

LGU2U – Session III Accountability and Compliance (November 17, 2021)

The LGU2U Initiative is designed to *“reinforce and enhance the unique relationship between LGUs and NIFA through active learning and engagement resulting in a strengthened and vibrant partnership.”* Over the course of many months, professionals from NIFA and the LGU system held forums to listen and learn, integrate, and discuss unique situations and the occasional challenge that occurs in LGUs and in NIFA. Improved understanding, partner connections, and genuine interest has helped to engage and reimagine NIFA OGFM and LGUs. We continue to delve deeper into key functions of the partnership, with a respectful and more trusting eye towards continuous improvement across NIFA OGFM and LGUs. Small group discussions with NIFA OGFM and LGUs explored additional topics highly relevant to improving processes, quality outcomes and state, regional and national impacts for NIFA and LGUs.

1) Identify the best ways to resolve questions/problems/differences in tracking expenditures.

- Acknowledge the partner. LGUs appreciate the positive communications and timely responses even with the transition.
- Provide ongoing education, communication, supporting documents, and efficient approval processes.
- Acknowledge that LGUs use different systems and processes to track expenditures. Most use Peoplesoft.
- Provide a list of NIFA contacts or website for LGU questions. Provide a mechanism to pose questions (phone, email, chat, moderated online forum, MS Teams channel) to NIFA.
- Review historical areas of concern to anticipate future questions. Analyze the reasons for the problems and then design systems to be proactive.
- Where possible, have joint meetings with NIFA and LGU.
- Check the NIFA notice of award for contact information.
- Work directly with NIFA for assistance and guidance.
- Internally at LGUs interact with other colleges, work with controller’s office, and follow institutional policies and procedures.
- Use separate fund accounts to track capacity and competitive funds with indicators for federal and state funds.
- College-level review critical with knowledge of capacity funds.
- Ensure that directors and supervisors are in sync with financial management practices to guide expenditures following university and NIFA guidance.
- Recognize that not all funds are the same and have unique requirements.
- Improve NIFA understanding of what capacity funds are used for across LGUs beyond faculty salaries.
- Receive quarterly reports with amounts drawn and end dates on grants from NIFA.
- Internal controls to follow organizational regulations coupled with duplicate staff reviews.

2) Brainstorm ideas about the primary approaches to identify roadblocks and ways to improve LGU and NIFA compliance practices.

- Identify a subgroup of LGUs to serve as conduit for system questions. Develop on-going mechanism to gather LGU feedback on challenges.
- NIFA FAQ webpage and general acknowledgement of this good resource.
- Clear NIFA communications to ensure LGUs are following procedures and policies accurately and in-line with expectations.
- Ensure the terms and conditions are updated and are communicated to all levels of LGU employees.
- LGUs should feel comfortable reaching out to NIFA for guidance.
- Education and training with field staff on compliance with effort reporting and certification, particularly with capacity funds and funding splits between federal and state funds.
- Supporting continued engagement with NIFA and LGUs through regional and national meetings with as many NIFA staff present as possible.
- Continue to use and enhance (as appropriate) global emails to listserves with important messages.
- With audit findings, presentation by NIFA with ideas or suggestions of alternatives or how to resolve would be efficient and effective.
- NIFA had created topical resources, yet the LGUs were not aware of their availability.
- Recognize and implement education and practices regarding the unique requirements with NIFA funds with such items as verification reports for capacity funds and match verification across colleges and other units.
- Ongoing communications with NIFA and LGUs to improve compliance at NIFA and uniquely across LGUs.
- Utilize the regional associations to identify common interest areas and resolution opportunities. Ongoing engagement with regional and national meetings such as NERAOC.
- Share best practices across LGUs.
- Recognizing that NIFA is regulatory, LGUs can discuss concepts to be compliant, while adjusting barriers.

3) What are ongoing communication approaches and needs (e.g., proactive communication)?

- Go beyond email, although it has been working well; also use the phone for communications.
- Create an LGU and NIFA Microsoft TEAMS channel.
- General communication increase with LGUs to NIFA. Specific connections to grants management specialists to understand issues.
- Regular office hour Zoom interaction. HELPLINE and email communications have been timely and assist in problem resolution.
- With NIFA administrative contact changes, how is the prior information archived for next professional? NIFA has an electronic award folder.

- Appreciate the new and revised NIFA fact sheets with suggestions to continue to provide emails on updates to LGUs.
- Interest in a standing NIFA OGFM and LGU group to address ongoing issues and new policy practices before roll-out.
- Manage the content and volume of FAQs and websites.
- Concerted efforts to update contact sheets or organizational contacts with NIFA and LGUs.
- Use multiple forms of communications to ensure excellent communications, including follow-up on specific issues.

4) Where are the differences of opinions/disagreements/conflicts? What is most likely to emerge? What are proactive ways to avoid/lessen conflict?

- Good communications and not being afraid to ask NIFA.
- Allow for open dialogue with trust and understanding to talk through situations.
- Disagreements are areas where policy changes may need to be updated or changed.
- During audits have NIFA and LGU staff explain and listen respectfully to differences and identify acceptable paths forward.
- Given the legacy challenges, time and effort best practices should be routinely discussed and robustly shared.
- Acknowledge that NIFA OGFM has personnel that are focused on specific things with different components and ultimately answer questions in a holistic manner.
- Appreciate the informal group discussions with some guidance that allow for people to talk and listen together because it is a team process.
- Consider these types of (LGU2U) breakout sessions at NERAOC with some formal with identified topics and others more informal without pre-identified topics.
- Ensure that the multiple levels of staffs at LGUs understand roles and responsibilities.
- Communicate clearly and ensure that the actual problem and issue is fully understood with NIFA and LGUs.