Understanding NRSA Fellowships (F) and Training (T) Grants

>> Dennis Twombly: Welcome, everyone. This is the session on NRSA Fellowships and Training Grants. My name is Dennis Twombly. I'm the Deputy Director of Extramural Policy at NICHD, and I'm also NICHD's Training Director, and in that capacity, I oversee the fellowships, the career-development awards and the institutional training grants. Joining me today is Lisa Moeller from NIGMS. Lisa, can you introduce yourself?

>> Lisa Moeller: Sure, Dennis. My name is Lisa Moeller. I'm one of five team leaders in the Grants Administration Branch at NIGMS, and in that capacity, I supervise eight grants-management specialists, and part of our portfolio includes fellowships and training grants.

>> Dennis Twombly: Okay, so today we're going to be covering the NRSA programs, the fellowships and the training grants, from start to finish pretty much. I will be doing the first part.

I will be covering programmatic elements of those programs: eligibility, purpose and so forth. And after I'm finished, Lisa is going to take over and talk about what happens once an award is made so postaward issues. We understand that this is a diverse audience who will be listening to this today, and it's going to include inexperienced people who are just interested in these programs and might be wanting to apply for some of these fellowships or training grants. Based on historical precedent for these NIH regional seminars, we've had a lot of people who are very experienced, grants administrators and departmental administrators who understand the basics of these programs and are really here to talk about special interests that they have or special problems they've experienced, and we're going to try to move quickly through some of the basics. We're going to try to cater to both of those audiences. Let me tell you that we have more slides to present than we have time to present, so some of these we will just put up for reference, and then we will be making comments on particular points that you need to remember based on questions that we often get. The slide sets also have a note section, and I think those will be available to you. We have in those notes, FAQs as well as case studies and scenarios and information topics, so you can take a look at those along with the slide material. All right. So NRSA awards, they're intended to support predoctoral students and postdoctoral students. We have some senior fellowships who are faculty members, but I'll be focusing on predoc and postdoc awards today, and the idea is, we're cultivating the next generation of scientists to work on research projects within the mission of our respective institutes. As you probably know, there are 27 institutes and centers at NIH. Each have their own missions and priorities. They have different budgets. They have different funding strategies, and they have different priorities for what types of students and postdoctoral fellows they're trying to recruit, so I'll be talking about the programs that we institute today. Lisa and I represent different institutes, so you'll see a little bit of differences, but we'll try to kind of stick to the basics of what all institutes use, and then if there are specific questions, you might get an NICHD-centric answer or an NIGMS-centric answer based on our practices at our respective institutes. It's important to know that when somebody applies for a fellowship or a training ground, the research proposed and the training proposed must be consistent with the mission of the institute who is going to provide support. Otherwise, we will send it off to another institute and hope that they might be able to support it. Here is a schematic of career development and training pipeline just to show you that there are different fellowships and training awards that NIH uses to foster our workforce, so at the top, you see graduate student and medical students. We have a set of fellowships and institutional training grants geared toward those particular people. After graduate school or medical school, folks go on to postdoctoral fellowships, and we have a series of fellowships available to support them while they're doing that, so in the case of individual fellowships, they're the F32s, and for institutional training grants, they will have postdoctoral slots or predoctoral slots or both on their training grants, and this is another way that postdocs can be supported. Just to show you the rest of the training pipeline, we have a series of transition awards, the K22, the K99, and then a series of career-development awards, some of which are more for PhD types, some of which are more for clinically trained investigators. And the goal is to have people be supported during one or more of these stages of development and give them the research training and experience conceptually that they need to eventually be able to apply for research project grants on their own, so we're really trying to develop independent investigators. That's our target, so on the left, you see R03 small grants, R21 exploratory developmental grants and R01 research grants. That would be the hope is, at some point, the people that we're training now would be applying for those independent awards. We also have two K24 ... two K awards that are for ... that are non-mentored awards for independent scientists. Those are people who already have funding, and the awards are intended for additional research training. Okay, so what are the fellowships that we have? I'll start off with fellowships and then move on to the training grants. So we have the individual predoctoral fellowships, the F30 and F31. The F30 is for dual-degree students, and the F31 is for PhD students. The individual postdoctoral fellowships are for folks with any kind of a degree, either a basic degree or a clinical degree, and these are applications that are mainly prepared by the student or postdoc in collaboration with their mentor, and those applications are submitted through their university for their support. Institutional training grants in contrast are awards to the institution and a senior PI at that institution. The way they handle those grants is, the award is made to support predocs or postdocs or a combination of both. We award slots or FTEs for supporting those positions, and it's up to the institution and the PI to decide who to recruit and who to appoint to those grants. Okay. So again, it's an institutional grant. It's for groups of individuals and usually directed by an eminent international or national scientist, and then they are the ones that correspond directly with NIH. Quickly, I'm going to go through the basic eligibility requirements for NRSA programs. These apply to fellowships as well as training grants. First off, trainees and fellows have to be US citizens or permanent residents, and for predocs, they need to be in a formal doctoral degree program. For the F30, they have to be in a formal dual-degree program such as an MD/PhD program, and for postdocs, they need to have some kind of doctoral degree. I listed PhD and MD here, but there is a whole sequence of doctoral degrees that would be eligible to apply for these. Duration of support on NRSA programs, the duration is limited to 5 years for predoctoral students. If they're in a dual-degree program, the limit is 6 years. For postdoc, the limit is 3 years, and that's 3 years overall and 5 years overall, whether they're on a individual fellowship or on an institutional fellowship, so we combine the amount of training, the time of training on those two types of awards and add it up to make sure that they stay within those limits. There are exceptions. We don't very often make exceptions. If you need to do that, you need to get in touch with the grant specialist or with the program officer who's handling the award. NRSA fellows and trainees have to spend 40 hours per week. That's what we consider full-time training. And there are a few but not many allowances for part-time training. Most of those are unforeseen and unusual circumstances such as medical conditions, family care, sometimes childbirth. We do not allow part-time training to accommodate other types of job opportunities or clinical training. Prior approval is required for a reduction from full-time training to part-time training. Now what does the stipend include? What does the fellowship include? It includes a stipend, which is simply subsistence allowance for living expenses, tuition and fees, training-related expenses for health insurance and research expenses and F and A costs in the case of T32 programs. So stipends, this is not really considered a salary. It's kind of a unique beast, so it does incur different IRS requirements. We publish these levels in the NIH Guide, and I'll show you in a minute what that looks like, but for predocs in fiscal year 2020, the level is $25,320. The postdoc levels are based on years of experience, and it's set at the time of appointment so years of experience after the doctoral degree. This is the list of postdoctoral and predoctoral stipend levels based on status and years of experience for fiscal year 2020. You see at the bottom the notice, so every year there will be a new notice published to give the current-year stipend levels and other expense allowances. These are some of those other allowances, so you see tuition and fees, training-related expenses, institutional allowance, travel and F and A. One thing I wanted to point out here for you administrators or people who are submitting applications for T32s, under tuition and fee categories, the applications have to list your actual costs, which can be way above our NIH allowances, so we have a formula that we apply after the fact. You need to put in the true actual cost to you, and we will reimburse up to 60 percent for 16,000 in the case of predocs and up to $4,500 for postdocs. The limit is $21,000 if it's a formal dual-degree program. So if you ... Some institutes have limits as far as large grant limits, so if the overall budget is above $500,000, many institutes require you to get permission to apply. In the cases that we see, most of those are because the applicant is using the actual amount rather than the NIH formula, so that's just to let you know how that works. Okay. There is such a thing as a payback requirement. It's not for predocs. It is for postdocs. In their first 12 months of NRSA appointment, they incur a payback obligation, which can then be repaid by either service of some time, what you see at the bottom, so this can be research, teaching, health-related activities. The allowable areas are quite broad. I don't think they have many people who actually have to do a payback, but in most cases, they're doing a 2-year fellowship and not just a 1-year fellowship, in which case the second year satisfies the payback requirement. Individual fellowships, I'm going to speed up a little bit here now. We have the F30s. They're in two types, one for institutions that have MSTP programs, and the other one with a different funding announcement is for those that do not have MSTP programs. We have two types of F31s. There's the parent F31, and then there's the diversity F31 for individuals who are underrepresented in research, and then finally postdoctoral fellowships, we have the F32, which is the majority of what we support, and then a few F33s, which are more for sabbatical types of experiences. How do you find out about these things? You need to rely on the program announcements, the funding-opportunity announcements. These are all 20-to-30-page documents that lay out all of the policies, all the cost provisions, the review criteria, everything you need to know about how these programs work. I'm just giving you an overall sketch of things here, which is gleaned from a bunch of different program requirements, and the things to notice here are, first off, which NIH institutes participate, so for this particular one, this is the parent F32. I've only listed six of the institutes. Pretty much all of the institutes participate in this one. I simply wanted to show you where those are listed. And then the special note at the bottom in the highlighted text, "Table of IC-Specific Information, Requirement and Staff Contacts," you really need to look at that because we have a whole page of entries from each institute that participates that tells what their mission is briefly, what the allowable costs are, what the eligibility factors are and so forth as well as who the contact individuals are. I'm the contact for NICHD. We also have a grants management contact, and if you have questions, those are the folks you should be getting in touch with, but any applicant, any awardee really needs to understand that these funding opportunities are the part of the overriding policy for how these programs work. Okay. This is the IC table for NICHD. Actually, I used the one from the K99 because it shows very specific types of monetary allowances that we have for there, so at the bottom, you see, "Salary support, $75,000, research support, $25,000." For the NRSAs, it's a formulaic entry that comes out each year, and so I wanted to show you this one just so you could see the variability that we have versus some of the other institutes. All right. Fellowship applications, this should all be pretty straightforward. The way you find this is to go to the SF424 lead-in page that has the different types of awards. You simply click on the fellowship instructions, and you'll get a PDF document that has everything you need to know about putting together a fellowship application. For T instructions, they're just right above that, and that's how you would get routed to those instructions. Review of fellowships, it's mostly done at CSR, Center for Scientific Review, but some institutes do review their own fellowship applications. NICHD does not. The time from the due date until a fellowship might be awarded is, at very best, 5 to 6 months. It's probably closer to 9 months, so just keep that in mind and plan around that. These are the review criteria. I'm not going to go into detail on this. This is all in the funding-opportunity announcement. For each of these scored criteria and other criteria, there are a series of review questions that the reviewers will be asking about the application and providing scores on, so you need to look carefully at those questions. Institutional training grants, I described what they were, so this is a single award to the institution to support multiple predocs and/or postdocs, and the program director is responsible for appointing people. We don't appoint people. There are several ... Excuse me. There's several types of institutional training grants. A few of them are listed here. The T32 is far and away the most common one that's used at NIH. I think this is not an exclusive list. There are other kind of boutique training grants that are available, and you need to look at the program announcement to find those. Some of the futures of the program you can see here. I won't go into it, but basically this is to provide formalized training to the predocs or postdocs on different aspects of conducting research, and this is all information that would be provided in the application. Preparing the application, again, you go to the T section of the 424 instructions, and you just follow those instructions. Due dates I do want to say something about. The standard due dates for T32s and most other institutional grants are January 25th, May 25th and September 25th. However, if you notice in the bullets below that, many ICs only use the May 25th due date each year, so NICHD is one of the ICs that has a single due date, and if you don't do well on that due date, you have to wait a full year to reapply. Some institutes have different due dates based on new versus resubmission applications. Some have different dates depending upon whether it's an AIDS or non-AIDS application, and some ICs use different dates for predoc and postdoc programs. So you need to look. I think that will usually be in the IC table, and in some cases, the ICs publish their own specific T32 funding announcement, and you will see those dates in those funding announcements. Review, it's, again, a two-stage review. Some institutes have one study section. NICHD has one study section. Other institutes use multiple study sections that might be organized by topic, for example. These are the review criteria. Again, a training program. Who are the mentors? Who are the leaders of the program? What types of trainees are going to be involved in the program? And importantly, the training record, so how have former trainees done? If it's a new T32, how have former trainees, predoctoral or postdoctoral, done after they left the mentor labs, or for existing programs, how well, if it's a renewal, how well have those T32 trainees have done going on and getting faculty positions or publishing papers or establishing their own independent careers? Those are very important factors in the review. Okay. That's the end of my section. I'll turn it over to Lisa now.

>> Lisa Moeller: Hi, everyone. I'm going to start by going over some postaward issues specific to fellowships. There are some that are shared between fellowships and training grants, and I'll point those out as we go along. Once you receive your notice of award, you'll see on the very first page the latest activation date. This date is 6 months from the day that your notice of award was issued. So the fellow has up to 6 months to activate his fellowship. In order to activate the fellowship, he fills out the PHS 416 form, and he sends it to the address in the terms and conditions of award. If he's in the first 12 months of an NRSA postdoc support, he or she will also have to include a payback agreement with their original signature. Now, of course, because of COVID, nobody is in the office and can send and receive this, so most ICs are accepting these forms in PDF form through e-mail. Once we all get back to normal and we're back in our respective offices, ICs will reach out to you to get those payback agreements from your postdoc fellows. When the fellowship ends, they'll submit a termination notice, and that is submitted electronically through the eRA Commons xTrain. Both fellows and trainees can receive stipend supplementation if you have formally established policies in place. The key is to treat these consistently with your non-NRSA trainees. For example, you wouldn't want fellows and trainees supported on NRSA fellowships and training grants to have a higher stipend versus your non-NRSA trainees. Some institutions use stipend supplementation because, in their area, they pay trainees a higher amount than the published NIH NRSA stipend amount. For instance, Washington, DC, Chicago or California, they have a higher cost of living, so most of their trainees on non-NRSA programs make much more than NIH trainees, so they'll choose to supplement the NIH NRSA trainees to bring them up to their non-NRSA trainee amounts. The supplementation has to come from non-federal funds, and it can't incur any additional effort or obligation on behalf of that trainee or fellow. Some of your trainees and fellows might want to get a part-time job, and this would be called compensation, and there's an employer-employee relationship unlike the stipend supplementation. This is just like any other part-time job if somebody were to work part-time at Taco Bell or a retail establishment. There are some rules, though. If their part-time position is going to be on an R01 grant, the research that is supported by that R01 grant has to be different than the research that the trainee is undergoing in the NRSA program. We also ask that the part-time job be capped at around 25 percent of the full-time, which would be about 10 hours per week, and this is because, like Dennis said, these are full-time training positions, so that's where the focus of the trainee attention should be, and we don't want the part-time position to interfere or prolong any of the approved NRSA training. The part-time position does have to be approved internally by the fellowship sponsor or, if it's a trainee on the training grant, by the training grant PI, but it does not have to be approved by NIH. Now if you have a multi-year fellowship, you will have to submit an annual progress report via the RPPR just like you do your R01s. However, once it is over, they don't have to submit a final progress report. They'll submit a termination notice through xTrain, and as part of the termination notice, there's a block. I think it's box eight that includes a section for the fellow to include their final progress report. You also don't have to submit a final Federal Financial Report for the fellowships. Instead, you'll only use the FFR for the federal cash transaction, but you don't have to submit the expenditure report. Now there are some changes that come up from time to time that do require NIH prior approval. If the sponsor is going to change, for instance, if the sponsor for the fellow is is transferring to a different institution and the trainee is not going to follow them to that new institution, you'll want to name a new co-sponsor. If the trainee is going to follow the sponsor to the new institution and you have to submit a transfer of award, we ask that you reach out to the IC and discuss it with them because, depending on where you are in the training period, they may want you to just submit a regular Type 7 application like an R01, or they may want you just to submit a letter if it's closer to the end of the project period ending. If the research is changing, you need NIH prior written approval, and if all three of these things are changing, a change to the sponsor, the grantee institution and the type of research, you'll probably be asked to resubmit the fellowship award for peer review because basically the whole thing has been altered from the original obligation. And if the sponsor plans to be absent for a continuous period of more than 3 months, an interim sponsor should be named, and approval will be needed by the NIH awarding IC. Your fellows and trainees can have the same vacation and paid holidays that your other trainees have, and they can continue to receive their stipends during this time. They can also receive up to 15 calendar days of sick leave and up to 60 calendar days of parental leave, and that's for either parent for the adoption or birth of a child, and they can continue to receive stipends during this time. If additional leave is needed beyond that, NIH prior approval is required. If prior approval is given to the grantee, if it's a fellowship, we will revise the NoA for the fellowship and bump out the project period by the number of months of leave that are being taken. If it's a training grant, you'll need to terminate that trainee and then reappoint them once they return to the training grant. Let's talk about a few of the postaward issues that are specific to training grants. So for training grants, to appoint a trainee, you'll do that electronically using the PHS 2271 and submitting that through xTrain. These should be submitted before the appointment date actually starts, and then once the training period ends, you submit a termination notice electronically through xTrain, and again, that should be done right after the training ends but certainly no longer than 30 days after the training period ended. Now as Dennis mentioned, these are full-time participants in the training program, and we usually define full-time as 40 hours, and you can appoint a trainee to a training grant any time during a budget year even on the last day for up to 12 months. If you appoint a trainee to the training grant for less than 9 months, you need NIH prior approval. For approval for this type of thing, one thing that we'll look for is, let's say you had a trainee appointed the previous year, and you want to reappoint them for 2 or 3 months just so that they can finish up their training appoint. That is something we are likely to approve. Now one thing that you'll want to do is reach out to the awarding IC and find out, do they attend to a philosophy of training slots versus training months? What do I mean by that? Well, NIGMS, we adhere to a philosophy of training months, so if you look at your notice of award and you see that we've awarded three FTTPs, which stands for full-time training positions ... And this is also slots or trainees. We use these terms interchangeably. If you see that we've awarded three FTTPs, NIGMS would interpret this as 36 training months, or three slots times 12 months equals 36 training months. So that means if you appoint three trainees for 12 months each and 3 months in one of your trainees comes to you and say, "You know what? I thought this was a good fit for me, but it just isn't, and I've decided to open up a restaurant in DC and make a go of it," so you terminate him early after 3 months. Well, now you've got 9 remaining training months that are unused, so NIGMS would allow you to appointment a fourth trainee to utilize those unused 9 training months. If your awarding IC adheres to the concept of training slots, in that same example, they might say, "No, we've given you three slots, so even if they vacate or terminate early, you can't add another individual to use up the remaining unused training months." Now some ICs might do that because they have a very small training-grant budget, so they depend on these unused training months to come back to them in the form of an unobligated balance on your FFRs, and then they'll use that to offset their training program in the future years. In either case, we ask that you look at the notice of grant award in the terms of condition, and you might see a term of award like the one example on the slide currently. This is the term of condition that NIGMS uses to explain what you can and can't do without NIH prior approval. In the absence of that, I would encourage you to reach out to the funding IC and ask them what you can't and can do before you do it because you don't want to get stuck when they find out later and say, "I'm sorry. That isn't allowable. You'll have to remove that trainee from the grant and find other ways to fund him." So I mentioned before that you can appointment somebody at any point during the year, even on the last day, for up to 12 months. In doing so, sometimes you create what is called an overlapping appointment, so let's look at the example on this slide. This trainee was appointed for 12 months starting August 1st, 2018. Because August 1st, 2018, is during budget year one, this individual, this trainee, is going to be appointed to budget year one for the full 12 months. That means the last 3 months of this 12-month appointment overlaps into budget year two. However, you're still going to report the entire 12 months on the year-one FFR, but you'll report the last 3 months that overlapped into year two on the FFR on the line for unliquidated obligations. An unliquidated obligation is something that's truly obligated, but it just hasn't hit your books yet. Now you can do this for stipend and tuition, but it's not necessarily something you can do for your travel or training-related expenses unless those expenses were truly obligated during that budget year. This isn't something that you can use as unofficial carryover. I'm going to skip over this slide and let you read it at your leisure, but I just wanted to emphasize that, for trainee tuition and fees, remember what Dennis said and request your full needs. So for training grants, you do have to submit an annual RPPR. The due date varies by IC. Most of the ICs adhere to the 2 months prior to the budget start date deadline. However, at NIGMS, we ask that you submit those RPPRs by November 15th even though we don't award the training grants until July 1st, so we award the lion's share of training grants and fellowships, so we need a bit of a longer time to read through all of those progress reports and determine how many trainees we're going to award based on the progress from the previous year. Now if you're going to submit a Type 2 application, you'll submit an interim RPPR. If we fund the Type 2, you don't have to do anything, but if we don't fund the Type 2, we're going to use an interim RPPR as your final RPPR, so the interim RPPR, final RPPR are due 120 days after the project segment. For T32s, you do have to submit an annual FFR, and these are due 90 days after the end of the calendar quarter in which the budget period ends, so if your budget period ends on June 30th, your FFR is due no later than September 30th, and remember if you have any overlapping appointments, you may need to report something on the FFR as unliquidated obligation. There are some instances where you need to ask for NIH prior approval. That's for a change of PI, for some rebudgeting, for replacing some early-term trainees and for a trainee leave of absence and also for an NRSA waiver of the limits. That's if you're going to go over the 5 years for predocs and the 3 years for postdocs. For rebudgeting, you can rebudget stipends and tuition into each other, but you can't rebudget stipend and tuition into trainee travel and training-related expenses. You can, however, rebudget trainee travel and training-related expenses into any other cost category without NIH prior approval. Lastly, you can request a no-cost extension for the first 12 months just by going through eRA Commons like you would at a regular R01. However, you can't appoint a new trainee during a no-cost extension. You can only reappoint previously appointed trainees, and you must have enough money available for that reappointed trainee to cover their NRSA stipend amount from the grant. Now the remaining slides are websites and resources that you might find helpful as well as contacts, including e-mail addresses for Dennis and I. We want to thank you for your time and attention, and now we'll open the floor for questions.