NIFA Center of Excellence Information for UF Faculty

Overview:

Beginning in Fiscal Year 2015, NIFA will be recognizing and providing priority in receipt of funding to applications from “centers of excellence” that have been established for purposes of carrying out research, extension, and education activities relating to the food and agricultural sciences. UF is eligible for Center of Excellence designation as it is Florida’s agricultural experiment station. To be designated a Center of Excellence and thus benefit from this higher funding priority, there is no standalone application, but you must include a section in a proposal under another NIFA program to which you are currently applying, such as AFRI, SCRI, or another qualifying program (see below for a full list, or simply check the current solicitation for the program in question for a section on Centers of Excellence). In addition to funding the work proposed, NIFA may recognize the applicants as a Center of Excellence in that area of research.

UF PIs are eligible for this program and are encouraged to apply for Center of Excellence designation in their area of science within their NIFA proposals, if appropriate. Not every track of every NIFA program is eligible, and PIs should be certain that their proposed effort meets the requirements for the program, described below.

Applications that rank highly meritorious and request consideration as COE will be further evaluated by peer panels to determine whether they have met the criteria to be COE. In instances where they are found to be equally meritorious with applications of non-COE, based on peer review, selection for funding will be weighed in favor of applicants meeting the COE criteria. NIFA will effectively use the COE prioritization as a “tie breaker.”

UF/IFAS Resources for Centers of Excellence (you may adapt some or all of this text for your proposal):

The University Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) is eligible for the NIFA Center of Excellence designation as an integrated unit with missions dedicated to teaching, research, and outreach. The research mission is pursued through the Florida Agricultural Experiment Station, where faculty conduct cutting-edge research in agriculture, natural resources, and life sciences to facilitate solutions in Florida, the country, and the world. UF/IFAS research is located throughout Florida, including 12 Research and Education Centers, four Research and Demonstration sites, a research forest, a biological field station, and a tropical fish hatchery. With nearly 500 faculty members with research appointments in 15 academic departments, UF/IFAS research is robust across disciplines. UF/IFAS scientists collaborate among departments and fields, and with researchers at other UF colleges and institutions in the United States and abroad, to address key issues in agriculture and natural resources. UF/IFAS has 10 members in the American Association for the Advancement of Science and 3 members in the National Academy of Sciences. UF/IFAS researchers receive more than $100 million in contracts and grants annually, and research expenditures for UF as a whole have recently eclipsed $700 million for the first time in FY2014. UF provides a rich environment for cross-disciplinary collaboration, both among the
research faculty of its 16 diverse colleges and through a network of established partnerships with other universities, government agencies, and industry partners.

Requirements for Centers of Excellence:

Suggested questions to consider in writing your application are included in purple below. You do not need to answer every question, especially given the space constraints (this section must fit within your overall proposal’s regular page limits), but consider whether you might include answers to some to demonstrate why your work is especially suited to the Centers of Excellence designation.

Applicants must justify the following as it relates to the implementation of the proposed research and/or extension activity outlined in the application:

• The ability of the center of excellence to ensure coordination and cost effectiveness by reducing unnecessarily duplicative efforts regarding research, teaching, and extension. NIFA is hoping that by funding one Center of Excellence in an area, they can avoid funding multiple repeated grants for similar work. How will your work tie together people working on related topics and be cost-effective for NIFA in the long run?

• In addition to any applicable matching requirements (check your individual solicitation for details – this does not apply to all programs), the ability of the center of excellence to leverage available resources by using public-private partnerships among agricultural industry groups, institutions of higher education, and the federal government. Who are your collaborators, and have you adequately explained their connection to the work in the proposal? How will they add value to your proposal at low or no cost to NIFA?

• Resources leveraged should be commensurate with the size of the award. This refers to your regular award under the proposed program – there is no special funding for the Center of Excellence designation. It is simply a recognition of excellence and can be a tie-breaker between similarly-ranked proposals to NIFA. Is your budget for your award realistic? Do you take advantage of programs and features at UF or through partners that will save NIFA money?

• The planned scope and capability of the center of excellence to implement teaching initiatives to increase awareness and effectively disseminate solutions to target audiences through extension activities. How will you leverage the extension network at UF, if appropriate? How will your work impact the formal undergraduate and/or graduate curriculum, if appropriate? Why does it matter that this work is being done at a land-grant university with access to these dissemination methods, rather than at an independent research institution? Why does it matter that it is happening specifically at Florida’s land-grant university – what about the audience that UF touches makes this the best place to be doing this work? Consider not just this project, but your broader research portfolio and how your work is disseminated directly or indirectly through these UF programs – NIFA is designating UF’s work in this overall area as a Center of Excellence, not just the project at hand.
• The ability or capacity of the center of excellence to increase the economic returns to rural communities by identifying, attracting, and directing funds to high-priority agricultural issues. How does your work impact rural economies? You may wish to look at the IFAS Extension Economic Contribution Reports link in the Links and Resources section below to find appropriate data to mention.

• Additionally, where practicable (not required), center of excellence applicants should describe proposed efforts to improve teaching capacity and infrastructure at colleges and universities (including land-grant colleges and universities, cooperating forestry schools, certified Non-Land Grant Colleges of Agriculture, and schools of veterinary medicine). Only include this if it is appropriate to the project being proposed.

• This brief justification statement is to be included as part of and within the page limits of their project narratives. You get no extra space to cover this topic, so be sure to highlight the most important information based on your area of research and the specific guidelines emphasized in your solicitation.

The following programs will be offering Centers of Excellence opportunities in fiscal year 2015:

- Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) – Foundational Program and Challenge Areas
- Aquaculture Research
- Biomass Research and Development Initiative
- Biotechnology Risk Assessment Research Grants Program
- Children, Youth, and Families at Risk
- Crop Protection/Pest Management
- Farm Business Management and Benchmarking
- Farm Safety and Youth Farm Safety Education and Certification
- Methyl Bromide Transition
- Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative
- Organic Transition Program
- Rural Health and Safety Program
- Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI)

Links and References:

- NIFA Centers of Excellence Outreach Webinars: http://nifa.usda.gov/centers-excellence-webinars-and-listening-sessions
- UF/IFAS Extension Economic Contribution Reports: http://ifas.ufl.edu/extension-economic-contribution-reports/
- UF Office of Research Gransmanship Resources and Boilerplate Language page: http://research.ufl.edu/faculty-and-staff/proposal-development-submission/grantsmanship-resources.html

Text source is color coded: NIFA Centers of Excellence Fact Sheet; NIFA solicitation text regarding Centers of Excellence program (taken from FY2015 SCRI solicitation); UF Division of Research Program Development. Please email Jenn Hubbs at hubbsj@ufl.edu with any questions, concerns, or updates.