



Highlights of [GAO-03-541](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

USDA's Outreach to Minority-Serving Institutions Could Improve Grant Competition

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) awards more than \$200 million annually to universities and colleges to support its research, education, and extension missions. USDA's largest grant program is the National Research Initiative (NRI). GAO was asked to examine the (1) success of minority-serving institutions in competing for NRI research grants, (2) factors that could improve their success in competing for these grants, and (3) actions USDA has taken to improve the quantity and quality of grant proposals these institutions submit. GAO interviewed senior administrators at 43 minority-serving institutions that had either applied for an NRI grant between fiscal years 1997 and 2001 or received more than \$100,000 from USDA for research, three major land grant universities, and cognizant USDA officials.

What GAO Recommends

To encourage minority-serving institutions to submit more NRI grant proposals, GAO recommends that USDA improve its outreach by tailoring on-site reviews to address strategies for becoming more competitive. In response to USDA's comments on GAO's draft recommendation about the cost of implementing a new outreach effort, GAO revised its recommendation to clarify that USDA could use on-going outreach programs to address strategies for building competitive research programs.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-541.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

In fiscal year 2001, minority-serving institutions competed more successfully for NRI funding than in prior years, as measured by the percentage of grant proposals awarded funding—30 percent of their proposals were awarded as compared with 13 percent in fiscal year 2000 and only 7 percent in fiscal year 1997. However, because minority-serving institutions submitted only 46 of the 2,579 NRI proposals, they received less than 2 percent of the NRI funding in fiscal year 2001. Senior administrators at many of the 43 minority-serving institutions told us that they submit few, if any, proposals because their institutions' limited resources place them at a disadvantage in competing with the major land grant universities.

The minority-serving institutions and three major land grant universities generally told us that the key to success in competing for NRI grants is making a commitment to research by improving an institution's research faculty, equipment, and facilities. Although 35 of the 43 minority-serving institutions said they have made a commitment to performing research, only 4 institutions believe they have the resources needed to compete with the major land grant universities. Several institutions cited the need, for example, to hire faculty members primarily interested in research. The major land grant universities in Montana, Maine, and Vermont said attracting top faculty to perform research and encouraging faculty to submit numerous grant proposals were important factors in their recent competitive success. Two of these universities also used their own funds to support research.

USDA has several initiatives designed to help universities improve the quantity and quality of grant proposals, but these efforts have not substantially benefited many of the minority-serving institutions we contacted. Specifically, upon request, USDA offers on-site reviews to improve a university's research capabilities, grant writing workshops, and communication with USDA officials about the competitive grant programs. However, senior administrators at most of the minority-serving institutions told us that USDA's outreach efforts do not address their particular need to understand how to build a competitive research program that will enable them to generate more NRI grant proposals and receive more funding.

NRI Grants Awarded to Minority-Serving and All Institutions, Fiscal Years 2000 and 2001

NRI grants	2000		2001	
	Minority serving	All	Minority serving	All
Proposals submitted	46	2,746	46	2,579
Proposals awarded	6	683	14	595
Percent awarded	13.0	24.9	30.4	23.1
Funds awarded	\$529	\$109,927	\$1,751	\$97,986

Source: USDA.