Guidance for Startup Requests and Budgeting
College of ACES
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Startup should be viewed as the "first grant" for a new faculty member (here and throughout we assume a starting assistant professor; hiring at more advanced levels often involves more specific negotiations). Startup is not a dowry, a signing bonus, a bribe, or enticement. It is intended to allow a new faculty member to develop a sustainable and productive research program appropriate to their discipline and appointment.

A guide for startup is "what will be the type of grant you expect to maintain your laboratory in the future?" This is not intended to predict the best possible outcome, but rather the type of grant that they might expect to obtain by year 2 or 3. Will it fund a graduate student only, or a technician, or a technician and a postdoc? Will they seek commodity funding (typically runs between $20-30K per year) or USDA ($50-100K in direct costs per year) NSF (typically $50-150K in direct costs per year) or NIH (up to $250K in direct costs per year, but more typically R2 level at $120-130K per year)? What will be their first grant budget? This should provide a reasonable starting point for a maximum yearly request, exclusive of equipment. Thus, unless there are exceptional items, startup should run between $100-300K total (cash and in-kind). Starting a laboratory with 3 postdocs and 2 technicians is not sustainable for most new faculty.

Most new faculty will have no experience in developing realistic budgets, and Department Heads should assume they will need mentoring and guidance. Many will come from large and long- or well-established laboratories and that is the model upon which they base their requests. Furthermore, many will have been given the advice "ask for everything because you will never get another chance for additional money." This is not helpful to new faculty and leads to wasteful spending or unrealistic expectations.

We encourage Heads to counsel new faculty on developing realistic budgets. Startup is a good opportunity to begin this counsel. Realistic budgeting and recognition that laboratories are dynamic and not static, with a realistic expectation for the third-year endpoint and rate of development, can be invaluable mentoring to ensure early success with a new faculty member.

Startup, as a first grant, should provide the ability to establish a research program that can be sustained, and hopefully grow, and the goal is to use the funding for developing not only a productive program but a competitive program. Therefore, understanding what constitutes competiveness needs to be part of the mentoring process. Startup is not intended to be the maximum a program can achieve but rather allow a faculty to be well-placed for their third-year review in a program that can be maintained with external grants. Thus, startup requests should be appropriate to the position. Molecular positions will often need more operating costs. Social science positions may need more travel. The budget should be developed based on realistic expectations. Startup should be expended in the fiscal year it is approved. If that is not possible, written permission must be provided through the corresponding Head outlining the reason for the modification and approved by the Agricultural Experiment Station Director before spending occurs. Although we do not require new faculty spend their startup according to the predetermined, approved budget, spending should only occur on NMSU allowable costs. Unspent start up, after 3 years, will be recovered.

In instruction, summer instruction funds can be requested to allow the new faculty member to be engaged in teaching-related activities: e.g., teach a course; develop a new course; supervise or mentor graduate students (undergraduates or pre-collegiate), pursue an instruction-related or instructional development grant, etc. The bottom line is summer activities add value to the department/college's teaching program, capacity, and/or budget. Summer months are important, productive time in which incoming faculty can grow both their research and their academic programs. We encourage thoughtful, intentional efforts in all three areas of the tripartite mission.

In Extension, startup funds are generally used by Extension Specialists to purchase equipment and a graduate student and/or technician needed for research and Extension programming. The CES Director's Office provides funding for travel and operations so these are not included in startup funds. However, we encourage all faculty to consider alternative funding models to support their programs, e.g. workshops, specialized training, short courses, training programs, etc.

One of the most common mistakes with startup is failing to recognize that laboratories start off slowly and grow. It is unrealistic to assume, for example, that all personnel will be in place on day one, that graduate students will be present the first semester, or that graduate students use resources equally throughout their career. It often takes several months or a year to recruit postdocs, technicians, and graduate students. Moreover, early on the PI will spend their time purchasing supplies and equipment, and the purchasing department has rules they must adhere to so plan ahead. Finally, there is simply a "settling-in" period for new faculty. The most common mistake we see are budgets that are equal for three years when some should have smaller budgets in year 1, while others may have larger budgets.

We recognize that many incoming faculty will need to purchase new equipment, but there will also be positions where there is equipment available. We want to emphasize that startup will not be provided for equipment expenses over $50K that can be shared on campus. It is reasonable that after some time equipment might fail, need to be replaced, or need to be repaired. Likewise, faculty may find that they need specific equipment that was not anticipated at hiring. We much prefer to provide future support than a large startup package that is spent unwisely on equipment that is never used. We also strongly advocate sharing of equipment when possible. This is an opportunity to interact with other faculty and to have personnel interact with other laboratories, often strengthening research and collegiality in the department, college, and university. Large pieces of equipment should be shared wherever possible. Furthermore, we expect departments to contribute to large equipment. We also expect departments to provide graduate student support.

Finally, requests to hire should indicate the type of funding the Department Head expects from this position – commodity, USDA NIFA, NSF, NIH, etc. – and make their request accordingly. They should indicate where large or expensive equipment may be needed. These requests are needed so that we can budget for AES support as well as request support from the Vice President of Research. Additionally, hiring requests should note the strategic or emergent research area highlighted on the NMSU Research website and NMSU and ACES LEADS 2025.