

Common questions about the NSF CAREER education plan and activities

By Kate Spohr*, UC Berkeley Research Development Office, April 2017

1. Are the two review criteria that are used to evaluate NSF proposals (Intellectual Merit and Broader Impacts) given equal consideration by reviewers of NSF CAREER proposals?

Per NSF: Weights are not assigned to either review criteria. Both are important.

From experience: While an excellent research plan is essential, a CAREER proposal will not be funded without a well-rationalized education plan that is integrated with the proposed research and meets at least the minimum requirements in the proposer's discipline. *Expectations vary widely across NSF programs and directorates.* To research what's expected, the proposer should review recently awarded proposals using the [NSF Award Search](#) tool on the NSF website, seek advice from colleagues who have received CAREER awards, and consult with an NSF CAREER program officer.

2. What number and scope of educational activities are expected for a competitive CAREER proposal?

Per NSF: Quantity isn't as important as quality and the integration of research and education.

From experience: Quality is indeed more important than quantity. We advise proposers to focus on one *novel high-impact educational activity*, a "centerpiece project" that can be highlighted in the CAREER education plan. This project should have the following attributes:

- The activity is likely to have a significant impact in teaching, learning, broadening participation, and/or workforce development in the proposer's field;
- Proposer is well-positioned to develop and lead the activity, by virtue of expertise, resources, prior track record, interests, commitment, etc;
- Proposer is able to achieve the objectives for the proposed activity(ies) in the 5-year CAREER project period;
- Proposer has the necessary resources to accomplish the project. This may require leveraging existing institutional resources and/or securing appropriate partnership(s) either on- or off-campus;
- The education activity is well-integrated with the proposed research.

The centerpiece project may be supplemented by 2-3 additional complementary activities that build on existing or ongoing activities.

3. For education activities, how important is originality versus the tried-and-true?

Per NSF: Education activities should be a balance between existing evidence-based practices and innovative plans.

From experience: NSF encourages proposers to take advantage of the education and outreach resources and expertise available at their institutions and leverage existing programs when possible. Proposed activities should be evidence-based. Proposers are advised to familiarize themselves with relevant literature on pedagogy, mentoring, and broadening participation and include appropriate citations in their education plans.

4. What level of effort and financial commitment does the NSF expect for education activities?

Per NSF: While excellence in both research and education is expected, activity of an intensity that leads to an unreasonable workload is not. The budget should be consistent with the scope of the research and education activities.

From experience: When budgeting for education activities, proposers should carefully consider what costs will be incurred for each activity. It may be necessary to solicit outside help to determine realistic costs for certain activities. For example, if working with K-12 schools, consult those working with local teachers regarding teacher stipends and substitute pay. Proposers may include costs for materials, participant stipends and travel, and other associated costs. Consult the [NSF Proposal & Award Policies & Procedures Guide](#) (PAPPG) to ensure that all costs are allowable. Proposers may significantly reduce their out-of-pocket costs by leveraging available resources and/or partnerships both on- and off-campus. Such resources should be clearly described in the project description and in the Facilities, Equipment, and Other Resources attachment.

**These recommendations come out of the author's experience working with UC Berkeley faculty on NSF CAREER proposals since 2010. Please do not copy or reprint this document without permission. Contact kspohr@berkeley.edu.*