

STATEMENT OF WORK
USDA – National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)
Evaluation of Capacity Programs

I. OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

NIFA Strategic Plan. Goal 1 of NIFA’s strategic plan is to deliver science with a purpose and to produce tangible, attributable outcomes that demonstrate value to society at large. Critical to the success of this goal is the partnership between NIFA national program leadership and the Land-Grant University (LGU) system. The rich history of this partnership has supported the agency’s mission to “invest in and advance agricultural research, education, and extension to solve societal challenges.”

Land-Grant University System. The LGU system is a collaborative and dynamic network of higher education institutions all throughout the United States, with domestic and international influence. Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 granted federally-controlled land to states for them to sell to raise funds to establish and endow land-grant colleges. The mission of the resulting institutions is to teach practical agriculture, science, military science and engineering. This distinguished LGUs from traditional higher education institutions that offer a liberal arts curriculum.

Today, the LGU system is comprised of three cohorts of universities:

- 1862 grants, of which Kansas State University was the first;
- 1890 grants, which established several of today’s historically Black land-grant colleges and universities; and
- 1994 grants, which expanded the system to include Tribal land-grant colleges and universities.

Further, recognizing the need to disseminate knowledge gained at the LGUs to the public, the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 established the cooperative extension services system. The appropriation for cooperative extension is shared between the states and is formula-based, hence the historical reference to such grants as “formula” grants.

The amount of funds provided to each institution is determined by a formula, often statutorily defined, that may include variables such as the rural population, farm population, and poverty rates. Local or regional university leaders determine which projects will be supported by an institution’s grant allotment. These decisions are informed, in part, by stakeholders who both conduct and use agricultural research and extension programs. Today, they are collectively referred to as capacity grants.

Capacity grants ensure that the LGUs and other partners maintain the “capacity” to conduct research and extension activities. They are intended for land-grant institutions, schools of forestry, and schools of veterinary medicine to fund research and extension activities.

NIFA's Capacity Grant Portfolio. Capacity grants represent approximately half of NIFA's grants, alongside large competitive grant programs like the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). Generally, capacity grants are awarded through eight funding streams: (1.) Hatch Act of 1887; (2.) Smith-Lever 3(b) and (c); (3.) Smith-Lever 3(d); (4.) Evans-Allen; (5.) 1890 Extension Institutions; (6.) McIntire-Stennis; (7.) Animal Health and Disease Research 1433; (8.) Renewable Resources Extension Act.

Need for Evaluation. There is an increased need to demonstrate evidence-based value of NIFA's grant portfolio to stakeholders at large. Capacity programs are particularly under greater scrutiny because of: (a) the length of time in which they have existed; (b) the consistency of funding they have received; and (c) the breadth of research, education and extension activities they endeavor. Though funding for capacity programs is legislatively mandated, grantees are still accountable for producing outcomes.

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide a summative review of capacity programs. Results from this evaluation shall be used to:

- Demonstrate the value of the programs to stakeholders and to strengthen USDA's Research, Education and Economics (REE) focus on evidence-based decision-making
- Identify research gaps and areas of improvement; and,
- Leverage the visibility and accountability of capacity programs by an independent review.

II. SCOPE OF WORK

The Contractor shall:

- Develop a methodology for answering the research questions that follow, including a questionnaire framework, in consultation with NIFA staff;
- Comprise a lead consultant who shall collect and analyze data from a subset of key capacity programs;
- Be expected to conduct interviews with grantees, program staff, and other experts. The evaluation shall draw on existing available data as well as any new data collected by the Contractor. The evaluation shall have the character of a summative, synthesizing validation effort;
- Interview a sample of former and current capacity grantees and other stakeholders, such as partner agencies and industry representatives;
- Review NIFA program assessments, evaluations, and outcomes to date;
- Produce a draft and final assessment report with detailed recommendations for NIFA.

Respondents are welcome to exercise creativity in the number of grants to be reviewed as well as the method(s) for reviewing them.

Key Research Questions. Key questions to be answered in this evaluation are organized in three categories: (1) Impact, Attribution, and Outcomes; (2) Function and Structure; and (3) Roles:

1. Impact, Attribution, and Outcomes

- a. Can sufficient evidence be found and measured for Capacity programs' main impacts? Are there examples where specific interventions led to successful outcomes and attribution of cause and effect can be adequately supported with evidence?
- b. Have Capacity programs contributed to the broad field of agriculture and increase the performance of agricultural systems? If so, how? What fundamental capacities were built across the land-grant institutions due to Capacity programs?
- c. Is the return on investment through Capacity programs commensurate with the level of funding?
- d. To what extent have participating institutions been able to seize opportunities, foster innovation, and take risks on promising initiatives funded through Capacity grants?
- e. Is there evidence that the Capacity funds are a primary tool used by institutions to remain agile and adaptable to changing priorities and external factors?
- f. Is there evidence that, in the absence of Capacity funds, agricultural sciences and production would be detrimentally affected?
- g. What are the challenges that these programs face in moving forward? What barriers prevent these programs from addressing the challenges?

2. Function and Structure

- a. Are Capacity funds, as currently designed, still the best way to support capacity building in the field of agriculture?
- b. Is there variability across institutions in the structure and process by which individual projects are supported with Capacity funds? If so, do some structures and/or processes lead to higher returns on investment than others?
- c. To what extent have Capacity funds allowed recipient institutions to compete successfully for Competitive funds and leveraged additional funding, from NIFA and from other federal agencies such as NSF, NIH, DOE, etc.?
- d. Are there opportunities to enhance the integration of research and extension and eliminate barriers at the regional and national level?

3. Roles

- a. What role has the partnership between NIFA staff and LGUs played in the overall programs achieving their strategic goals?
- b. Are there recommendations for improving this partnership?

III. METHODOLOGY

The successful applicant shall develop a complete methodology to conduct the analysis specified in the scope of work to analyze the performance of NIFA capacity investments. It should include specification of the analytical framework, research methods, and statistical techniques to be used for the proposed analysis, including Office of Management and Budget (OMB) clearance, if appropriate. Proposals should discuss the relative merits of various approaches, and outline the advantages and limitations of the selected approach.

IV. DELIVERABLES

The contract shall require three deliverables to the NIFA Contracting Officer Representative (COR):

1. A plan/schedule to address scope of activities within 10 calendar days of award
2. A draft report no later than 30 days prior to the end of the contract. It should include draft key findings written for a non-technical audience.
3. A final report with an executive summary that integrates, summarizes and interprets key findings. The report should be written for a non-technical audience and relate the narrative discussion to descriptive statistics, analyses, graphs, maps and tables (as appropriate). Technical details, data tables, and details regarding methodology should be included in appendices. A printed copy of the final report suitable for reproduction and an electronic copy must be submitted upon completion of the project (in Microsoft Word and Adobe PDF file formats).

These should be accompanied by a Microsoft Excel workbook or Access database of all relevant data compiled during the study. The contractor will provide metadata (field name, description, definition, source, source date, and equation if completed) for all raw and computed quantitative data. Qualitative software findings (if used) should also be included at the end of the contract. NIFA COR will provide the selected contractor with formatting guidance for all reports.

The final report should have three parts: (1) executive summary; (2) key findings; and (3) recommendations to NIFA senior leadership. The total report (not including appendices) should be no more than thirty (30) pages.

Final report should be submitted no later than 15 days prior to the end of the contract.

V. LOCATION

The contractor shall conduct the work in their own facilities except as instructed by the COR.

VI. PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE

November 1, 2015 to July 31, 2016

VII. PROPOSAL EVALUATION

All proposals will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

Technical Proposal

1. Understanding of the Issue: Clear articulation of the issues and challenges (25 points)
2. Technical Approach: Complete, clearly articulated, logical study design and technically competent methodology (40 points)
3. Management Plan: Credible management proposal for staffing and completing the project in a timely fashion (15 points)
4. Personnel: Qualifications, relevant prior experience in performance measurement and evaluation; demonstrated knowledge of existing research, policies, and practice regarding the questions and issues outlined in the RFP (20 points)

Cost Proposal

Cost effectiveness of the proposed project design.

VIII. PROPOSAL INSTRUCTIONS

A. Technical Proposal

The narrative should not exceed 30 pages, and should include:

- *Methodology*: Provide a brief abstract of the proposal by summarizing the background, goals and objectives, proposed methodology, and expected output and results of the research study. The technical proposal should focus on an understanding of the project and a detailed approach to addressing the scope of work. Outline the step-by-step approach that shall be taken to achieve the project's goals and arrive at research findings and conclusions. Describe how these methods will accomplish the desired results outlined in the RFP. The proposal should also identify any difficulties that may be encountered in executing this project, and propose practical and sound solutions to these problems.
- *Project Work Plan and Milestones*: The proposal should briefly describe several phases into which the proposed work can logically be divided and performed. A schedule of milestones and deadlines should be specified for the completion of the various project elements, including review of data, information collection, surveys, analyses, preliminary review draft, and final report.
- *Data Requirements*: NIFA will provide a file containing relevant data on capacity projects from FY2010 through FY 2014. The proposal should identify additional

information needs according to sources, procedures, and individual tasks of the research that may need to be supplied by NIFA. The proposal should identify the points and tasks in this research project that will require participation by NIFA staff.

- *Management Plan:* The proposal must provide a brief narrative description of the organization that will perform the proposed work effort, and the authority responsible for controlling resources and personnel. This should also include staff distribution to accomplish this work, including an organization chart that clearly presents the relationships of key proposed staff to manage/direct the project, lead key tasks, etc. The staffing plan should also present a chart that partitions the time commitment of each professional staff member to the project's tasks and schedule. The proposal should clearly identify the relationship of key project personnel to the contracting organization, including subcontractors and consultants.
- *Personnel:* Personnel performing the work must be described in this section in terms of numbers of people and their professional classification (e.g., project manager). Brief resumes detailing the education and relevant experience of the key personnel proposed for this project are required. The selected contractor will be required to furnish the services of those identified in the proposal as key personnel. Any change in key personnel is subject to approval by NIFA.

B. Cost Proposal

Each proposal submitted must contain all cost information, including direct labor costs consistent with the staffing plan, labor overhead costs, travel, estimated cost of any subcontracts, other direct costs (such as those for creating or maintaining databases), total costs, and overhead.

The contractor should include estimated expenses for at least two in-person meetings at NIFA offices in Washington, D.C. This should include a kick-off meeting to clarify and refine the schedule, scope, roles of the contractor and NIFA staff, and any issues/key challenges. Another in-person meeting is needed for presentation of study findings at a half-day meeting at the NIFA offices in Washington, D.C. This activity will be over and above routine conference calls, email communications, and/or meetings with NIFA staff during the course of the project.

The contract terms shall remain firm during the project and shall include all charges that may be incurred in fulfilling the terms of the contract.

Questions about this proposal should be directed to Sabrina Brown at Sabrina.Brown@ars.usda.gov.