



# AIDS Institute/CFAR Seed Grant Policies and Instructions for Reviewers



## Overview of Seed Grant Process

AIDS Institute seed grants opportunities are open to all investigators at UCLA or UCLA-affiliated institutions. Applications are submitted in response to RFAs published online, posted and distributed by email. Each RFA details funding available, deadlines, specific eligibility and project criteria.

Each grant submitted in response to an RFA is reviewed by at least 2 independent reviewers and written reviews are submitted to the AIDS Institute office. The overall impact scores from both reviewers are averaged to provide a final impact score for each grant. Grants with an average score lower than 3 are considered fundable, and those above 3, not fundable. Grants with borderline scores, (one reviewers scored below 3 and the other above 3), are sent for a second round of review by the grant review committee. The committee discusses the written reviews and provides a revised impact score, based on their discussion.

Grants are funded, beginning with the highest ranking (lowest scoring) grants, until all funds have been expended.

*Any grants funded outside of this process are not considered AIDS Institute-supported seed grants.*

## Mentoring and Pre-Submission Consultation

All applicants are strongly encouraged to consult with Dr Gail Wyatt, [gwyatt@mednet.ucla.edu](mailto:gwyatt@mednet.ucla.edu) or the appropriate AIDS Institute Associate Director, prior to submitting an application.

## Letters of Intent

Letters of intent may be requested prior to full submission, to confirm that the submission is responsive to the RFA and to assist in the identification of suitable reviewers. Information required as part of the LOI is included in the RFA. LOIs are reviewed by the relevant Associate Director and successful candidates are provided with instructions for submission of their full grant application.

## Grant Review

Reviewers are selected for each seed grant application by the Principal Investigator of the RFA or, if desired, his/her faculty designee. Reviewers are selected based upon their expertise, objectivity and integrity in the review process. If there is a conflict of interest, (see below for Conflict of Interests) such as collaborator or mentor/mentee relationship, the PI will recuse themselves from selecting reviewers for that application, and delegate the task to another Associate Director. Two or three reviewers are selected for each application.

Reviewers score each grant in five core areas and also for “final impact” (see instructions for reviewers below). All scores are integers from 1 to 9. Impact scores from each reviewer are averaged to provide the final impact score for each application. Grants with an average impact score of <3 are deemed fundable, and those that are >3 will potentially be eliminated. Grants that are borderline, with scores that flank 3 (i.e. one reviewer’s score is <3 and the other reviewer’s score is >3) move forward to the Grant Review Committee- a committee of faculty representatives with expertise in the research represented by each RFA. Grant review committee members discuss each borderline grant and provide a revised impact score. The scores of all committee members are averaged to produce a final impact score. Grants that receive an average impact score of <3 in either first (written) or second round (committee) review, will be considered for funding, beginning with those with the lowest score, until funds are exhausted for any given RFA. Grants scoring >3 will not be funded.

## Instructions to Reviewers

Reviewers will be provided with a copy of the RFA and asked to pay particular attention to the specific RFA guidelines and the section on Conflicts of Interest. Reviewers are expected to follow the NIH review guidelines ([http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer/r\\_awards/R01\\_Guide\\_for\\_reviewers.pdf](http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer/r_awards/R01_Guide_for_reviewers.pdf)) and to be concise in their written reviews of these pilot projects. Each reviewer will evaluate their allocated grants for five core criteria (Significance, Approach, Innovation, Investigators and Environment) based upon a 9-point rating scale (1 = exceptional; 9 = poor; **only integers will be used for scoring**). In addition, reviewers give each grant an overall impact score (also an integer) Each reviewers’ impact score should reflect his/her evaluation of the overall impact that the project is likely to have on the

relevant research field(s). An application does not need to be strong in all five core review criteria to be judged likely to have major scientific impact.

Reviewers are asked to provide the following as part of their review:

- Description of the project
- Critique and numerical score for each of 5 core components of the proposal
  - Significance
  - Innovation
  - Approach
  - Investigators
  - Environment
- Comments on the adequacy of other components (*if relevant*)
  - Protection of human subjects
  - Inclusion of women, minorities and children
  - Use of vertebrate animals
  - Biohazards
  - Budget for the proposed work
  - Overall evaluation
- Final impact score

**In order to ensure conformity in the review process, reviewers are instructed to use the following scale when scoring applications:**

1	The very best, absolutely must be funded.
2	Excellent application, fund if there are sufficient resources.
3, 4	Good grant but needs additional work
5-9	Needs major revision, should not be funded
NRFC	(Not Recommended for Further Consideration): Not meeting the criteria of the RFA. Lacks significant and substantial merit; presents serious ethical problems in the protection of human subjects from research risks; or presents serious ethical problems in the use of vertebrate animals, biohazards, and/or select agents.

### **Instructions for Grant Review Committee**

The Grant Review Committee reviews grants where the average final impact score falls on the borderline between fundable (below 3) and not fundable (above 3). The committee is appointed by the AIDS Institute leadership group and is typically made up of 5-9 faculty, representing all RFAs in circulation. At least 4 days before the grant review meeting, the written reviews for the grants to be discussed are sent to the review committee. At the meeting, grants are discussed one at a time, for approximately 15 minutes. Committee members with conflict of interest for a particular grant are asked to step out of the room while that grant is being discussed. Each member of the committee then presents their review. Following discussion, each member gives final impact score for the grant, which reflects their evaluation of the overall impact that the project is likely to have on the research field. All impact scores provided at the meeting for a particular grant are averaged to produce one final impact score. Any final impact scores which differ significantly from the reviewers' original scores should be explained in writing, either by the meeting Chair or a designated Recording Secretary.

The PI of the RFA may attend the review committee prior to review to provide any specific instructions pertinent to the goals of the RFA. Reviewers should stay for as much of the meeting as possible. The expertise of each reviewer contributes to the overall review process when grants from different disciplines are being considered.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The pool of potential grant reviewers and seed grant applicants at UCLA is relatively small and formal collaboration as well as collegial interaction among UCLA faculty is both desired and promoted. As such, UCLA faculty have a responsibility over and above that normally expected at NIH study sections to utilize their best judgment to remain

objective and impartial when reviewing an application from a fellow UCLA investigator. However, there are specific cases where direct conflict of interest disqualifies the individual from reviewing a particular grant application.

#### **The following are relationships that would result in actual and/or perceived conflicts of interest:**

1. Faculty engaged in active collaboration in the project described in the application.
2. PI of a program or center and co-investigators who derive salary or research support from the PI.
3. A direct mentor/mentee relationship, provided by a senior investigator to a junior investigator.

Areas where conflicts of interest may occur and the appropriate recusal mechanism would be as follows:

- A. Selection of reviewers: The PIs or their faculty designees for any given RFA funding source will be responsible for selecting the reviewers. Should there be a potential conflict, the PI should designate one of the AI Associate Directors to assist in selecting reviewers.
- B. Written review of an application: Any reviewer with a conflict of interest should recuse themselves and a new reviewer be selected.
- C. Grant Review committee discussion and voting: Any committee members in conflict should recuse themselves from the discussion and voting.

#### **Record Keeping**

It is the intent of the AIDS Institute that the review process be as transparent as possible so that all applicants are aware of the review process and potential conflicts of interest be avoided. However, the strict confidentiality of the identity of reviewers and content of oral discussion of committee members will be maintained. Copies of all applications and correspondence with applicants should be maintained at the AIDS Institute office. A centralized AI spreadsheet will be maintained listing the PI and title of all submitted applications, the names of reviewers, scores, amount awarded, and status. This spreadsheet will be available for review by any Associate Director of the AIDS Institute. The identity of reviewers will not be divulged to any other individual.

#### **Notice of Award and Responsibilities of Awardees**

Applicants will be notified by email regarding the outcome of their application, and provided with the written reviews from both anonymous reviewers and, if relevant, comments from the Grant Review Committee. Award notifications will confirm the amount of funding awarded, the source of the funds and the funding period. Awardees are responsible for obtaining all the regulatory approvals (IRB, ARC etc) associated with their proposal and providing these to the AIDS Institute office, before funds will be transferred. They are also responsible for acknowledging the relevant funding sources (AIDS Institute, CFAR, CTSI, private donor etc) in all publications and presentations of the work and providing 6 month and 1 year (or final) progress reports as requested. Awardees are also expected to provide information regarding publications and funding resulting from their project, to the AIDS Institute office.

#### **No Cost Extensions**

All funds will be transferred to the awardee at the time of award. If funds are not expended during the allotted funding period, a no-cost extension can be requested. NCE requests should be emailed to AIDS Institute Director Irvin Chen ([syuchen@mednet.ucla.edu](mailto:syuchen@mednet.ucla.edu)) or CFAR Director Jerome Zack ([izack@ucla.edu](mailto:izack@ucla.edu)) and include an explanation for any delays justification for extension. Unspent funds at the end of the project should be returned to the AIDS Institute/CFAR.

#### **Support of Projects Outside of the AIDS Institute Review Process**

It is recognized that some senior investigators have grant support and/or discretionary funds that may be utilized to support projects by junior investigators and/or as part of collaborative studies. These may be in the form of support for research programs, travel, start-up support, bridge funding, etc. Support of this type is not AIDS Institute sponsored support and should not be designated in any manner as AIDS Institute funding and support. It is particularly important that the Director and Associate Directors be very clear when providing such individual private support that it not be confused with formal support sanctioned and reviewed by the AIDS Institute review process. As indicated above, the AIDS Institute sponsored support must follow the review process above and must be clearly indicated as such on correspondence to the applicant, award notices and posted on the AIDS Institute website. Conversely, the Director or Associate Directors who provide support outside of this process should never utilize AIDS Institute letterhead and should specifically indicate that the support is not provided through the AIDS Institute review process.