

2015 National Service and Civic Engagement Research Competition Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

(Updated 7.21.15)

- 1. Question:** I am a Contract & Grant Administrator with a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization and I am reaching out to you on behalf of one of our established researchers who is interested in applying to the 2015 National Service and Civic Engagement Research Competition. We understand that this competition is only available to institutions of higher education. However, I would like to confirm whether or not a researcher employed by a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization, affiliated with but separate from an institution of higher education, would be qualified to apply for this opportunity. I greatly appreciate any guidance you can offer.

Answer: The NOFA is very specific in stating that the applicant receiving the award must be an institution of higher education. Therefore, all individuals involved in the actual research for this project must be affiliated with that organization. In a situation where a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization is affiliated with, but separate from, an institution of higher education, researchers employed by the non-profit organization itself would not be eligible to apply if they are only representing the non-profit organization. If, however, that employee/researcher is also affiliated with the institution of higher education, even if just for the purpose of participating in this specific research project on behalf of the institution of higher education, the employee, if also determined by CNCS to possess the requisite qualifications, could participate in the research as a representative of the eligible applicant.

- 2. Question:** Is a research project involving data collected outside of the United States eligible for the 2015 National Service and Civic Engagement Research Competition?

Answer: Only research conducted in the United States will be considered eligible for the competition.

- 3. Question:** Are applicants located outside of the United States eligible for the 2015 National Service and Civic Engagement Research Competition?

Answer: Only institutions of higher education located within the United States are eligible to apply for the competition.

- 4. Question:** Will there be a 2016 National Service Research Competition? I would like to apply for funding but do not think I will have a finalized proposal prepared for the 2015 competition.

Answer: We do not yet know if there will be funding for a 2016 competition.

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5. **Question:** My principal investigator cannot be relieved of teaching requirements for the 2015 fall semester, which may limit his/her ability to participate in the project during that time. Can the research project begin after the fall semester, or if not, can other members of the research team begin the project during that semester with a limited role for the principal investigator?

Answer: The cooperative agreement begins October 1st, 2015. The research project is expected to begin at that time. If the principal investigator is not able to begin work until later, CNCS should be notified of this, and it is possible it would be acceptable as long as the project team is starting the project. Please note, the NOFA explicitly states that at least one principal investigator from each recipient must participate in each of the three annual meetings, and the first meeting is held in the fall of 2015.

6. **Question:** What needs to be submitted with the Notice of Intent to Apply?

Answer: As stated in the NOFA, all that is needed for the Notice of Intent to Apply is the name of the applicant organization, name of the principal investigator(s), address, contact person, email address, and phone number. No other information about the project is required. The Notice of Intent to Apply should be sent to the competition email address, NationalServiceResearch@cns.gov, with the subject line: "2015 National Service and Civic Engagement Research Competition Notice of Intent to Apply". A Notice of Intent to Apply is not required for applicants; should you choose to submit a Notice of Intent to Apply, it is due by June 19th, 2015.

7. **Question:** Can research projects include human subjects?

Answer: Yes, research on human subjects is acceptable. As stated in the NOFA, if your project involves research on human subjects, you must document in your application whether you have obtained approval from your Institutional Review Board (IRB) or if you have plans for doing so. The final research report submitted to CNCS must state whether IRB approval was necessary, and if so, obtained.

8. **Question:** Can we provide incentives to individuals participating in our research project as respondents or subjects?

Answer: Incentives are allowable to attract the necessary number of participants in the study. Incentives should be reasonable in amount given the nature of involvement.

9. **Question:** Can an applicant submit multiple applications?

Answer: As the NOFA states, applicants can submit multiple applications to one or both award category (Dissertation and Scholars). To the extent possible CNCS seeks to fund a diverse pool of applicants and it is likely only one application per applicant may be funded. Keep in mind,

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“applicant” is the institution of higher education, it is not the principal investigator. Also, if multiple applications are submitted, a separate eGrants application must be created for each application.

- 10. Question:** Given the application has a 15 page limit, I am concerned about having limited space to provide all of the necessary information. Can applicants submit appendices?

Answer: Applications must fit into the page limit. Any excess information over the page limit will not be reviewed. Appendices are not permitted, and any appendices submitted with the application will not be reviewed. Applicants are encouraged to be parsimonious and judicious with the information they provide, including sufficient information to give application reviewers adequate understanding of the project. This includes sufficient information in your work plan for all years of the project, not solely the first year.

- 11. Question:** My project may focus on service learning in a university or school setting, or it may focus on the measurement or role of civic engagement for youth. Are these topics appropriate for this competition?

Answer: There is nothing in the Notice that precludes service learning or a focus on youth as the topic of a research project. Keep in mind, one of the selection criteria is the relevance of the proposed research objectives, where we will look at the extent to which your study objectives align with the priority areas in the Notice. The closer you can make your objectives align with those priority areas, the higher you will be scored.

- 12. Question:** My project focuses on social capital or civic engagement as an independent or explanatory variable in a model, not as an outcome or dependent variable. Is this type of study still eligible for the 2015 National Service and Civic Engagement Research Competition?

Answer: There is nothing in the Notice that precludes social capital from being used as an independent variable of interest, rather than a dependent variable. Keep in mind, one of the selection criteria is relevance of research objectives, where we will look at the extent to which your study objectives align with the priority areas in the Notice. The closer you can make your objectives align with those priority areas, the higher you will be scored.

- 13. Question:** I am an early or mid-career researcher, not a PhD student or an established scholar in the field. In the Scholar category, the language in the Notice looks like priority will be placed on established researchers. Am I eligible to apply?

Answer: There is nothing in the Notice that precludes early or mid-career researchers from leading a project for the National Service and Civic Engagement Competition. The experience of the principal investigator(s) is part of one selection criterion (see the Notice), and as a result it will be part of the

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overall funding determination. However, as shown by the other selection criteria in the Notice, various other factors will be considered when reviewing applications. As this is still a growing field, we encourage early and mid-stage researchers to apply to the competition.

- 14.** Can intervention components be proposed as part of the application? For example, can a capacity building training for CNCS program grantees that participate in the study be part of the proposal? If the study is proposing research designs and data collection instruments and methodologies, is it possible to examine baseline levels of let's say skills of volunteers or an organization and then also examine enhanced skills or organizational capacity after an intervention component (e.g., training)?

Answer: Based on the Notice, none of the priority areas of the National Service and Civic Engagement Research Competition focuses on identifying or developing new models of national service, and funding under this competition cannot be used to support implementation of an intervention or program model. The competition will fund the research and evaluation that could support a new intervention or program model. Keep in mind, one of the selection criteria is the relevance of the proposed research objectives, where we will look at the extent to which your study objectives align with the priority areas in the Notice. The closer you can make your objectives align with those priority areas, the higher you will be scored.

- 15.** As a part of the application, is the applicant expected to have identified CNCS program grantees that will participant in the study (e.g., AmeriCorps funded or existing program grantees)? And/or, can the applicant propose the method to be used in working with the CNCS office through the cooperative agreement to select appropriate past or current CNCS program grantees for study participation?

Answer: There is nothing in the Notice that precludes identification of the CNCS grantee after the award is made. In fact, as described in the Notice and discussed in the technical assistance call, one role of CNCS in the cooperative agreement is to facilitate connections with program officers and other CNCS staff; this could include facilitating connections with grantees. However, also as described in the Notice and technical assistance call, application reviewers will be looking at the feasibility of the research design and work plan. If you have not yet identified a CNCS grantee to work with, this may be a factor that is considered by reviewers. CNCS is under no obligation to guarantee provision of a grantee for a study, and grantees are under no obligation with CNCS to participate in a research study under the National Service and Civic Engagement Research Competition.

- 16. Question:** Must principal investigators be a US citizen or permanent resident?

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Answer: As the applicant to the competition is a University, the citizenship or residency status of principal investigators will not be reviewed nor is it a concern of CNCS. However, the principal investigators must be present and working in the United States with legal immigration status.

17. Question: The NOFA states that the page limit for the application is 15 pages, excluding the budget narrative. Must the curricula vitae and publications list of the principal investigator(s) and key project staff fit into that page limit?

Answer: No. The originally-posted NOFA and application instructions did not clearly state that the curricula vitae and publication list of the principal investigator(s)/project director(s) or key project staff was excluded from the page limit. This has been amended in the current NOFA and instructions as posted. The curricula vitae and publication lists must be submitted as additional documents, and as such, will not be considered in the page limit. They should be sent to the email address NationalServiceResearch@cns.gov, by the application deadline, in accordance with the instructions in the NOFA.

18. Question: The application instructions indicate that \$800,000 is available for cooperative agreements under the 2015 National Service Research Competition. Does this mean that the maximum total funding for any single research proposal is \$800,000 or is that the total amount for all selected proposals cumulatively?

Answer: \$800,000 is the total amount of appropriated funds we have for the entire competition, not for an individual cooperative agreement. \$30,000 - \$300,000 is the range for any individual annual award we anticipate making.

19. Question: The application instructions and NOFA state that CNCS will make the initial awards in the range of \$30,000 to \$300,000, and that the cooperative agreement award covers up to a 3-year project period. Is the \$30,000 - \$300,000 an annual range or a total possible award to be distributed over three years?

Answer: \$30,000 - \$300,000 is the range for any individual annual award we anticipate making. That means you can propose between \$30,000 and \$300,000 per year for your project, for up to 3 years. You are not required to have the same budget amount each year. As the application instructions state: A detailed budget is not required for years two and three (if applicable), however, a budget estimate for each year of the project is required.

20. Question: Can the applicant associated with a project change from one year to the next? As a principal investigator, I am either conducting research for my dissertation, in a post-doctoral appointment, or conducting research as a scholar, and it is possible that I may move to a different institution of higher education after the first year of the project.

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Answer: At this time, the applicant cannot change between years of the project. It is incumbent upon the applicant and principal investigator to ensure that the project can be sustained at the institution over the number of proposed years. This may be accomplished by substituting another principal investigator if that individual leaves and no longer wishes to participate in the grant-supported research, or the applicant may make arrangements with the existing principal investigator to continue research for the applicant although that person has left the institution. There is no requirement that the principal investigator be employed by the applicant, so long as there is an assurance that the work will be accomplished and that the applicant remains legally and practically responsible for the completion and the quality of the research.

21. Question: My university is applying for the competition and will be partnering with another university. How do we account for this relationship in the application?

Answer: Only one institution of higher education may serve as the applicant in a single application. If you are partnering with researchers at another institution, you can account for that within your budget and describe the researchers' capabilities in the Organizational Capability narrative. However, only the institution that is listed as the applicant will be considered a party in the cooperative agreement.

22. Question: When a federal agency collects data from the American public, the instruments used to collect data must receive clearance from the US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act. Will projects that collect primary data have to go through this clearance?

Answer: No, projects funded by the National Service and Civic Engagement Research Competition will not have to go through OMB clearance. However, as stated in the Notice, all projects collecting data from human subjects must be approved by an Institutional Review Board.

23. Question: Can grant money be used to pay for food or beverages that would be provided at focus groups?

Answer: Grantees will need to follow the *Omni Circular Guidance* on allowable costs as it relates to food. In general food/beverage are not allowable costs. However, there are exceptions where food is allowable and that is normally when information about a program is being disseminated, and such dissemination is necessary to accomplish the purpose of the grant. These costs would need to be reasonable and necessary. When in doubt, please contact the program point-of-contact prior to obligating the funds for such a purpose.

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24. Question: Is it acceptable to have a Co-Project Director in addition to a Project Director?

Answer: Yes, it is acceptable to have a “Co-Project Director” for the project, but that is internal to the grantee/organization. In eGrants, applicants are asked to specify one Project Director as the main director for a project. Applicants are requested to name one Project Director so that there is clarity by the applicant and to CNCS as to who is responsible for performance on behalf of the applicant. If you want to specify that there will be a Co-Project Director, please do so in the narrative or in the CV you send as an additional document. However, the narrative or the CV should clearly set forth for any time or on any issue the roles and responsibilities for each co-project director so there is no confusion over who is responsible for what task or for a time period during the grant performance. This will not change who CNCS will look to on performance issues for the applicant. The one Project Director named in eGrants will continue to be the main director for the project for purposes of CNCS.

25. Question: We would like to include funds in the budget to support the staff time of our non-profit partner in the research process. Will this be allowable in the budget?

Answer: Yes this would be allowable cost per the OmniCircular Guidance.

26. Question: The application instructions state applicants should include relevant citations and that CNCS does not have a preferred citation method. As part of those citations, where should we include the references (i.e., bibliography) and how does that affect the page limit?

Answer: As references may take several pages of text, applicants must separately send their references as a separate document to NationalServiceResearch@cns.gov by the application deadline. Please include your Legal Applicant Name and Application ID number in your email submission. The document must be limited to the references only; additional narrative in the reference document will not be considered.

Citations, e.g. (Smith 2010), should still be included and integrated in the narrative text.

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27. Question: The language in the Notice of Funding Availability (Notice) concerning voluntary committed cost-sharing appears to conflict with 2 CFR § 200.306, which states that whether or not an applicant voluntarily includes a cost share or match in its application should not be used as a factor during the merit review of applications absent specific conditions, one of which is not applicable for this particular Notice. Does CNCS agree that the Notice language encouraging a voluntary match by an applicant may not be consistent with this provision of the CFR?

Answer: Yes. As a result, and in order to avoid any further confusion concerning this specific Notice provision, CNCS has determined that neither the inclusion or exclusion of a cost share or match proposal in an application will be used as a merit factor in the application review process under this Notice, nor will it be used in any other manner whatsoever to determine the overall quality of a specific application.