

Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) Applicant Survey: Feedback on the BFRDP Application Process and Technical Assistance Needs

Introduction

In 2016, the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) funded New Entry to support inexperienced BFRDP applicants through the Educational Enhancement Team (EET) - Assistance grant. A survey of grant applicants was conducted at the beginning of this project, in late Fall of 2016. The primary purpose of the survey was to provide feedback to BFRDP staff to improve the RFA process where possible and to help the New Entry EET project team create targeted trainings and resources to help beginning farmer education organizations successfully submit grant applications.

While the primary focus of the survey was to guide program development for the BFRDP and New Entry staff, results may also be useful for organizations and individuals who support beginning farmer training organizations. Additionally, the results may be of interest to organizations who have applied or are considering applying for BFRDP grants. This report summarizes the basic survey findings for these broader audiences.

Survey Methods

The survey was developed collaboratively among New Entry EET project members and BFRDP staff. The target audience for the survey included those who led a completed BFRDP application, or attempted one. We focused on an application lead in order to reach the person best situated to answer the questions, and to get one survey response per application. Since the identity of previous applicants is confidential, and there is no list of those who had started or considered starting a BFRDP application, a general solicitation letter was developed and sent out widely. New Entry, along with their five EET project partner organizations, sent the announcement to their networks of people who work with beginning farmers around the U.S. Most of the organizations sent the announcement out by email 3 times. The survey was implemented online in Qualtrics software in December 2016 and January 2017.

There were 78 respondents who fit the full criteria for completing the survey. There were 706 unique organizations that had applied for grants since 2009. Thus, we can roughly assume an overall response rate of 11%¹. Since our method of outreach (mass emailing to people who may or may not fit the criteria to take the survey, vs a targeted request to a known audience), this rate is not that unusual. However, most people who responded to the survey had completed the most recent RFA submission (see Table 1).

¹ The response rate for this survey has been estimated, as we did not have the list of people who fit the criteria for the desired population. We do not know how many people attempted an application but didn't finish, nor how many organizations applied more than once.

Table 1: Response rates

Application	Total Submitted to USDA*	Survey Respondents+	Response Rate
FY2017	164	33	20%
FY2016	166	15	9%
FY2014-15	446	22	4%

*Includes those that were late or missing other criteria and thus excluded from further review

+ Survey respondents include those that successfully submitted a survey and those that did not. Not all respondents answered the question regarding when they submitted or attempted the application.

A low response rate makes it more difficult to confidently extrapolate results to the entire population. However, this information can be used similarly to the BFRDP feedback listening sessions - the responses can provide suggestions for changing RFA methods, as well as offer training ideas.

Findings

Who Responded to the Survey

The survey asked several questions about the applications people made, and the organizations that made them. These questions were used to learn more about the population that provided feedback.

Submission Success. Survey participants were asked to identify all the types of submissions or attempted submissions in which they had taken part. The majority of the 78 respondents had submitted applications that had received an award (63%) and did not receive one (64%). There were 30% who began a submission at some point but did not complete it and 13% who began *planning* an application but did not develop it. This information shows that many of the respondents received an award, but had also applied, or attempted to apply, at a previous time.

However, looking at a unique count of participants, 27% submitted but never received an award, and 10% attempted or started conceptualizing a project, but never completed a submission.

Future Plans. The majority of these respondents, 79%, plan to apply for a grant in the future, and 17% are unsure. Only 3 people (4%) said they would not apply.

Organization Types. The majority of organizations responding were nonprofits (67%), followed by 1862 Land Grant universities (12%) and cooperative extension (10%). However, respondents were able to select as many organizations as was appropriate for them. All but one of the cooperative extension respondents were also from an 1862 Land Grant institution.

Table 2: Respondent organizations

Answer	%	Count
Non-profit / community based organization / NGO (non-university)	66.7%	52
Cooperative Extension	10.3%	8
Two-year college	1.3%	1
Four-year college or university	6.4%	5
1862 Land grant university	11.5%	9
1994 Land grant university or other Tribal College	0.0%	0
1890 Land grant university or other Historically Black College/University	0.0%	0
Hispanic Serving Institution	2.6%	2
Other:	3.8%	3
Total	100%	78

Non-Profit Organization Characteristics. The nonprofit organizations were asked to provide information about their staff size and overall annual budget, in order to provide an idea about their size and capacity. The nonprofit organizations had a wide range of staff capacity. Of the 61 people responding, approximately a quarter (26%) had less than 4 FTE, 18% had between 4 and 7.9 FTE, 31% had between 8 and 19.9 FTE, and another quarter (25%) had more than 20 FTE. However, most of their budgets tended to be under \$3 million (87%). Only a third (33%) had budgets of less than \$500,000.

Organization Capacity. To attempt to understand organization capacity, the survey asked if their organization had any person or office that regularly handles grants.gov submissions. Of the 78 respondents, 82% said yes.

Application Attempts. Out of 72 respondents answering the question, 28% had only completed one application as the primary lead. There were 31% who had completed 2 applications as the lead, and 37% had completed 3 or more.

Most Recent Attempt. More information was collected on the most recent project that was submitted. For their most recent application, 87% (of 71) said it was a completed submission, and 13% (9) said it was attempted. For over half of the respondents, the most recent attempt or submission was either their first time applying as a lead (25%) or they were submitting a new proposal (31%), even if they had been a lead before. Twenty-eight percent were submitting a revision or re-submission, and 17% were submitting a renewal.

Project Audiences for Most Recent Application. The audiences these projects aimed to serve vary widely. See the tables below.

Table 3: Project audiences targeted in the most recent submission or attempted submission (n=72)

Answer	%	Count
Aspiring farmers (have not yet started farming independently)	69.4%	50
Start-up beginning farmers (approximately 1-5 years in operation)	76.4%	55
More established beginning farmers (approximately 6-10 years in operation)	48.6%	35
Organic growers	47.2%	34
Specialty crop producers	52.8%	38
Small farms/ranches	65.3%	47
Urban producers	26.4%	19
Traditional commercial producers (other than specialty crops)	12.5%	9
Other	25.0%	18
Total	100%	72

Table 4: Project audiences targeted in the most recent submission or attempted submission (n=67)

Answer	%	Count
Farm workers	23.9%	16
Limited resource producers	59.7%	40
Immigrants	26.9%	18
Refugees	26.9%	18
Military veterans	28.4%	19
African Americans	22.4%	15
Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders	16.4%	11
Hispanic/Latinos	20.9%	14
Native Americans (including tribal groups)	13.4%	9
Producers living with disabilities	3.0%	2
Women	43.3%	29
Seasonal workers	0.0%	0
Other	9.0%	6
None of these groups	14.9%	10
Total	100%	67

Project Partners. Most respondents had multiple project partners: 56% had between 2 and 4 partners on the project, 25% had 5 or more partners, and only 19% reported a single partner. The respondents also reported the number of letters of commitment/support they were

collecting for their most recent application. The majority (62%) collected between 1 and 8 letters, 20% of respondents collected between 9 and 12 letters, and 17% collected 13 or more.

Applicant Timing. We also asked several questions to identify how much time was allotted for the proposal development and submission. Over half of the 72 respondents started working on their proposals before the RFA was released. Twenty-five percent started more than 6 months ahead of time, 36% started 3 to 6 months ahead. Only 31% started two months before the proposal was due. Only 8% started one month or less before the deadline.

In terms of actual writing, respondents generally started drafting the proposal text either 2 months (41%) or 1 month (31%) before it was due. A smaller number (20%) started 3 months or more ahead of time. Only 8% started 3 weeks or less before the application deadline.

Generally, the respondents started entering information into Grants.gov between 1 week (18%) and 2–3 weeks (29%) before the due date. A small group started early – one month or more ahead of time (13%). Only 15% started 2–3 days before it was due, and 6% started on the due date.

Summary. The survey respondents did not seem to fully represent those who applied for grants. Those who filled out the survey were more likely to have received an award at some point (63%), whereas the general award acceptance rate is not that high (24% between 2009 and 2015)². Thus, we cannot with confidence say the results represent the overall target audience. For example, we cannot assume that 50% of all applicants start their application before the RFA is made public; this may be more indicative of those who received awards. However, as noted previously, this information can be useful for identifying the “votes” or preferences of those who responded.

The survey respondents did appear to target some audiences the EET project wanted to be sure to serve. For example, most of the respondents said they plan to apply in the future, and a large proportion were from nonprofits (who are more likely have less experience in or resources for completing federal grants). On the other hand, the survey did not get at all potential audiences. There were no responses from people at 1890 or 1994 Land Grant Universities.

Finally, we hoped to learn more about what strategies led to successful submission of applications vs not completing an application. However, due to the small sample size of those with only unsuccessful applications (9 total, but only 8 answering most questions), we cannot confidently draw those conclusions.

² National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. 2016. Demand for Beginning Farmer Support Programs Greatly Exceeds Available Funding. NSAC Blog, July 18, 2016. <http://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/bfrdp-progress-report/>

Problems Inhibiting a Successful Submission

One purpose of the survey was to identify problems associated with unsuccessful submissions, to identify how they may be addressed in the future. Table 5 shows the problems that were noted by all respondents who were unable to complete a submission at some point.

Table 5: Problems inhibiting a successful grant application (n=28)

Answer	%	Count
Other problems with Grants.gov	82.1%	23
Could not meet the cost match requirements	53.6%	15
Could not meet other requirements	50.0%	14
Started on it too late to get it done in time	42.9%	12
Too much work for available staff	42.9%	12
Could not find appropriate partners	28.6%	8
Not sure if our program was a fit for the priorities	25.0%	7
Application instructions too confusing	7.1%	2
Didn't understand how to use Grants.gov	7.1%	2
Did not identify a compelling need in my area that was not already being met	0.0%	0
Other	50.0%	14
Total	100.0%	28

The primary problem inhibiting a submission was related to “other problems with Grants.gov” (82%). Unfortunately, the survey question did not provide a place for respondents to specify the problem. The next most frequent problem areas were being unable to meet cost match or *other* requirements (for approximately 50% of the respondents). A few respondents described what they meant by “could not meet *other* requirements,” including not setting up or delaying getting SAM registration and DUNS numbers, discovering there was an ongoing award at their organization, or that you can’t apply if in the middle of the award.

The general “other” category was also chosen by 50%. This item included having a family emergency before deadline, an old computer working poorly during submission, submitting 10 minutes after the deadline, etc. Starting too late or the application process being too much work were the issues for 43%.

Given the stated problems, the most straight forward solutions would be to encourage people to start developing their proposal, using/learning Grants.gov, and getting other registration information completed well in advance (which the BFRDP staff have been advocating for some time). Common issues/barriers to successful grant submission include difficulties using Grants.gov and securing the 25% match.

Application Feedback

One goal of the survey was to identify ways to improve the application process, and a number of questions were asked to address this topic.

Application Models. Respondents were asked if they had completed other federal grant applications, and if other federal funding agencies had better instructions or technical assistance. The goal of these questions was to identify any resources or models that might provide ideas for BFRDP application improvement. Ninety percent had completed a grant for another federal agency or department grant, but only 17% thought one of these other grant applications process/systems had information or structures that might be helpful. Looking for ideas from the Risk Management Agency was advocated the most (4).

RFA Clarity. In order to improve the RFA text, respondents were asked how clear the different sections were. Overall, the program goals and narrative instructions had the highest reports of clarity. Just-In-Time pilot instructions and instructions for claiming indirect costs were considered to have the least clarity.

Table 6: Clarity of RFA sections (n=46)

Question	Clear		Somewhat clear		Not very clear		Don't remember		Total
Program goals	80.4%	37	17.4%	8	2.2%	1	0.0%	0	46
Narrative instructions	73.9%	34	21.7%	10	4.4%	2	0.0%	0	46
Evaluation criteria	54.4%	25	37.0%	17	8.7%	4	0.0%	0	46
Instructions for claiming indirect costs	34.8%	16	39.1%	18	21.7%	10	4.4%	2	46
Cost matching instructions	47.8%	22	37.0%	17	15.2%	7	0.0%	0	46
Letters of commitment	50.0%	23	34.8%	16	15.2%	7	0.0%	0	46
Budget instructions	41.3%	19	34.8%	16	21.7%	10	2.2%	1	46
Using Grants.gov	40.0%	18	37.8%	17	17.8%	8	4.4%	2	45
Just-In-Time (JIT) pilot instructions	19.4%	6	45.2%	14	22.6%	7	12.9%	4	31
Other	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	100.0%	1	0.0%	0	1

However, the responses to some items differed when comparing those who completed an application in FY2017 to FY2016 (no one completed this section who only applied before FY2016). There was a large difference noted by the FY2017 respondents, who were much more likely to find cost matching, budget, and using Grants.gov instructions to be clear (see Table 7), which suggests an improvement in the clarity of the language over the past year. However, there could be more error in the responses from those completing it for FY2016 as they had to remember their experience from the previous year, unlike the FY2017 respondents. Focusing on improving the sections with the least clarity, as cited by the FY2017 respondents, may make the most sense.

Table 7: Percent of respondents who found the RFA instructions to be clear, by application period (n=46)

	Clear – FY17		Clear-FY16	
Program goals	80.6%	25	80.0%	12
Narrative instructions	74.2%	23	73.3%	11
Evaluation criteria	58.1%	18	46.7%	7
Instructions for claiming indirect costs	35.5%	11	33.3%	5
Cost matching instructions	61.3%	19	20.0%	3
Letters of commitment	51.6%	16	46.7%	7
Budget instructions	51.6%	16	20.0%	3
Using Grants.gov	51.6%	16	14.3%	2
Just-In-Time (JIT) pilot instructions	20.7%	6	0.0%	0
Other	0.0%	0	0.0%	0

Clarity of Grants.gov Information. To identify the clarity of Grants.gov information, participants were asked if they felt the need to call Grants.gov in the process of developing their most recent submission. The majority said no (53%), 14% said they did not manage the Grants.gov submission, 4% did not get to that step and 29% said yes. Of these respondents, 20 did contact Grants.gov.

General RFA Feedback. Participants were also asked if there was anything else about the RFA language or directions that could be improved. A wide variety of feedback was given to this open-ended question by 27 people, which did not yield clear themes. The specific suggestions were given to the BFRDP staff. Examples include requests to simplify budget forms, tell applicants to budget to attend the required project director’s meeting, decrease the number of times the same information needs to be repeated in the proposal (e.g., project outcomes), etc.

Application Process Preferences. The survey participants were also asked about some of their preferences for upcoming proposals. Regarding the timing of the RFA, the majority of the 72 people responding to this question preferred to have the proposal due before mid-December (69%) or during the last half of January (47%). Very few wanted it in between those times. Only 4% wanted it due in the second half of December and 8% wanted it due in the first half of January³. We also asked participants if they would be interested in applying for a year-long planning grant to develop a more comprehensive proposal. Of the 71 respondents, 41% said yes, 38% were unsure, and 21% said no.

Award Feedback. Those that had submitted a proposal were asked how helpful the feedback was from reviewers. Of the 47 who had received some feedback at that point, 38% said it was helpful, 51% said it was somewhat helpful, and 11% said it was not very helpful.

³ Respondents were only offered these times to pick from, since the BFRDP staff aim to have the proposal out in early Fall, so that projects can be awarded and start within the same fiscal year. However, the timing of the proposal release is based on many factors and it may not be possible to post it at the desired time.

Those who found the feedback at least somewhat helpful (30) said the feedback provided affirmation/confirmation of what they were doing, and provided useful information for improving the program or knowing if they were on track. There were a range of comments about how the project feedback was specifically useful for them.

There were 18 people who shared how the award feedback could be improved. The most frequent request was for the reviewers to offer more specific feedback and share more guidance for improving the proposal. There were also concerns that the feedback was contradictory and that reviewers didn't always appear to be paying attention when reviewing the proposal.

Additional Feedback. We asked survey participants if they had any additional feedback to offer BFRDP staff for improving the BFRDP RFA and the BFRDP grant application process as a whole. Thirty-two people responded. Several of the topics had been addressed in previous questions, and few themes emerged. Several people offered thanks and appreciation. Again, there were many suggestions that were provided to BFRDP staff. Comments included items like encouraging BFRDP to track quality of outcomes not just the numbers served, allowing large universities to get more than one grant at one time (as they have several departments who may have different things to offer), get rid of redundancy in the application, provide more forms and budget templates, etc.

Summary. Suggestions for ways to improve the BFRDP application process include addressing the clarity of the RFA sections, primarily the instructions for indirect costs and Just-In-Time, but also for those sections pertaining to letters of commitment, budget, using Grants.gov, and evaluation criteria. When possible, most applicants prefer a proposal deadline in the first half of December or the last half of January (as compared to the 4 weeks between those times). Suggestions for award feedback had repeated themes: to provide more specifics and guidance, as well as integrating team responses.

Training and Technical Assistance Preferences

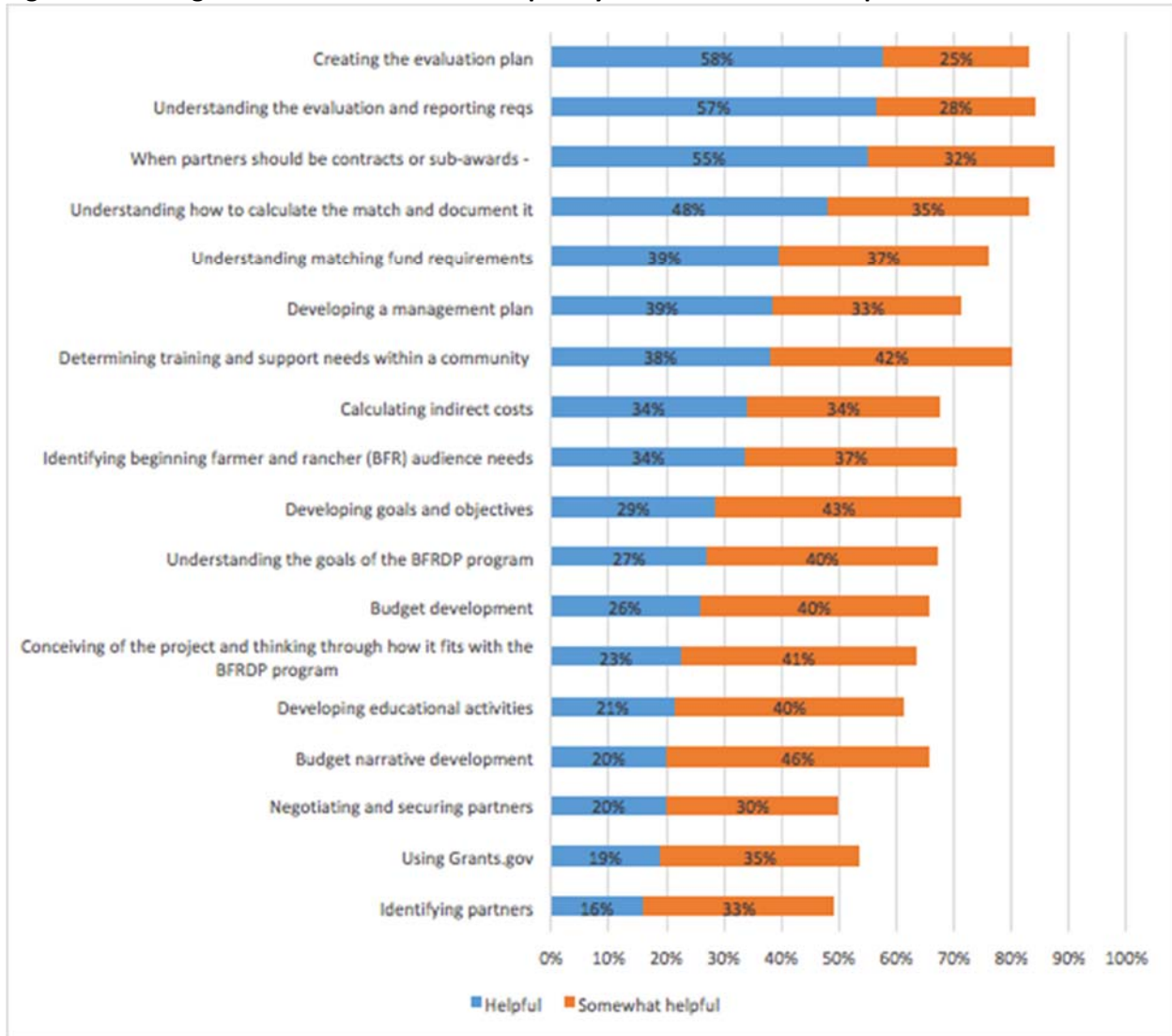
To identify priorities for creating training and technical assistance materials, we asked survey respondents about the topics that would be most useful in developing a grant, how they'd like to receive these materials, and what other professional development topics would support their programming.

Training and Technical Assistance Topics. Respondents were asked to rate a long list of potential training or technical assistance topics as being "helpful," "somewhat helpful," or "not very helpful." A series of topics were both most frequently rated as "helpful," or "somewhat helpful." These are shown below. All topic ratings can be seen in Figure 1.

- Creating an evaluation plan
- Understanding the evaluation and reporting requirements
- When partners should be contracts or sub-awards

- Understanding how to calculate the match and document it
- Understanding matching fund requirements
- Developing a management plan
- Determining training and support needs within a community

Figure 1: Training and Technical Assistance Topics by Level of Perceived Helpfulness⁴



Preferences by Application Status. To better address the issues of those who had a more difficult time with the application process, the topics identified as “helpful” for those who have only attempted an application (8) but were unable to submit are listed below.

- Negotiating and securing partners – 63%
- Budget development – 63%

⁴ Each topic was listed as an individual question to be rated by level of helpfulness. Most questions were answered by 69 to 71 of the respondents, with only 1 being rated by 65 respondents. Percentages were calculated based on the number responding to each question.

- Identifying beginning farmer and rancher audience needs – 63%
- Developing a management plan – 63%
- Calculating indirect costs – 57%
- Identifying partners – 50%
- Developing goals and objectives – 50%
- Understanding the goals of the BFRDP program – 50%

Preferred Method for Delivery. Respondents who identified a training and technical assistance topic as “helpful” were asked to identify how they’d like to get that information, and to choose all that apply – including webinars, short written guides, spreadsheets or worksheets, templates, or examples. The responses varied widely by topic. See Table 8 for details.

Table 8: Percent of Preferred Method for Training and Technical Assistance, for Those Who Rated the Topic as Helpful

Question	webinars	2-8 page guides	worksheets/spreadsheets	templates	examples	Total Respondents
Using Grants.gov	75.0%	33.3%	16.7%	25.0%	41.7%	12
Understanding the goals of the BFRDP program	61.1%	61.1%	27.8%	22.2%	55.6%	18
Identifying beginning farmer and rancher audience needs	52.4%	52.4%	23.8%	33.3%	47.6%	21
Determining training and support needs within a community (what is being done to serve BFRs and what isn't)	45.8%	70.8%	25.0%	29.2%	50.0%	24
Identifying partners	55.6%	44.4%	33.3%	55.6%	55.6%	9
Conceiving of the project and thinking through how it fits with the BFRDP program	73.3%	53.3%	26.7%	33.3%	66.7%	15
Developing goals and objectives	47.4%	63.2%	26.3%	63.2%	89.5%	19
Developing educational activities	57.1%	57.1%	14.3%	28.6%	50.0%	14
Developing a management plan	36.0%	48.0%	28.0%	56.0%	68.0%	25
Budget development	52.9%	29.4%	41.2%	58.8%	64.7%	17
Budget narrative development	46.2%	30.8%	30.8%	53.9%	61.5%	13
Understanding matching fund requirements	65.2%	39.1%	30.4%	26.1%	47.8%	23
Understanding how to calculate the match and document it	46.9%	53.1%	50.0%	46.9%	56.3%	32
Understanding the evaluation and reporting requirements	81.1%	51.4%	21.6%	46.0%	62.2%	37
Creating the evaluation plan	61.5%	48.7%	20.5%	61.5%	74.4%	39
Negotiating and securing partners	54.6%	54.6%	36.4%	27.3%	54.6%	11
When partners should be contracts or sub-awards - when and why	36.1%	66.7%	25.0%	16.7%	58.3%	36
Calculating indirect costs	42.1%	57.9%	42.1%	47.4%	52.6%	19

Professional Development Topics. Respondents were asked, “What other kinds of general professional development topics do you think would help you or your organization/staff provide better programming and develop a strong grant proposal?” Of 69 respondents, program evaluation received the most endorsement (59%) followed by program development (33%), education methods and strategies for adults (33%), and proposal writing (23%). However, those who attempted an application are more interested in both program development and proposal writing (50%).

Summary. Survey respondents prioritized program evaluation topics as the areas in which they would most like training and technical assistance, followed closely by other technical topics such as dealing with cost-match, developing a management plan and contract vs sub-awards. There is also strong interest in programmatic-related topics, particularly for understanding community needs. Those who did not complete an application also prioritized topics regarding the budget, indirect costs development, identifying farmer needs, securing partners and developing goals and objectives.

Final Open-Ended Question

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they had any additional feedback they'd like to offer the BFRDP staff to improve the BFRDP RFA and the BFRDP grant application process as a whole. Eighteen people answered this question. Over half of the responses were “thank you’s” to NIFA, both in general, for conducting the survey and for trying to improving the program and process. A few other items repeated previous comments and added specific suggestions, which have all been forwarded to the BFRDP staff.

Overall Summary

Below are some general observations about the results of the BFRDP Applicant Assistance Survey.

Sample – Representativeness. The survey received what might be considered an average response rate given the methods of outreach. However, it is ultimately low and makes extrapolation to a broader audience challenging. It generally best represents those who applied for BFRDP grants in FY2017. Additionally, those responding do not necessarily mirror the population, as the sample appears to have over-represented those who have received a BFRDP award. It is also likely it under-represents those who did not complete an application (only 8 people who have never completed an application). Therefore, the results do not necessarily reflect the actions and interests of the entire sample population. However, the survey does provide useful information. These results can be used much like other sources of feedback BFRDP staff receive through individual comments and listening sessions to make needed improvements.

Application Process Feedback. Feedback regarding the application process has been shared with BFRDP staff. General feedback focused on the RFA sections with the least clarity, suggested times for proposal due dates, suggestions for proposal reviewers, etc. Specific

comments received in open-ended questions were also shared with staff for their use. However, the survey results have also pointed to issues that could not be addressed by this USDA unit. For example, changes to Grants.gov and the required amount of cost share need to be addressed in other manners⁵.

Training and Technical Assistance Feedback. New Entry project members used survey feedback to develop webinars and resources focused on evaluation, building collaborations, project development and the RFA application generally – which covered many of the topics of primary interest. Next year’s webinars and resources will continue to address the RFA application process in general, education strategies, and additional focus on evaluation. Those working with beginning farmer organizations can look to these results in developing efforts to improve applications success rates and boost program development.

This report was finalized on 5/9/18. The survey was conducted and reported by Jan Perez, Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems, University of California Santa Cruz in conjunction with New Entry Sustainable Farming Project (Third Sector New England Inc.). The report was developed as part of a BFRDP Educational Enhancement Team project entitled: PROVIDING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, EVALUATION SUPPORT, AND CAPACITY BUILDING TO DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES SEEKING TO DEVELOP COMMUNITY FOOD PROJECTS, Agreement #: 2016-33800-25610.

⁵ Cost share is required through legislation, and thus desired changed needs to be addressed through congress. Grants.gov is a federal government wide program, and changes need to be addressed at that level (it is administered by the Office of Management and Budget).