AIDS Institute/CFAR Seed Grant Policies and Instructions for Reviewers

Overview of Seed Grant Process

AIDS Institute/CFAR seed grants opportunities are open to all investigators at UCLA or UCLA-affiliated institutions. Funding of early stage investigators (ESIs) is prioritized except for those RFAs in which senior investigators are allowed (typically only those new to HIV/AIDS, emerging areas, or collaborations involving ESIs). Applications are submitted in response to RFAs published online, posted and distributed by email. Each RFA details available funding, deadlines, specific eligibility and project criteria. For training purposes, application and review will be based upon NIH PHS 398 guidelines with abbreviated forms, page limits, and timelines. 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 2 are considered fundable, and those above 3, not fundable. Grants with borderline scores, (2-3 or discrepant review scores), will be reviewed at a convened meeting by the Grant Review Committee. The committee will discuss the written reviews and provide a revised impact score, based on their discussion. Grants will be funded, beginning with the highest-ranking (lowest scoring) grants, until all funds have been expended for each round of reviews.

Occasional RFAs may be designated for applications outside of this review process, typically those with funding from non-CFAR or philanthropic sources.

Mentoring and Pre-Submission Consultation

All applicants are strongly encouraged to consult with the appropriate Program Section Head, prior to submitting an application. In addition, all ESIs must identify a senior co-investigator to serve as mentor for the application as well as for overall career development.

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 Program Section Head and successful candidates are provided with instructions for submission of their full grant application.

ESIs must include a career development path to independence. Note that "career scientists" within a senior PI's lab will not be eligible for seed grants. The description of career path must include:
1) a description of career plans and timeline to independence
2) time spent within the senior PI's group (typically postgraduate training would not exceed 10 years)
3) efforts to obtain independent and /or new investigator career development funding
4) efforts to obtain independent positions
5) how obtaining a seed grant would help attain independence
6) the role played by the co-Investigator mentor in assisting with the application and career development plans.

Grant Review

Reviewers are selected for each seed grant application by the Program Section Head responsible for the RFA or, if desired, his/her faculty designee. Reviewers are selected based upon their expertise, objectivity and integrity in the review process. Prior pilot project awardees are required to serve as reviewers in subsequent grant review cycles. If there is a conflict of interest, (see below for Conflict of Interests) such as collaborator or mentor/mentee relationship, the Program Section Head will recuse him/herself from selecting reviewers for that application, and delegate the task to another Program Section Head. Two or three reviewers are selected for each application.

Reviewers score each grant in five core areas and 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 <2 are deemed fundable, and those that are >3 will potentially be eliminated. Grants that are borderline, with scores between 2 and 3, or with widely discrepant impact scores will move forward to the Grant Review Committee. 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 <2 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.

Resubmission: Applications not selected for funding may be resubmitted in response to relevant RFAs for subsequent seed grant round. An NIH style one-page *Introduction* must accompany the application. ESIs must work with their designated mentor for resubmission.

Instructions to Reviewers
Reviewers will be provided with a copy of the RFA and be 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) 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 will give each grant an overall impact score (also an integer). Each reviewer's impact score should reflect his/her evaluation of the overall impact that the project is likely to have on the relevant research field(s), as well as on the likelihood of providing sufficient preliminary data so as to allow the recipient to apply for subsequent external funding. An application does not need to be strong in all five core review criteria to be judged likely to have major scientific impact. When providing a score under *Investigators*, the Reviewers should consider the applicant's previous pilot project funding record as well as the applicant's external funding record (numbers of grants applied for and success rate). Unless specified in a particular RFA, all applicants for CFAR funding must be Early Stage Investigators (<10 years from terminal degree and no R01 (or equivalent) level funding).

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 2) and not fundable (above 3). The committee is appointed by the AIDS Institute and CFAR leadership groups 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/application. Committee members with conflicts 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 a 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 Program Section Head for each 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 Program Section Heads 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 Program Section Head 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, IACUC, 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 Operations Administrator Jina Lee (jinalee@mednet.ucla.edu) and include an explanation for any delays and justification for extension. Ms. Lee will forward the request to the Leadership Group for approval. 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 Program Section Heads 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 Program Section Heads 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.