Reviewer’s Timeline

• 6-10 weeks before review meeting: confirm availability and attendance

• 4-6 weeks before: assignments sent to reviewers
  • 6-8 applications per reviewer, 80-110 pages each

• 48 hours before – post preliminary scores and full critiques

• Half of applications are streamlined (aka triaged, unscored)
Day(s) of Meeting – how it unfolds

• Introductions and instructions – Program officers, staff, reviewers
  • Applications reviewed in random order by application number
  • Reviewers 1-3 state their initial scores of application (1-9)
    • Thorough discussion for EVERY application regardless of initial scores, led by reviewers 1-3 and panel Chair
    • Discussion and questions from entire panel is encouraged
    • Assistance may be requested
  • Reviewers 1-3 give final scores verbally, all others vote electronically
Conclusions and Recommendations

• Start early – gather information and advice at beginning
• Be thorough and meticulous in ALL sections
• Communicate often with your mentor and support team
• Get feedback on all sections, leave time for revisions
• Have a team of proofreaders reserved for deadline