Faculty Improvement Grants: Information and Guidelines for Faculty

The Faculty Improvement Grant (FIG) funds come from MinnState in accordance with Article 19, section A of the IFO contract. The SMSU Professional Improvement Committee (PIC) awards FIGs in order to assist faculty in improving their performance in relation to the following two professional development criteria: "scholarly or creative achievement or research" and "continuing preparation and study." Professional study and travel funds awarded under Article 19, section B of the IFO contract are considered unrelated to the FIG funding process.

Basic Information for Applicants
Eligibility: All tenure-track and fixed-term faculty members are eligible to receive FIGs, including when they are on sabbatical leave. Adjunct faculty are eligible to receive FIGs in any application review cycle of the fiscal year in which they have an assignment of more than 3 credits or more than one course in an academic year. Faculty members may apply for no more than one award per review cycle.

Application Review Cycles: There are two FIG review cycles per year with deadlines in mid-September and mid-February. At the beginning of each review cycle, faculty will receive email notification of submission guidelines including where to submit applications.

Generally, applications should cover activities happening during the semester in which the application is submitted. Applicants may appeal situations to the committee. For financial reasons, the committee reserves the right to request that an applicant resubmit an application during a future review cycle. Late applications are not accepted. However, retroactive requests can be submitted by tenure track and fixed-term faculty members if the application is submitted during the first application cycle following the activity and within the same fiscal year as the activity. Award recipients who are tenured or in a tenure-track position have one year from the date of their award notification to use the funds, after which time any unspent money will be returned to the FIG account. Any fixed-term faculty member who receives a FIG must complete their proposed activity within the contract year. Any adjunct faculty member who receives a FIG must begin and complete their proposed activity within the semester during which they applied for the grant.

Award Amounts: All eligible faculty members (including adjunct faculty) may receive up to $2,000 in any two-year period corresponding to the biennial contract between the IFO and MinnState.[1] A faculty member who receives less than the maximum amount in one review cycle may submit another request in a later cycle, so long as the total amount of the grants does not exceed $2,000 in the biennial contract period. Adjunct faculty may receive up to $1,850 for an international trip, $1,250 for an out-of-state domestic trip, and $650 for an in-state trip. Adjunct faculty projects not involving travel are eligible for up to $2,000. Please note that all faculty must acquire permission for out-of-state and international travel prior to the trip. The appropriate form can be found at the Business Services webpage for travel authorization and expense reimbursement.

Competitive Funding: The university does not receive enough funding for every faculty member to receive the maximum potential amount each biennium. As a result, FIGs are

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[1] The MNSCU biennial contract operates on an odd-year cycle.

competitive in nature, and the PIC must sometimes pro-rate awards depending on the amount of funding available and the number of qualified grant applications. In the event that awards must be pro-rated, funding for proposed activities that focus on equity inclusion and/or the elimination of educational equity gaps will be prioritized. Other projects would be funded on an equal percentage basis.

The Application Process

Selecting a Professional Improvement Category: An applicant must specify whether they are requesting funding for an activity related to "scholarly or creative achievement or research" (SA) or for "continuing preparation and study" (CP). Any faculty member who requests funding to attend a conference at which they will make an academic presentation should select SA. Any faculty member who requests funding to attend a conference without making a presentation should select CP.

Preparing and Submitting an Application: Applications must meet ordinary standards of professional preparation for a university setting. The committee expects brief, clearly written requests that include: 1) a description of the activity, including the location; 2) a rationale for the activity and 3) a detailed budget including estimated amounts for all expenditures. In calculating budget amounts for food and mileage reimbursement, applicants should use the most recent MinnState reimbursement rates available on the SMSU Business Services webpage. Although FIG awards are limited to $2,000, faculty are encouraged to include all anticipated expenses on the application. In the event that some expenses are not allowable FIG expenses, this will help ensure that the committee has the opportunity to award the highest amount possible to the applicant.

To avoid potential accounting problems, applicants are encouraged to consult with their department administrative assistant to make sure they are using proper account numbers, especially for contractual travel. Applications must be submitted online using the Faculty Improvement Grant Application Form located on the university website. Any questions may be directed to the chair of the PIC.

Hiring of Research Assistants: The committee may approve grants that include the hiring of one or more research assistants so long as the applicant can demonstrate such personnel are integral to the proposed activity.

Purchase or Rental of Equipment: The committee may approve grants that include the purchase or rental of specialized equipment and/or supplies if the applicant can demonstrate that the items are integral to the proposed activity. Supplies and equipment funded with FIG monies shall become the property of Southwest Minnesota State University.

Revising Applications: A FIG is made for the specific activity described in the application. Grant recipients must request the approval of the PIC committee in advance if they plan to make any significant revisions to the funded activity. Approval of revised applications is subject to approval by the committee.

The PIC may request information from the applicant to clarify the nature of the project.

Award notification

Follow-up Reports: FIG recipients are required to submit a follow-up report upon completion of the funded activity. Reports must be submitted by clicking on the unique link provided in the award email. That link will bring recipients to the Faculty Improvement Grant Final Report Form. Faculty with missing follow-up reports are ineligible to receive future grants.

Expense Reports: Any expenses incurred using an SMSU-issued purchasing card must be allocated using the US Bank website. All other expenses covered by the FIG will be reimbursed only after the FIG grantee submits an expense report accompanied by the corresponding receipts. Meals and mileage reimbursement do not require receipts and can be reimbursed up to the approved rates. Faculty may consult with their department administrative assistant to complete these reports. The cost center number required on the expense report is specific to each faculty member's grant and can be located in the award email. The expense report form as well as meal and mileage reimbursement rates can be found at the Business Services webpage on travel authorization and expense reimbursement.

It should be noted that 19B money can be used to initially pay for expenses prior notification of a FIG award. Once a FIG has been awarded, the money from the FIG account can be transferred to the 19B account. It is also important to be aware that in compliance with IRS rules, expenses must be submitted for reimbursement within 60 days or the reimbursement is treated as taxable income.

Faculty Improvement Grants: Professional Improvement Committee Procedures

Administration and Committee Responsibilities

Administration Responsibilities:
1. The university administration shall be responsible for designating employees to handle the administrative responsibilities of the FIG process including the following.
   o Setting dates for notification of FIG process and deadlines.
   o Gathering grant applications online and distributing them in a timely manner to the PIC.
   o Maintaining the FIG account, authorizing payment to grant recipients, and providing the PIC with regular reports on the FIG account (or providing the PIC chair the ability to access FIG account information).
   o Collecting follow-up reports online after completion of grant activity.
2. The university president is responsible for making final decisions about the awarding of FIGs.

Committee Responsibilities: The PIC shall be responsible for:
1. Reviewing, categorizing, and evaluating all FIG applications.
2. Determining which applications are eligible for funding, subject to final approval by the university president.
3. Distributing funds on an equal percentage basis to the eligible applicants, subject to prioritization described above and final approval by the university president.
4. Keeping adequate records of procedures, recommendations, and explanations.
5. Passing on such records to subsequent committees.
6. The PIC is encouraged to respond to applicant questions and help educate them about the FIG process.

Committee Procedures:

Committee Membership: The PIC shall consist of five appointed members plus the elected chair. The chair shall be elected by the Faculty Assembly in accordance with the SMSUFA constitution. The other five members shall be appointed by the SMSUFA Executive Committee. Should not enough volunteers be found for adequate representation, the committee chair shall be authorized to seek additional members, with final appointment to be made by the Executive Committee. Any PIC member who submits a FIG application shall not vote on their own application.

Evaluation of FIG Applications: The PIC will evaluate each grant application according to the following criteria:
1. Extent of focus on equity inclusion and/or the elimination of educational equity gaps
2. Evidence of professional preparation.
3. Clarity and quality of the description of the activity.
4. Strength of the rationale in support of one of the following criteria:
    a. Scholarly or creative achievement or research: For the purpose of committee review, such applications have an implied product that can be shared with the larger professional community. Presenting a paper at a conference falls into this category.
    b. Evidence of continuing preparation and study: For the purpose of committee review, such applications demonstrate participation in a professional development activity that may not include a final product that can be shared with the larger professional community. Attending a conference without presenting a paper falls into this category.
5. Strength of a budget that includes an itemized listing of estimated expenses.

Opportunities for Revision: Whenever possible, the PIC will give an applicant whose application does not conform to one or more of the criteria outlined above an opportunity to provide additional information to the PIC chair within five working days of the request. If the faculty member does not submit suitable documentation or fails to satisfy the committee's concerns, the committee may reject the application.

Disapproval of Grant Applications: A application will not be funded if:

    a. The PIC determines it does not conform to one or more of the criteria outlined above.
    b. An applicant fails to provide additional information after being given an opportunity to do so by the PIC.
    c. In the opinion of the PIC it does not meet ordinary standards of professional preparation, even after an opportunity to revise has been given.

Allocation of Funds: The PIC will allocate funds in each review cycle to requests in both categories. Each approved request from either category will be funded at an equal percentage of the approved request, subject to the prioritization described above, with the percentage depending on total available funds.

Notification of Approved Applicants: Once the committee has reached a consensus on the approval of applications and the allocation of funds, it will:

1. Forward the names of approved applicants and the amount of approved funding for each to the administration. The university president will then be responsible for the final approval of applications and for notifying faculty of their awards. Award notification will occur by an email sent from a "no reply" email address. These emails are often routed to junk mail or clutter until they are moved to the recipient's inbox. After submitting a FIG application, faculty should check their junk mail and clutter until the FIG email notification has been received.
2. Providing a written explanation of the committee's decision to any faculty member whose application was not approved. Due to funding considerations, faculty may be requested to resubmit their application during a subsequent semester.

Responsibilities of the Committee Chair: The chair of the PIC shall be responsible for:

1. Calling and scheduling committee meetings.
2. Conducting meetings in accordance with the guidelines for committees and boards as described in the most recent edition of *Roberts Rules of Order*. All committee decisions require participation of a quorum of the members.
3. When appropriate, communicating with administration and faculty regarding decisions of the committee.
4. Maintaining detailed records of committee proceedings and forwarding them to future committees.

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