NSF Essay Advice

Peter Enyeart – NSF Recipient 2009-2010

[The] following is my advice on how to apply for the NSF Fellowship (specifically, how to write the essays). It is based on advice that was given to me from people who are reviewers for the fellowship and was extremely useful to me in preparing my application. It probably applies to other similar awards and even research grants.

Make it easy to read. In the first round of review, at least two thirds of the applications will be discarded. Two to three people will look at your application at this point, spending about fifteen minutes on it before making their decision. The essays will most likely be skimmed and not read carefully at this stage.

For this reason it is extremely important that the reviewers can easily figure out what you have to say. The essays should start with a clear summary of everything you plan to say, and the subsequent points you want to make should be in order from most important to least important. Do not assume the reviewers will be knowledgeable about whatever field you are writing about. Write the essays so that an intelligent layman (your parents, for instance) could understand the gist of what you are going to do or have done. Formatting is also important. There should be significant white space. Resist the urge to cram as much text as possible into the space provided (and make sure to carefully follow the formatting guidelines.)

As for the actual content, I kept in mind two comments: "Vague is the kiss of death" and "The best indicator of what you will do in the future is what you have done in the past." Specifics are important to demonstrate clearly what you did or to show that you have thought carefully about what you are going to do. Otherwise it will seem like a platitude that you're just putting in because you think it sounds good. Thinking of your past as an indicator of your future also helps in coming up with specifics, and can also help you make the essays more cohesive as a whole. You should present your past in such a way that the future plans you propose seem like a logical and doable progression.

Also, keep in mind the mission of the NSF "to promote the progress of science; to advance the national health, prosperity, and welfare; to secure the national defense" and make sure your application is in harmony with these goals. The Broader Impacts are also very important when applying for NSF funding. Involvement in community science outreach programs and that sort of thing is a big plus.