

Budget Considerations

Hitting the right budget sweet spot is critical. A proposal can be scored poorly if you underbudget or overbudget. Reviewers may use your budget to gauge your understanding, and their confidence in you, of what it takes to accomplish the proposed research and as a reflection of your knowledge of the NIH grant application process.

Reviewers don't use the budget to assess scientific merit. However, it is a part of the review process for NIH reviewers to flag budgetary concerns.

When to start the budget process

Start the budget process once you have drafted your study aims, a general scope of work, and an outline for your proposed study activities. Your Research Analyst (RA) can work with you on budget preparation and help to ensure that requirements are met for salary, benefits, and F&A. You should start the budget process at least 3 weeks prior to the Sponsor Deadline.

Consider the following questions:

- Who is needed to accomplish what you've proposed?
- How much of your time (effort) will be required to accomplish what you've proposed?
- Who else will need to be involved (i.e., research staff and students)?
- How much of their time (effort) will be required?
- Will you need to partner with another organization/ an individual from another organization?
- How long (in years) is needed to accomplish what you've proposed?
- What is needed to accomplish what you've proposed?
- What are the major costs associated with the activities you've outlined (Data collection? Travel? Participant incentives? Equipment? Use of facilities, such as laboratories?)

Put Forth Your Best "Level of Effort"

Your budget includes the amount of salary you request, which depends on how much time you and your personnel devote to your project. Percent effort should be appropriate to the work you propose. Peer reviewers expect you to devote enough time to your project so you can effectively manage it.

If you are a new investigator, put at least a 25 percent level of effort on each application you submit. Although NIH does not set a requirement for minimum effort, reviewers will likely raise concerns over a lower level of effort from somebody who does not already have a history of independent research on an NIH grant.

Putting Together Your Research Staff

Project Manager

A project manager (or project coordinator) is responsible for planning, organizing and directing the completion of a specific project while ensuring the project is completed on time, within budget, and within scope. The project manager supports the Principal Investigator in their research efforts by administering many logistical aspects of the award, and can assist with adherence to deadlines, progress reports, etc. A project manager will help with timeline, milestone and deliverable tracking, and setting and scheduling regular meetings of project personnel.

Assistance to the PI also can include helping with post-award support such as planning and tracking of project tasks, answering questions, and communicating with research partners. A project manager typically will help achieve research aims while managing daily operations of a project. A project manager is there to ensure more consistent and reliable research efforts, by spotting timeline or budget deviations early, and mitigating issues before they become significant. The assistance of a project manager also allows the PI, and other key personnel, to focus on their research by alleviating some of the administrative burden of the grant and daily management of personnel (e.g., research assistants, data collection staff, technicians, and programmers).

Research Assistants

Research Assistants should not be clerical staff. Administrative and clerical staff should normally be treated as F&A costs.

However, direct charging of administrative and clerical costs often is appropriate where a major project or activity is required (i.e., a project that requires an extensive amount of administrative or clerical support, which is significantly greater than the routine level of such services provided by academic departments.) In such cases it is important to explicitly budget for the research assistance required to perform the work and individuals involved can be specifically identified with the project activity.

Public Health research often involves projects that require an extensive amount of administrative/clerical/research assistance. When your project requires support that is greater than the routine level of such services provided by the academic department it is appropriate to budget for that support. Projects that involve extensive data accumulation, analysis and entry, surveying, tabulation, cataloging, searching literature,

and reporting (such as epidemiological studies, trials, and retrospective records-based studies) can, and should, include appropriate budgeting for staff to perform project-related work. This may include administrative staff or research assistants and a project manager.

Graduate Student Researchers (GSRs) often make valuable contributions to research projects. For inclusion on a proposal budget, graduate students should be listed as Graduate Research Assistants. A Graduate Research Assistant can assist with work on the project while also benefiting from practical training experience. GSR salaries should be budgeted for 50% effort over the academic year (4.5 academic months) and 100% effort over the summer (3 summer months) if budgets allow. Similarly, three quarters of tuition per year can be included. Note that Teaching Assistants (TA) cannot be paid on sponsored research projects. Salary for GSRs are budgeted at the Increment 5 level.

Database management and programmer support

Similarly, projects requiring project-specific database management should budget for this effort when a project requires an extensive amount of support that is significantly greater than the routine level of such services provided by your academic department.

As with a project manager, a database manager/programmer will allow PIs, and other key personnel, to focus on their research by alleviating some of the data management burden.

Proposal Checklist

- I'm not being overly ambitious in what I propose to do with my project. Propose only what you are sure you can accomplish with the time and budget you request. If you find yourself trying to squeeze too much into your Research Plan, i.e., overloading on Specific Aims, step back and reassess
- I limit myself to three Specific Aims so I can accomplish them with the resources and time I have.
- I think carefully about how much money to request since going way over or under can be a strike against me in peer review.
- My budget is appropriate not only to my research but also to my career level.
- My budget is sufficient to conduct my research with sufficient support of students and staff and not more.

- I allot time that's sufficient and appropriate for my project. Remember that research usually takes longer than people plan for, so build in extra time by proposing less work.

Developing a Budget Justification

The budget justification should follow funding agency guidelines, explain why each of the requested items is necessary to accomplish the proposed research, be organized in the order of the detailed budget page, and make it clear that all budget requests are reasonable and consistent with sponsor policies. Your Research Analyst (RA) can give you a template of descriptions that are commonly used

Personnel

Often, the largest part of the budget is personnel costs. The Personnel Justification should include the name, role, and number of person-months devoted to this project for every person on the project. Do not include salary and fringe benefit rate in the justification.

Senior Personnel

This category includes anyone who is a PI, Co-PI or Project Director. List the name, title, amount of time to be spent on the project (in calendar, academic and/or summer months) and what they will accomplish.

Other Personnel

This category includes Project Coordinator, Postdoctoral Associates, Graduate Student Research Assistants, Undergraduate Research Assistants and Research Technicians. When known, list the name, title, amount of time to be spent on the project (in calendar, academic and/or summer months) and what they will accomplish. Again, note that public health research often involves projects that require an extensive amount of research assistance; and, when a project requires support that is greater than the routine level of such services provided by academic department it is appropriate to budget Research Assistants, and may be advisable to include a project manager to focus on planning and tracking of project tasks and project logistics/management.

Non-personnel costs

Most PHS agencies separate non-personnel costs into the following categories:

1. Equipment: Property that costs \$5,000+ and has an expected life of over 1 year
2. Travel: Domestic (U.S., Canada, Mexico & U.S. possessions)/ Foreign
3. Participant/Trainee Support Costs: - NIH: tuition remission for graduate students will typically be included in Other Direct Costs.
4. Other Direct Costs:

- Tuition
- Materials and supplies
- Publication costs (NIH)/ Publication/Documentation/Dissemination (NSF)
- Consultant services
- ADP/Computer services (NIH)/ Computer costs (NSF)
- Subawards/consortium/contractual costs (NIH)/ Subawards (NSF)
- Equipment or facility rental/user fees (NIH)
- Alterations and renovations (NIH)

Budget Checklist

- Does the budget justification follow the same order as the budget?
- Does the budget justification give additional details to explain the costs included in the budget?
- Does the budget justification include only items allowable, reasonable & allocable?
- Is the budget justification easy to read (short paragraphs, headings for different budget categories, etc.)?
- Is the budget justification concise?
- Do the numbers in the budget justification match those in the budget?

References:

Material in this document is drawn from and supported by the following references and helpful resources:

<https://www.niaid.nih.gov/grants-contracts/create-budget>

NIH/ PHS Agencies: Developing your budget:
http://grants.nih.gov/grants/developing_budget.htm

NCI Quick Guide for Grant Applications:
<http://deainfo.nci.nih.gov/extra/extdocs/gntapp.pdf>

NIH Developing your budget podcast:
<http://nexus.od.nih.gov/all/2011/04/29/developing-your-budget-podcast/>

Revised Policy on the Acceptance for Review of Unsolicited Applications that Request \$500,000 or More In Direct Costs:
<http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-02-004.html>

Types of grant programs/ Grant activity codes:
http://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/funding_program.htm

Other external:
NSF Sample budget/ budget justification:
http://www.nsf.gov/eng/iip/sbir/samplebudget_and_justification.pdf

<https://www.brown.edu/academics/biomed/offices-and-services/research-administration/sites/academics-biomed-offices-and-services-research-administration/files/Budget%20Justification%20Best%20Practices%20FINAL%2011-5-14.pdf>