NIH R15 AREA Grants and R15 Grant Manual:

The National Institutes of Health’s Academic Research Enhancement Award (AREA) grant program (R15) is a unique funding opportunity designed to support small-scale, investigator-initiated research projects at educational institutions that have not been major recipients of NIH research grant funds. Because institutional eligibility is limited, AREA R15 grants are not as competitive as other NIH funding mechanisms. Through the AREA program, the NIH strives to support meritorious research projects while also exposing students to research and strengthening the institution’s research environment. Research project periods are 3 years maximum and direct costs are capped at $300,000 over the entire project period. R15 AREA grants are renewable, and preliminary data is not required.

NIH has set two levels of eligibility for AREA grants: The eligibility of the institution and the eligibility of the principal investigator. To be eligible, institutions of higher education offering advanced degrees in the health-related sciences may not have received more than $6 million per year in NIH support in each of 4 of the last 7 years. For institutions composed of multiple schools or colleges, such as UNM HSC, the criterion of financial eligibility is not based on the amount of NIH support received by the institution as a whole; rather, the individual health professional schools/colleges are considered independently. The College of Pharmacy meets the financial eligibility criterion and is thus eligible for the AREA program. Eligible Principal Investigators must have a primary faculty appointment at an AREA eligible institution; may not be the PI of an active NIH research grant at the time of an AREA award; and may not hold more than one AREA grant at a time.

Given AREA program goals, applicants are required to provide information about the profile of the student body at their institution, which provides NIH a better understanding of the type of students who will benefit from the AREA award. Further, NIH requires applicants to describe the characteristics that make their institution eligible for an AREA award, as well as how the institution will benefit from the award. Last, the PI must document his/her experience working with students in research, and the PI must provide evidence that the institution is supportive of the AREA research project (for example, a letter of institutional commitment providing lab space or special equipment, protected time, credit for student involvement, etc.).

While R15 AREA program grants emphasize students’ exposure and access to research, R15 grants are not training grants; R15 grants are research grants and are considered a slightly modified version of the NIH R01. The structure of the R15 application, including the research plan, mirrors that of the R01, and applications are evaluated using the same criteria as those used to assess R01 applications, with only slight modifications given the unique student-focused goals of the AREA program. As with R01 applications, major assessment criteria for the R15 are focused on the research plan, and projects are judged according to impact-based criteria. Like the R01, R15 projects must align with NIH funding priorities. Although not required for AREA grant applications, preliminary data is very helpful in determining the feasibility of a study and makes the grant more competitive to NIH reviewers.

The current parent AREA R15 funding opportunity announcement number is PA-13-313. Unless responding to a specific RFA, standard due dates for AREA R15 grants are: February 25, June 25, and October 25.

The CoP Research Office has purchased a “NIH R15 Grant Application Mentor Manual” which is a step-by-step guide to planning for and preparing an R15 application. The guide addresses each component of the R15 application and offers valuable tips and techniques from experienced R15 grant recipients, as well as writing examples from funded grants. Expert advice is provided for each of the following topics: Developing the project summary/abstract, biographical sketch, environment section, budget and research plan; Guidance to ensure the research strategy addresses the project’s innovation, significance, approach and overall impact; Special considerations for special agents, human and animal subjects; Selecting the appropriate NIH Institute, Center, and Office, and finding a relevant institutional program officer; Understanding NIH’s review process and the PI’s role in the process; Tactics for Submitting a winning proposal; Common R15 application pitfalls to avoid; and much more!
Also available are two brief, informative NIH R15 Grant Mentor MP4s: “R15 Overview and Distinctives” and “Unique Components of an R15 Application”.

Please contact the CoP’s Research Office (Becky, 2-1477 or rwoloszy@salud.unm.edu) if you’d like to obtain a free copy of the R15 manual and/or MP4s.

Additional information concerning the AREA program can be found here:
http://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/area.htm