

BEST PRACTICES

**Best Practices
When Applying
for a USDA-NIFA-AFRI
Conference Grant**

**Shauna C. Henley, PhD^{1*}, Gina Crist², Maria Pippidis³,
Stacey K. Alexis⁴, Danielle Jessup, CMP⁵**

*Dr. Shauna C. Henley, Senior Family & Consumer Sciences Agent. University of Maryland Extension
Baltimore County, 1114 Shawan Rd., Ste 2, Cockeysville, Maryland 21030
shenley@umd.edu, 410-887-8090

Abstract

As funding to support conferences becomes limited, Extension associations need to expand the tools used to support their annual events that provide professional development, increase knowledge of new content and programs, and provide networking opportunities. This article highlights how to apply for a United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Conference Grant. In this case, the National Extension Association of Family & Consumer Sciences association executive office, liaisons, and national board worked together to write a project narrative. Sharing best practices for such funding can assist Extension in continuing to provide professional development as resources become limited.

Conferences represent a place for people with similar interests/backgrounds to meet, learn, and discuss issues of similar interest (Rabinowitz, 2023). Professional association conferences focus on the practical issues with the members' work, allowing for exchanging ideas, networking, celebrating successes, and working through emerging issues, which leads to funding, collaborations, employment, and additional professional benefits (Rabinowitz, 2023).

When planning a conference, costs range from nominal to substantial. Factors that influence costs are the location and resources to support the expected number of attendees. A standard contract may include fees for the venue, food package options, and audio-visual (AV) and/or tech support (Rabinowitz, 2023). Additional funds are needed for potential keynote speakers, signage, and other conference activities (Rabinowitz, 2023). As funds to support extension opportunities become more challenged (Page & Kern, 2018), additional strategies and resources are useful for hosting a budget-friendly annual association conference.

The National Extension Association of Family & Consumer Sciences (NEAFCS) is a professional

organization for Extension Family & Consumer Sciences (FCS) Agents. NEAFCS builds future leaders, provides innovative professional growth and development opportunities, recognizes scholarship in programming, is a nationwide resource, and promotes the "mission and goals of the Land Grant University Extension System" (National Association of Family & Consumer Sciences, n.d.). This is the first time NEAFCS has applied for United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (USDA-NIFA-AFRI) conference grant support in its 90 years. In 2023, there were 1,968 Family & Consumer Sciences (FCS) Affiliate Agents (W. Ferguson, personal communication, February 14, 2023), where 73.52% (n=1,447) focus programming on health, nutrition, and/or food safety (W. Ferguson, personal communication, February 14, 2023). The NEAFCS Conference provides four full days of networking with national colleagues, skill-building, and sharing science and evidenced-based research and programs for other agents to adapt/adopt within their respective communities. For the 2023 annual session, the proposal team anticipated 750 attendees, and applying for a USDA-NIFA-AFRI conference grant would provide capacity building for future Extension leaders.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to 1) bring awareness to Extension professionals of the USDA-NIFA-AFRI Conference Grants that support professional development and leadership opportunities for new and seasoned Agents and 2) build the knowledge and practical skill set of how to search and apply for a conference grant from our lessons learned. The objectives in our project narrative included: 1 (Instructional materials & equipment): Support the delivery of Food safety, nutrition, and health-Diet, Nutrition, Diet, Nutrition, and Prevention of Chronic Diseases (FSNH-DNPC), science-based knowledge and informal educational programs for a national audience of FCS professionals. Audio/visual support will allow two tracts for peer-reviewed oral and poster presentations. 2 (In-service training): Devel-

op human capital in FSNH-DNPC, through pre-conference and in-depth sessions, with bus rental and speaker honorariums.

Methods & Results

To begin, the Land Grant University (LGU) will want to determine whether the respective Office of Research and Administration can submit a conference grant when working with an association group. An association group would be considered a pass-through entity, which means a “non-Federal entity that provides a sub-award to subrecipient to carry out part of a federal program” (§200.1 Definitions) (Definition, 2001), where there are implied legal risks. In our case, the liaisons’ universities of Delaware and Maryland could not submit the grant proposal, therefore NEAFCS submitted it. Once the LGU and any potential association group determine who is submitting the proposal, the proposal can be submitted per usual LGU route (Figure 1), or the association group will need to create several accounts from sam.gov, login.gov, and grants.gov (grants.gov, login.gov, SAM.gov), with an understanding that it can take time for each to be approved (Figure 1). Simultaneously, the proposal team should review grants.gov for whether 1) a USDA-NIFA-AFRI conference grant is an option based on the various proposal priorities and 2) the organization’s eligibility (Figure 2). Throughout this process, the team will want to ensure that all government documents are current (Figure 2).

The next significant step is to determine whether all or some of the conference sections are eligible for funding or need funding support. For example, NEAFCS’ Annual Session brings together a diverse group of topics, such as textiles, food and nutrition, child development, and finance (National Extension Association of Family & Consumer Sciences, 2024). However; this experience with the USDA-NIFA-AFRI conference grant were focused on the Foundation and Applied Science Program, specifically “Diet, Nutrition, and Prevention of Chronic Diseases” (United States Department of Agriculture National Institute

of Food and Agriculture (USDA-NIFA), 2024), where funding was put towards chronic disease prevention and food, nutrition, and food safety topics, and not necessarily child development or personal finance.

From this determination, the proposal team prepared to write the letter of intent (LOI), per the request for proposal, which is on a rolling deadline but must be submitted to the program area priority contact(s) 195 days before the conference commences (USDA-NIFA, 2024). The proposal team must identify the AFRI-Project Type (USDA-NIFA, 2019) (Figure 2), and determine if the team will write a LOI focused on research, education, extension, or an integrated project (USDA-NIFA, 2019). The team must address any conference specifics in the LOI and comply with the formatting, submission, and reviewing/notification process (USDA-NIFA, 2022).

The program area priority contact(s) will inform the team whether their LOI was approved to write and submit the project narrative, which will determine the amount of conference funding they could receive, where the maximum was \$50,000 (USDA-NIFA, 2024). The proposal must address all parts of the conference's grant application, which may overlap with other aspects of the specified proposal priorities/objectives. Some unique needs may include 1) a justification for the meeting; 2) recent meetings on the same subject, dates, and locations; 3) name and organizational affiliations of the chair and other members of the organizing committee; 4) proposed agenda; etc. (Figure 3).

Key personnel

It is important to delineate roles on the proposal team upfront so that people know the tasks and timeline for applying and reporting back to the funders. If the association or group has an education committee, this committee is instrumental in providing more details about the proposed conference agenda and its objectives. The conference planner can provide details about past and similar

meetings and the names of chairs as required in the proposal. The executive director can share historical data to assist in the proposal's introduction and budget. The liaisons took the lead to draft the project narrative.

Budget

Work with the program area priority contact(s) to learn what are allowable expenses. In our case, we prioritized funds for guest speakers travel and/or honorarium requests and rentals. We kept the budget justification easy for the reviewers to understand for how the funds would support the conference (Figure 4).

Evaluation

An evaluation plan in the project narrative guides the team's process of reporting outcomes to the funders. Determine what needs to be measured based on the proposed objectives submitted in the Letter of Intent (LOI) and refined in the project narrative. The team should consider if there are additional questions to include that could improve future association conferences. Another consideration is whether institutional review board (IRB) approval is needed for human subject research. Some universities may see participant surveys not as research but as part of an education program. Therefore, the team should consider the pros and cons and the breadth of an IRB approval allowing for disseminating the results to a broader audience and scholarly venues. An IRB may also help guide the team on how surveys are created, implemented, data analysis, and storage.

Application

The LOI focused on an Extension Project, to "Build science-based capability in people to engage audiences and enable informed decision making" (USDA-NIFA, 2019). The tracks within the NEAFCS 2023 Annual Session that were supported by the

grant focused on food safety; nutrition, and health in diet; nutrition and the prevention of chronic disease; and activities that build science-based knowledge and skills for attendees (n~500) to better engage their communities across the United States. Thereby aligning with the grant content requirements. A \$50,000 grant was awarded and these funds supported budget "buckets" of rentals and professional development. Rentals included but were not limited to bus rentals for offsite professional development and AV equipment. Professional development included but was not limited to costs related to speaker/presenters and admittance fees, for example for the oyster tours. The team had decided that these supports were most instrumental in meeting the learning objectives for participants.

We sought IRB approval (#2087170-1). The Qualtrics survey predictor tool and two testers said the survey took 2-7 minutes. Each survey consisted of multiple choice, Likert, and fill-in-the-blank questions. Survey items focused on knowledge, behavior intention, demographics, and program satisfaction. Examples of survey questions: "The presenter(s) create an inclusive and welcoming learning environment," and "What is your MAJOR area of programming?"

The conference evaluation tool was developed, reviewed, implemented, and analyzed to inform how well our overall goals and objectives were met. The specific deliverables from the proposal narrative the team wanted to measure were: 1) survey completion rate (70%); 2) respondent enjoyment of the professional development they attended (70%); 3) respondents can apply what they learned to their current program at home (40%); 4) learned something new related to Food Safety, Nutrition, and Health (60%); and were 5) inspired to learn more on the professional development they attended (70%). The team met or exceeded each metric (data not shown). Volunteer(s) for each grant-related professional development setting had a pre-conference meeting with the liaisons. Liaisons shared how the surveys would be implemented and how the executive office would assist with follow-up re-

minders with their ListServ. Folders were prepared with attendee rosters, survey QR codes and URLs, recruitment scripts, bus schedules (if offsite), and liaison phone numbers. Data collection was open for two weeks, and the majority of respondents participated in the brief retrospective survey on the same day of their event. Reports were generated and shared with the 2024 annual session planning committee.

Discussion

As resources for Extension activities become challenged, the authors wanted to bring awareness to Extension professionals of the USDA-NIFA-AFRI Conference Grants that can support professional development and leadership opportunities for new and seasoned Agents, and build the knowledge and practical skill set of how a proposal team can search and apply for a conference grant from our best practices:

- Identify roles and responsibilities up-front of the writing team members
- Determine the project type to help create the conference objectives, education or extension is a strong fit for most of the Extension Associations
- Set aside time to write and navigate the reporting system
- Make sure the dates of the federal documents are the most current
- Look for supplemental materials for the LOI and project narrative at USDA-NIFA (n.d.)
- Keep the budget simple, and use a transparent Excel spreadsheet
- Use an online platform for data collection and analysis
- Ensure your evaluation measure the objectives listed in the proposal narrative
- Communicate with attendees that the conference has federal funding, completing an assessment is needed and their cooperation is greatly appreciated
- The USDA grant application support team is helpful, responsive and available 24/7 except for

federal holidays.

In conclusion, receiving the conference grant funds is doable but takes some time and team effort. The additional funds can improve the quality and range of what the conference planning committee would like for its attendees. We chose to support guest speakers and rental fees, whereas Extension agents in FCS and other programs may identify other allowable expenses to improve their conferences. We hope other extension groups and beyond can use this manuscript to assist them to apply for a conference grant.

Acknowledgement: NEAFCS-Education Committee led by Marcia Parcell, Elizabeth Lane, Zoey Felton.

Author Information

¹Shauna C. Henley, PhD, University of Maryland Extension, Baltimore County, and Affiliate of the Department of Nutrition and Food Science at the University of Maryland College Park. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8913-7908>

²Gina Crist, Extension Specialist, University of Delaware Cooperative Extension, Newark Delaware. <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7026-188x>

³Maria Pippidis, Extension Educator, University of Delaware Cooperative, Newark, Delaware. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5223-8043>

⁴Stacey K. Alexis, Affiliate of the Prince George's Community College. <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1491-1617>

⁵Danielle Jessup, CMP, Executive Director, National Extension Association of Family & Consumer Sciences. <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0158-8295>

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Figure 1

The overall flow of the conference grant process.

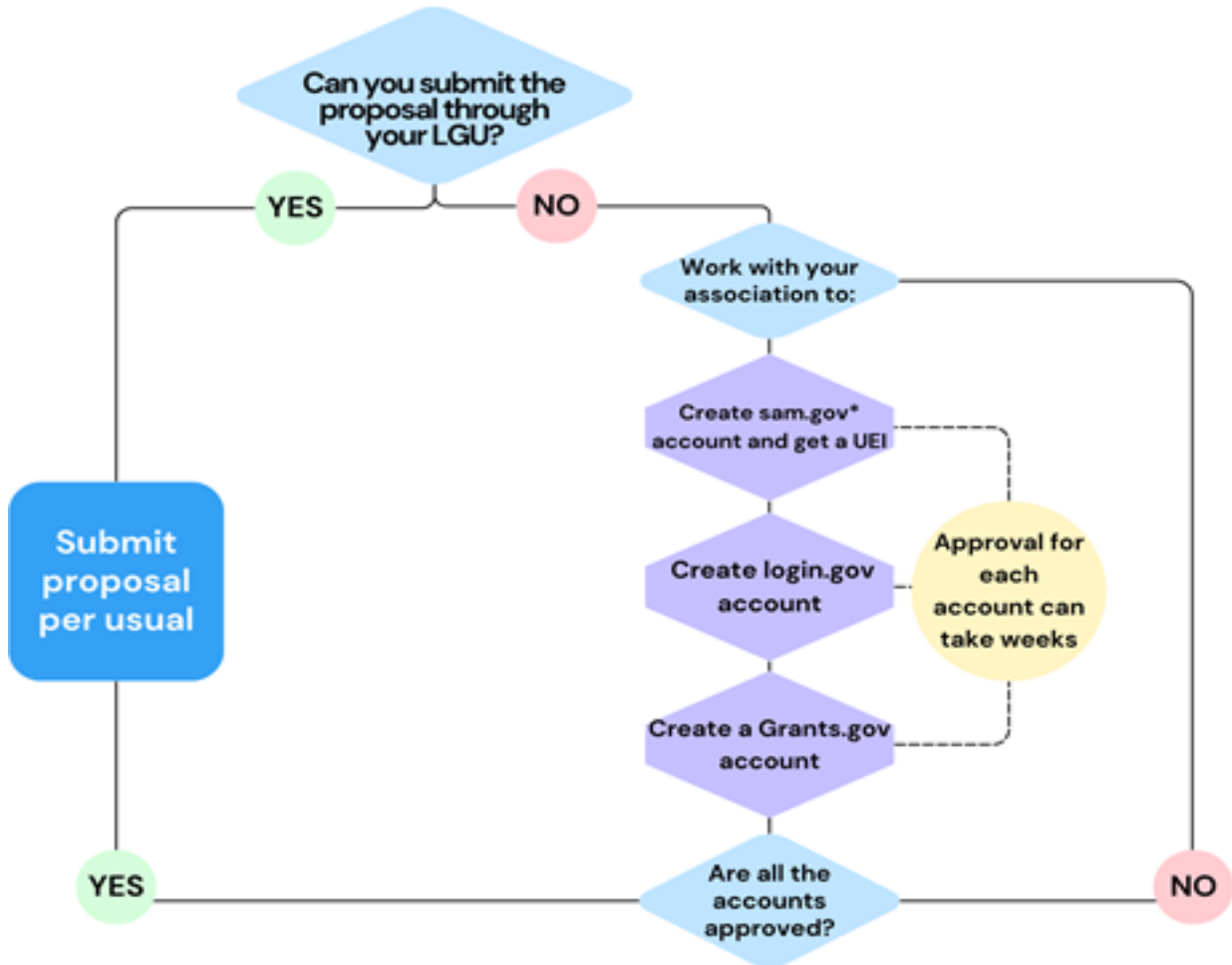
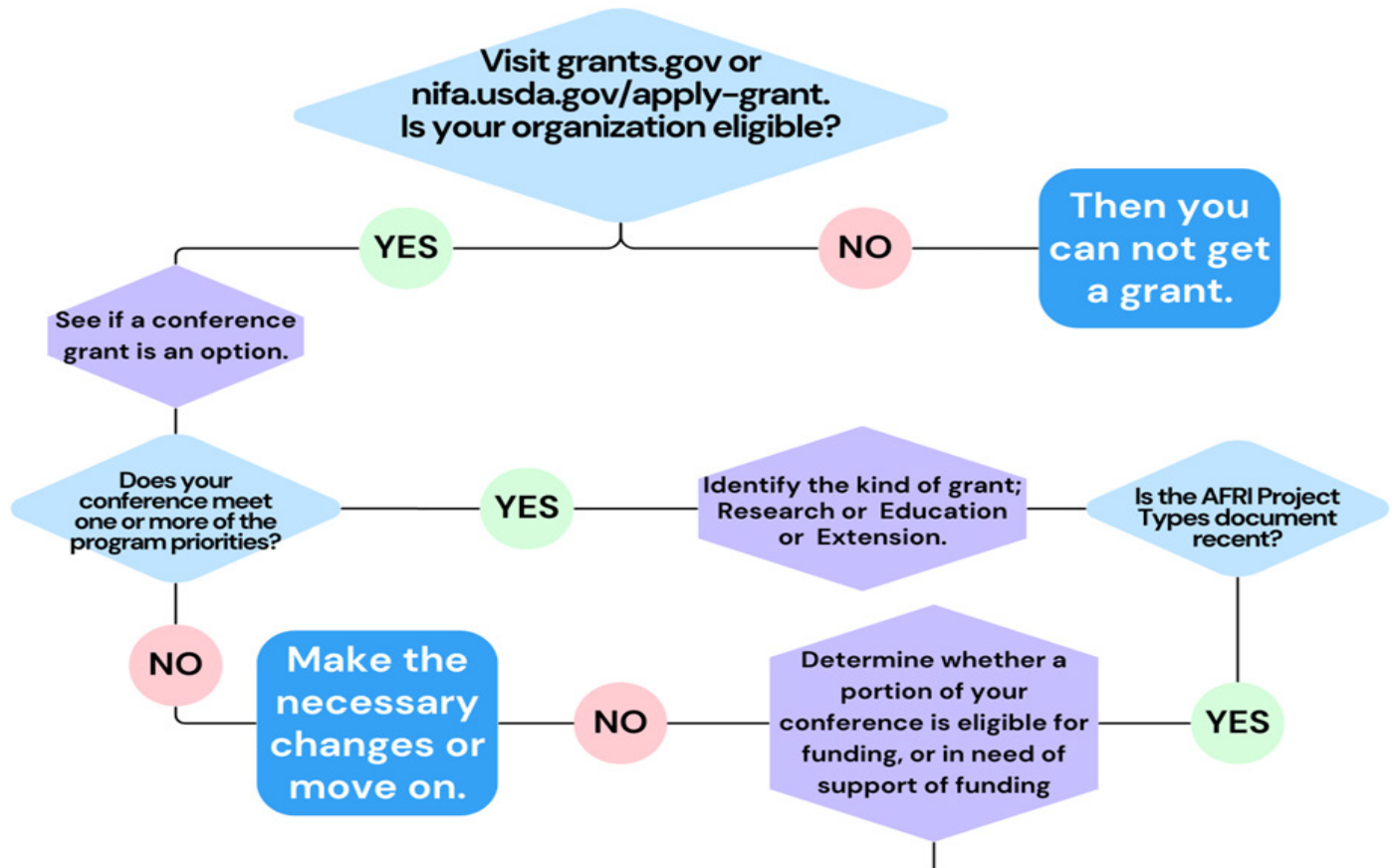


Figure 2

Finding an appropriate conference grant and initiating the Letter of Intent (grants.gov, n.d., USDA-NIFA, 2019, USDA-NIFA, n.d.-a, USDA-NIFA, n.d.-b)



3. Extension Projects

Single-function Extension Projects conduct programs and activities that deliver science-based knowledge and informal educational programs to people, enabling them to make practical decisions. Program delivery may range from community-based to national audiences and use communication methods from face-to-face to electronic or combinations thereof. Extension Projects may also include related matters such as certification programs, in-service training, client recruitment and services, curriculum development, instructional materials and equipment, and innovative instructional methodologies appropriate to informal educational programs.

Extension Projects address one or more of the following key strategic actions:

- 1) Support informal education to increase food and agricultural literacy of youth and adults;
- 2) Promote science-based agricultural literacy by increasing understanding and use of food and agricultural science data, information, and programs;
- 3) Build science-based capability in people to engage audiences and enable informed decision making;

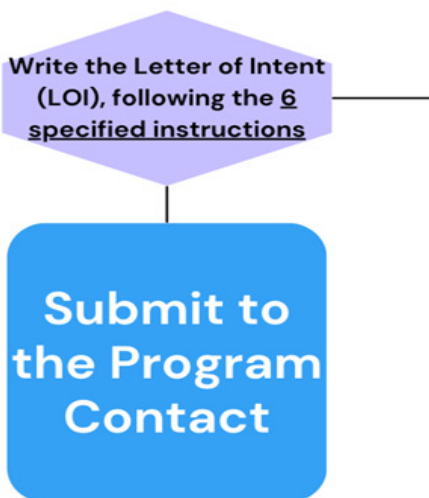


Figure 3

LOI approved for writing the project narrative (USDA-NIFA, 2022, USDA-NIFA, n.d.-a)

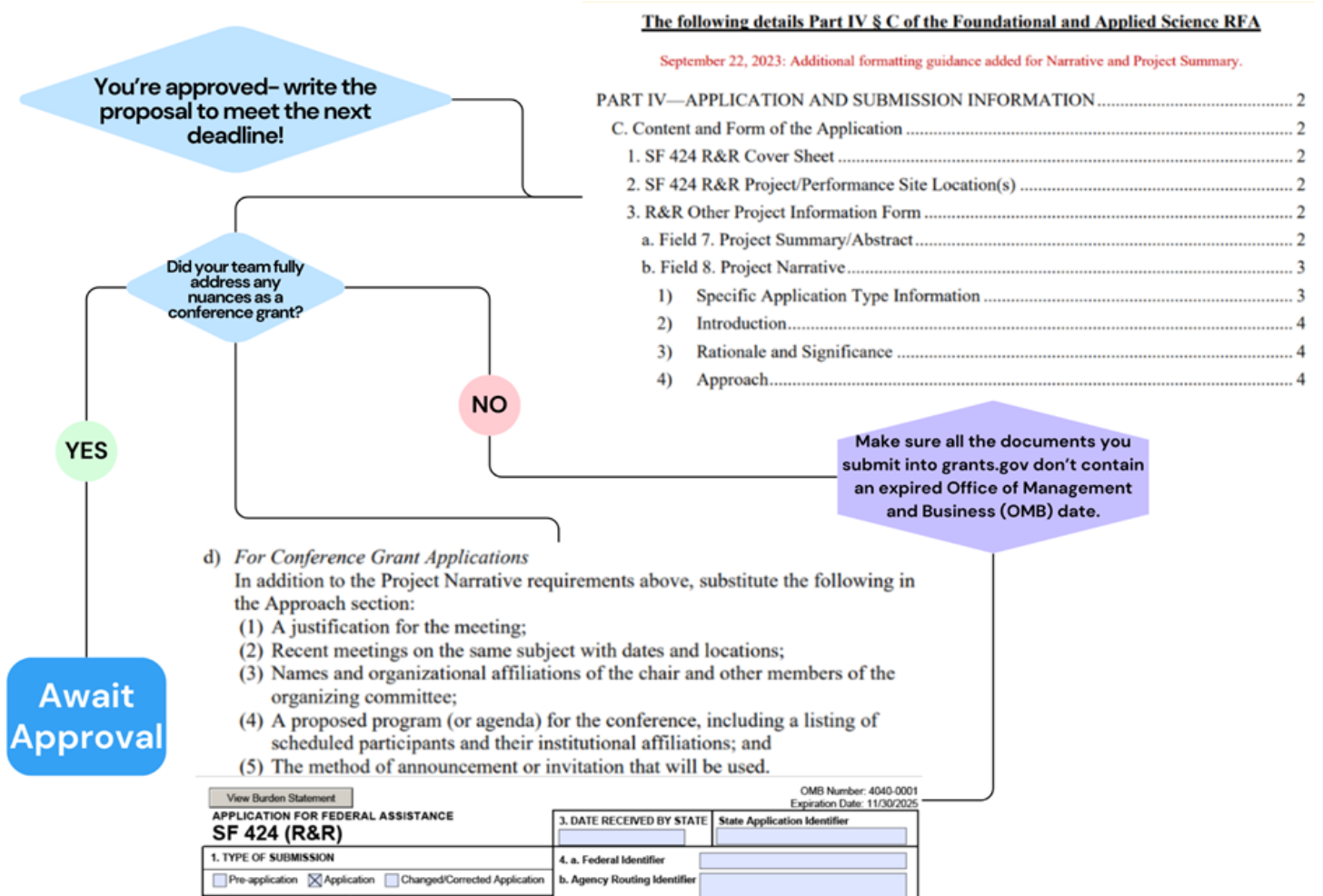


Figure 4

Funding and reporting general schematic (USDA-NIFA, n.d.-c).

