



Cultural Anthropology

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CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Dissertation Panel Advice to Students

The panel reviews 50-90 proposals each meeting, and usually ranks less than 20% in the "must fund" category. While the proposals span the breadth of diversity in cultural anthropology, the top-ranked proposals share some strengths which more proposals could display. On the most general level, the panel notes that projects which advance our theoretical understanding are more scientifically meritorious than descriptive projects which add a case study of some (albeit fascinating and topical) situation. Outstanding proposals specify how the knowledge to be created advances our theoretical understanding of the study situation, so that people interested in similar situations in different contexts will learn from the project's outcome. The key is to be explicit in showing how the general theory explains the local situation, and in showing how the new knowledge from the local situation will advance the theory.

Project Duration: **Maximum 12 Months**

Project Budget: **Maximum \$12,000*** [Budget guidelines](#)

*** Note: Students doing international research, having a formal affiliation with a foreign research institution, may be eligible for additional funding. Please contact the appropriate program in NSF's Office of International Science (<http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/int/>)**

Specific suggestions for students preparing dissertation proposals:

- Select "[NSF 04-007](#)" as the Program Announcement/Solicitation number on the cover page.
- Follow the proposal preparation guidelines in the [Doctoral Dissertation Program Announcement](#), especially the instructions for spacing (single-spaced), length (10 pages for the project description), font size (12 point is best, no smaller than 15 characters/2.5 cm), CVs (two page maximum biographical sketch), and proposal summary (one page max, 200 words minimum.) The summary must address in separate paragraphs the "intellectual merit" and the "broader impacts". (See the [GPG](#)). The project title should begin with the words, "Dissertation Research:"
Proposals which violate these regulations in an attempt to squeeze in more information antagonize reviewers and may be returned without consideration.
- Use a clear and concise writing style. Reviewers will include anthropologists from a variety of specialty areas in cultural anthropology. It is possible that no specialist from your particular area of research will be on the panel. Defining key terms and keeping your proposal free of jargon will ensure that all reviewers will be able to understand your proposal and evaluate it fairly.
- One of the areas in which the proposal will be evaluated is "Research Competence of the Student." You can provide information to reviewers in the body of the proposal as well as in your CV. Be sure to include relevant language skills and proficiency, training or experience with the data collection or analysis techniques proposed, and any other information which can help reviewers evaluate how well prepared you are to conduct the research.
- At the end of the proposal, include only references cited rather than a complete

or general bibliography for your problem area.

- Examples of interview schedules, questionnaires or task protocols, etc. should be included wherever possible in appendices, but do not attach any appendix unless you have received permission from the NSF program director. Proposals without explicit permission for appendices may be held up or returned from the mail room. Remember that reviewers are not obligated to read appendices, so critically important information should be in the body of the proposal. Letters testifying to local institutional sponsorship need not be appended but definitely should be cited in the proposal.
- The following are suggested page limits for the Project Description. These are not hard-and-fast rules, but indicate reviewers' interests:
 - Statement of the research problem, specific aims, expectations, propositions or hypotheses 1 p
 - Review of the literature and significance 2 p
 - Preliminary studies by the student, if any 1 p
 - Research Plan, 5 p, Including:
 - Research Design
 - Research Site or source of data
 - (References and citations are as important in your methods as in your theory section)
 - Data analysis plans
 - Research Schedule 1 page

The research plan should begin with an overview of the research design, relating it to the theory. This should be followed by a brief description of the research site. Data collection and analysis methods follow. Theories, setting and methods should be tightly linked: Readers should learn what the researcher is going to do and how the specific activities to be engaged in relate to both theory and setting. Note that a mere listing of a method is not enough to tell a reader what the researcher plans and why. The term "participant observation", for example, is extraordinarily general and should be unpacked into its specific components, each related to the information outcome which is then related to the research design and theory.

Sampling should be explicitly justified by discussing how data will generalize to a relevant population or theory. "Snowball sampling," which has various limitations, is not appropriate for some projects and if proposed should be explicitly justified with respect to alternatives. Each method, whether it generates qualitative or quantitative data, should be justified in terms of the research aims. The key issue is to impress reviewers that the new knowledge from your project will generalize to significant populations and theories.

Proposals also should include an analysis plan, although readers recognize that plans change in the process of fieldwork. Describe how you will use your data to answer your research questions and test your hypotheses. A mere listing of software programs will not demonstrate to reviewers that you have seriously considered all phases of the research process in designing your proposal. It should be possible for a reviewer to look back to your specific aims and understand why each kind of data is being collected, and why a particular analytic technique is planned.

Reviewers are well aware that there are no perfect strategies for conducting research, but will be looking for evidence that you understand the strengths and weaknesses of the approach selected. In a competitive review process where only a subset of excellent proposals can be funded, reviewers need to be told how the new knowledge to be gained from your particular study will yield generalizations that advance our theoretical

understanding of the problem.

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Last Updated 11.04.03
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