Overview of the Research Networks Competition

Caroline Ebanks:
Good afternoon and welcome. My name is Caroline Ebanks. I'm the program officer for the Early Learning Research Network. You will hear from three presenters this afternoon -- myself and Dr. Tom Brock, the Commissioner for the National Center for Education Research, and James Benson, the Program Officer for the College Completion Research Network. I'm going to provide you with a quick overview of the structure for the presentation this afternoon.

We will start with an overview of the network by Dr. Tom Brock, and Tom will also describe the network's structure, expectations, and the level of financial investment. I will provide an overview of the Early Learning Network, and describe the requirements for the Research Team and Assessment Team applications. James will provide an overview of the College Completion Research Network and describe the requirements for the College Completion Research Team, and James and I will then talk about the requirements for the Network Lead application. We will then review some general requirements -- application requirements for submitting your application, and we will end with a discussion of how to prepare a high-quality application and the peer review process.

We will take questions or answer questions at the end of each section, or try to incorporate them into the presentation where it makes sense to do so. I will now turn it over to Dr. Tom Brock.

Tom Brock:
Okay, thank you Caroline, and thanks to all of you that are on the telephone today. I wanted to begin just by providing a bit of an overview of this new funding opportunity that IES is providing. As we have thought about the research networks, we really have had three primary objectives. First of all, we were looking for a new mechanism to focus some of our resources, and the field's attention on education issues that are a high priority for the nation. Secondly, we were looking to create a new structure and a new process that would enable researchers to share ideas, build new knowledge, and strengthen their own research and dissemination capacity. Thirdly, we were looking for a vehicle that would advance the field's understanding of a problem or an issue beyond what one research team could do on its own. And as most of you probably know, we provide a number of opportunities at IES for field-initiated work that allows researchers to work on a project of their own development, or their own choosing. Here we really are trying to come up with a new process that is a bit more collaborative and more integrative, than our normal research opportunities.

We've received a number of questions about why IES created the research networks. And just to provide a brief background, about two years ago the Government Accountability Office conducted a review of IES programs, in which they gave IES significant credit for advancing the scientific rigor of education research. But at the same time, we were given the advice that we would really benefit from more stakeholder input into our programs -- both our research programs and our training programs that we support.

Over the past year, both the National Center for Education Research, and the National Center for Special Education Research have undertaken a number of efforts to gain such input. For

example, last year we held two technical working group meetings, one with a group of education practitioners, another with a group of education researchers, to get their views on how our programs were working and areas where we might improve.

Secondly, last August on our website, we posted a letter in which we invited public comment on all of our programs. And then thirdly, throughout the year and really on an ongoing basis, we talk regularly with our colleagues in the Education Department, as well as elsewhere in government to get their input on what the needs are and how our programs might evolve and grow. There were two major themes that evolved from many of these conversations over the past year. One was just a recognition that we are operating in a time of scarce resources, and in such times, we were told by many different people that it would make sense to be clearer about our research priorities. We are funding a wide range of projects across many different topics in our Education Research Grants Program, for instance. But many of the stakeholders and advisors we spoke to suggested that it really would make sense to reserve some of our resources for areas that seem particularly ripe for research attention, or prime for research advances.

A second major theme that did emerge from these conversations, was this theme around collaboration. And while there's a great deal of support for the field-initiated programs that we provide, there was also a view that perhaps, intentionally or not intentionally, many of the IES programs tend to leave researchers working in relative isolation from each other -- on their own projects or with their own teams, but without an obvious mechanism to find out what other people are doing related to the same topics or issues.

So after hearing this feedback and also taking into account specific suggestions that we heard from the field about areas that might be ready for more research attention, we decided to create research networks focused on two major topic areas: the first, in the early learning field, specifically supporting early learning from preschool through early elementary school grades. IES as well as other research funders, have conducted quite a bit of research and supported a lot of research over the past several years that have shown a lot of promise for preschool education, for instance, and strong interventions that help young children prepare for elementary school. At the same time, there has also been quite a large body of research that shows that, as children move from preschool into the elementary school grades, they often fail to maintain some of those early benefits that they acquired from high-quality preschool programs. And so we've looked for ways -- and really looked for ideas about what might be going on during this time, and what kinds of strategies might be developed to help young children make a better transition into early elementary school.

The second topic that we've heard much about, relates to college completion. As many of you know, there've been big advances over the years in the number of students going to college, and in the diversity of students who are attending college in the United States. But, despite increases in college enrollment, college completion rates have remained relatively flat. At the same time, we know from a variety of sources that there is a very strong need to have more college-educated adults in the workforce. And so, looking at the research we've funded, and the other kinds of education research that's been done in recent years, we've noted that there's been a particular gap -- that much of the attention has been on questions of college access, and on questions about helping students over the initial hurdles of getting into college and succeeding, for example, in

developmental education courses. But not so much attention has been placed on college students who are farther along in the pipeline. So again, this then became an area for focus for this new research network.

The overall structure of the research networks is going to be similar, both for the Early Learning Network, as well as the College Completion Network. We intend to fund up to four research teams in each network. In addition, the Early Learning Network will have up to one assessment team that's involved. Each of these teams will carry out a research project of its own design. At the same time, the teams will get together periodically under the coordination and facilitation of a network lead, who will bring them together to share ideas and to think about ways that they might work together to advance their particular research agendas.

This first diagram provides an illustration of how the Early Learning Network will be structured. The network lead -- again we envision it being in the center of this network, who serves as a facilitator, bringing the different research teams and the assessment team together to work on this common issue to better understand how we might improve the transition from preschool programs into early elementary school. The structure for the College Completion Network is basically similar. Once again, we have a network lead who serves in this facilitative role, working with up to four research teams to develop and evaluate strategies that might lead to higher rates of college completion.

Our expectation of members of the network is that they enter into this structure in a collaborative spirit. That they work together to share research plans, to share data collection tools, to exchange information and ideas. We are very hopeful that network members will provide constructive feedback to each other, really serving as friendly critics, if you will, of each other's projects and ideas and findings as they begin to emerge. And also, and perhaps most importantly, that network members will look for opportunities to work together in some ways that might strengthen all of their projects. For instance, network members might work together to develop some common measures or measurement tools that they would utilize across their projects. As their work continues, they might work together to do some common writing to try to synthesize their findings in ways that will be meaningful for policymakers and practitioners. And finally, we are hoping that as the networks evolve that they will also work together around the dissemination of their results.

As I mentioned, the goal for the network lead is to be someone who brings the network members together, who serves in a facilitation way. There are some minimum requirements that we have set up for the network lead. First of all, that he or she bring all of the network members together at least two times in the first year, to begin coordinating their work and discussing their work plans together. After the first year, that they would come together at least one time in person for the same purposes. In addition to the in-person meetings, we would expect the network lead also to coordinate phone or virtual meetings on an as-needed basis. A second critical function for the network lead is to play the role of point person with IES. And as I'll explain in a moment, we are providing some supplementary resources for network members to get together and come back to IES for additional funding for some of these common activities that might support all of their projects -- things like measurement development, for example.

Thirdly, we are expecting the network lead to develop and host a network website, which is a place that would explain the work of the network members as a group. It would also be a place where network members and the public can go to access papers and other products that are developed by network members. And then finally, we are expecting the network lead to be chiefly responsible for organizing briefings or presentations on the work of each network for federal and state policymakers and local practitioners. Just a moment ago, I mentioned the supplementary activities. IES is setting aside up to $1 million for each of the two networks to support their collaborative activities and also to foster some new ideas. Our hope is that these funds will be used to support research and dissemination activities that will be carried out by two or more network members working together. The development of common measures is one clear idea we had, where network members might come together.

A second area that they might think about, is conducting some exploratory research that would answer questions that come up during the course of their individual studies and that might further advance or enrich the research that they're carrying out. A final example that we thought of, is that network members may have some ideas as their work progresses around new research syntheses or articles or publications that they might work on together, and that some additional funding could help support. These ideas are simply illustrative, and are not meant to constrain original thinking. But they are some obvious examples of ways that we think a network of researchers working together could perhaps be more powerful than individual research teams working on their own. We do expect that network members will get together for at least one year before they begin developing these supplementary activities. I want to stress that we are not asking for any proposals for supplementary activities at this stage. Rather, after the networks are formed, this will be one of the first items on their agenda, and that they can begin coming back to the Institute with their ideas and suggestions starting in the second year of funding.

The total investment that IES is planning to make in the networks is rather substantial for IES. The Early Learning Network, we are planning to invest up to $23 million over five years. You can see the breakdown here. Those dollars are divided among the research teams, the assessment team, the network lead, and again the $1 million set aside for supplementary activities. For the College Completion Network, we are planning to devote up to $18 million over five years. And again, you can see the breakdown on the slide. One obvious question is, "Why is IES putting more money into the Early Learning Network at this stage, than the College Completion Network?" One critical reason is that the Office of Early Learning is partnering with IES in support of the Early Learning Network, and has provided some supplementary resources for this particular network. And indeed, some of the expanded activities of that network, including the assessment activities and also some of the additional expectations on the network lead and the research teams, relates to some additional goals or objectives that we heard from the Office of Early Learning.

A final question that we have often received since this opportunity was announced is, "Is this somehow replacing other IES research grant programs? For instance, is this going to supplant the Education Research Grants Program, or the Research and Development Centers Program?" In both cases, the clear answer is "No." The Education Research Grants is our oldest program. It is our most established. It is where we make our largest investments in our grant dollars every year. We expect that will likely continue. The Research and Development Centers, likewise, is

a program that has a long history here at IES, and indeed, it is part of the legislative mandate for the National Center for Education Research. So these programs are not going away. Rather, we're thinking about the research networks as just a new way to achieve some of our goals. We want to underscore that the research networks are still going to be held to the same high standards as other IES grant programs. And also that the funding decisions that we are going to make, are going to be actually arriving at an earlier stage in this next year. So while we are continuing to support the Education Research Grants Program, we are continuing to support the R&D Centers, we will actually first make the decisions on the research networks as a way of establishing their priority. And as we enter the next fiscal year with perhaps some expectation that it will be a tighter funding year than we've had in the past, really ensuring that this work is the first that is launched. So I will stop at this point, and turn the phone back over to Caroline Ebanks to talk more about the Early Learning Network.

Caroline Ebanks:
We are going to respond to some of the questions that came up during Tom's presentation before I discuss the Early Learning Network segment of the presentation. There was a question about the two diagrams showing the structure for each research network. Slides seven and eight of the PowerPoint presentation. There was a comment that the diagrams inaccurately represent the role of the network lead. The diagrams illustrate the number of awards we're going to make. We will award up to four research teams for each network, and a separate award for the network lead. The diagrams accurately represent the plan to award up to four Research Team grants and one Network Lead grant for *each Network* (Early Learning; College Completion), and one Assessment Team grant for the Early Learning Network (see slide 8 of the presentation, diagram for the Early Learning network). There was an additional question about the role of the assessment team. For the Early Learning Network, folks need to look at slide seven, which represents the fact that we will fund up to four research teams, one network lead, and one assessment team. I will say more about the interaction between the research teams and the assessment teams in the Early Learning segment of the presentation. Are there any other questions we need to address?

Mark Gable:
There was a question about whether there's an advantage or disadvantage to applying to be both network lead and research team.

Tom Brock:
This is Tom Brock returning. So there was one question regarding whether there is an advantage to applying to be both network lead and research team. There is no particular advantage. A research team will not get any additional points on their application because they are also putting in to be the network lead. That said, we do want to encourage everyone who does apply to be a research team member, to seriously consider the network lead role. It's obviously a very important role, in terms of the functioning of the overall network, and we think that the teams that are funded to be part of the research network itself are the ones who are going to be best qualified, obviously, to lead the field in this particular subject area.

Caroline Ebanks:

Before we move on, we continue to get questions about the role of the research team and the network lead. To summarize, we will fund up to four research teams, and one of those research teams will also have the network lead role. Or the network lead role could go to the assessment team, if it's the Early Learning Network.

I am going to provide an overview of the Early Learning Network now, and we are on slide 14. As Tom mentioned earlier in his presentation, there has been a great deal of interest and investment in early childhood programming, as well as research and evaluation. But we know less about how to support children's ongoing learning as they transition from early childhood programs into early elementary grades. The purpose of this Early Learning Network is to identify malleable factors that support early learning from preschool through the early elementary grades. We have defined early elementary grades as kindergarten through third grade for the purpose of this grant program. The overall objective of the Early Learning network is to advance the field's understanding and implementation of policies and practices that support early learning and ongoing academic achievement during early elementary school. We hope that through this program of research researchers will identify malleable factors are associated with learning, instruction, and school achievement, and will lead to future development work or evaluation work. [**NOTE:** It is important to note here that **the Institute does not intend to support the development of new interventions or the evaluation of fully development interventions or policy initiatives in the Early Learning Research Network.** Applicants interested in evaluating the efficacy or effectiveness of an intervention or policy initiative should apply for funding under the **Education Research Grants program (305A)** Request for Applications.]

And I will also note, as Tom said earlier, this initiative is being carried out in collaboration with the Office of Early Learning in the U.S Department of Education. This collaboration translates into a greater level of funding for each aspect of the Early Learning Network -- the research teams, the assessment team as well as the network lead. I'm now on slide 15. I'm first going to talk about the roles and responsibilities and requirements for the Research Team application for the Early Learning Network. And then I will talk about the Assessment Team application and those requirements. During this section of the presentation, I will address some questions that have come in about the nature of the research and what we're asking for. [Slide 15] Each Research Team must conduct three complementary, prospective studies: (1) a descriptive study of systems-level policies and practices that support early learning; 92) a classroom observation study to identify classroom-level malleable factors associated with children's school readiness and achievement in preschool and early elementary school; and (3) a longitudinal study to identify malleable factors associated with early learning and school achievement over time form preschool through the early elementary school grades (e.g., kindergarten through third grade).

One question that I've received a lot from applicants is, "Is this truly exploratory?" And the answer is, "Yes." For applicants who are familiar with Goal One of the Education Research Program RFA, we are asking people to focus on exploratory questions, <u>not causal questions</u>. Applicants who are interested in looking at the impact of interventions, programs, or policies on children in preschool or in early elementary school, should apply under the Education Research Program (305A RFA) to conduct an efficacy or an effectiveness study, depending on the stage you are in your research. The focus of Early Learning Research Network is on identifying

malleable factors and conducting exploratory research. We will not support research focused on causal or impact questions.

One thing to note with the three types of studies that applicants are asked to propose, we're expecting each Research Team to conduct place-based research, in-depth, exploratory research in states, regions, cities, or school districts that are providing preschool opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some applicants have asked if can they focus on an entire state. And the answer is yes, it's up to the applicant to define the geographic location. The applicant identify and describe the size of the geographic location (e.g., a school district, region, or state). Make sure that you are able to conduct three *high-quality* studies in whatever geographic location you choose to work in.

I talked about the three studies that each research team is expected to carry out. That's at the site-specific level. The program of research for the three studies -- that will be unique to your site and the geographic location you work in. In addition to site-specific research, each Research Team is expected to participate in network-level activities [see Slide 16]. Tom discussed some of this earlier. So each research team is expected to work with the network lead and other research teams to plan, propose, and conduct supplementary studies, to participate in the annual network team meetings; and to work with the assessment team to support the development of the new, or improvement of an existing, classroom observation tool.

And in terms of this, I've also received questions from applicants about the role and work of the Assessment Team as it relates to the studies that will be conducted by the Research Teams. Specifically, applicants have asked about the classroom observation study. The classroom observation study that each research team is expected to conduct <u>is not dependent on the work of the assessment team and the development of the new classroom observation tool</u>. The development of a classroom observation tool -- the work the assessment team will carry out -- is <u>independent of the site-specific classroom observation study</u>, one of the three studies that each Research Team is expected to conduct. And I will say a little bit more about that later. The important thing to note here is that Research Team applicants should propose to use existing classroom observation tools to conduct the site-specific classroom observation study, <u>not</u> the tool that will be developed by the Assessment Team.

I am now moving to Slide 27-Early Learning Research Team, General Requirements, Sample. For the Early Learning Research Team, there are some general sample requirements that you have to comply with when you prepare your grant application. One, you must focus on children form prekindergarten ((ages 3-5) through early elementary grades (kindergarten through third grade). Two, you must focus on typically developing children, including children who are at risk for lower school achievement because of socio-demographic factors. Three, your longitudinal study sample, must include preschool attenders and non-attenders. You must focus on children in preschool -- so prekindergarten (ages three to five). And you must also focus on the early elementary school grades (kindergarten through third grade). You must focus on typically-developing children, including children who are at risk for lower school achievement because of socio-demographic factors. And for the longitudinal study -- this is one of the three studies that you are expected to carry out -- for that study in particular, you must include preschool attenders and non-attenders in your study sample.

I've received questions from applicants about what we mean by preschool non-attenders. We are defining preschool non-attenders as children who are not enrolled in any formal center-based preschool program (i.e., public pre-k classroom, Head Start, or a private child care center) the year before kindergarten. In the RFA, we defined preschool to include center-based preschool settings. That includes public pre-k classrooms, Head Start settings, as well as private child care centers. And so, non-attenders are children who are not enrolled in any of those center-based settings the year before kindergarten. I am now moving to Slide 28-Outcomes of Interest and Setting. In terms of outcomes of interest -- for preschool you must include measures of children's school-readiness skills, broadly defined to include both pre-academic and socio-behavioral skills. For the elementary school grades, you must include measures of academic achievement *and* socio-behavioral competencies that are associated with academic achievement. Applicants have asked if the wording is deliberate -- if we meant academic *and* socio-behavioral. Yes, we applicants to assess both of those types of outcomes -- both academic and socio-behavioral indicators of early school achievement.

Okay. For setting, for the preschool component, the research must be conducted in center-based prekindergarten programs. I have already defined what we mean by center-based prekindergarten programs (see also page 3 of the RFA). For the elementary school grades, you must focus on kindergarten through third grade, and most of the work we're expecting to be done in public elementary schools, but you may conduct some of that research in private elementary schools. I am now going to talk about the project timeline (19) I've received several questions from applicants about the timeline. In the RFA for the Early Learning Network, we say that for the longitudinal study we're expecting you to follow the children through third grade. Also in the RFA, you're given several options for a start date for your study. The purpose of slide 19 is to illustrate the five-year timeline and alignment with different start date options. If you choose an earlier start date -- for example, if you were to choose January 1st, 2016, your study would end in the middle of the third grade year. My recommendation to applicants is that you choose one of the later start dates, May 1st or June 1st, so that you'll have enough time to cover the third grade school year. At then of the fifth year, we anticipate that we will need to give applicants no-cost extensions to complete final data analysis and dissemination at the end of the five-year funding period. [**NOTE:** You should not include a no-cost extension year in your grant application. You should propose and budget for five years of work.]

[Slide 20-Narrative Requirements]. Now I'm going to talk about the narrative requirements for the research team application. You have up to 30 pages to discuss four things, the significance of the work, a research plan, the personnel, and resources. And I will say a little bit about each one of those. So for significance -- the purpose of this section of the application is to really sell reviewers on why what you're proposing to do is important and how it will make a difference. You want to provide a strong rationale for your approach to addressing the objectives of the network. You want to explain your understanding of the issues the network is meant to address -- so really, how to support children's learning and achievement as they transition from prekindergarten into the early elementary grades. You have to propose an overall plan for your approach to conducting the three studies: the descriptive study of system-level policies, the classroom observation study, and the longitudinal study. You have to describe how your

program of research will inform policy and practice in preschools and early elementary school grades.

For the research plan section [slide 22], we expect you to describe the methodology you will use to answer your research questions, and to collect and analyze data about the malleable factors that you've identified. Your research plan must focus on descriptive, prospective studies. We will not support research focused on causal questions. We're expecting you to conduct primary data collection, and to conduct exploratory studies, play-based work, and all of that should be outlined and described in detail in the research plan section of your project narrative. For personnel [slide 23], there should be a clear alignment between your scope of work and project personnel. So you've outlined why the work is important, and how it will improve early learning and early elementary education, and you've also described how you're going to go about doing the work in your research plan. There should be a clear alignment in the personnel section, in terms of the expertise and experience of key personnel and how that's aligned with your program of research, the research plan and what you say you're going to do. We ask you to describe the responsibilities of each team member, and the level of effort and time commitment. We also want you to identify and describe, the qualifications of all members of the research team who will be involved in the project. And for personnel -- you want to describe key personnel at your institution and co-investigators at other institutions, because we anticipate most people will probably put together collaborative teams. Describe key personnel at the primary institution as well as any sub-award institutions and consultants on the project.

For the resources section [slide 24], basically here we want you to describe the resources you have available at your institution and any sub-award institutions, and any other resources that you will use to help you carry out the work that you propose to do, and to also disseminate the results at the end of the study. So I'm going to revisit again the work of the Research Team and the Assessment Team. Each Research Team applicant may apply for a maximum of $4.5 million. The Research Team will have $4 million to conduct the three site-specific studies outlined in the RFA. In addition, each Research Team must budget for a maximum of $500,000 to work with the Assessment Team on the development of a new classroom observation tool. At the bare minimum to provide input to the assessment team, review the measurement development work as they go through that process -- that iterative process of development the measure, or revising an existing measure, and to help the assessment team validate the tool. [Note: As a reminder, the work of the Assessment Team is **independent of the** site-specific classroom observation study that each Research Team must conduct.] In the grant application, we want each Research Team to describe the allocation of funds for the site-specific studies ($4 million) and the work with the Assessment Team (a maximum of $500,000).

[Slide 25]As I said earlier, the work of the assessment team and the classroom observation measure that they will develop, is <u>independent of the classroom observation tools the Research Teams are expected to use in their site-specific classroom observation studies</u>. Research Team applicants should choose existing classroom observation tools for your classroom observation study, and think about the work of the assessment team as something that will unfold over the five-year period. And at the end of that, we will have a product, but you're not expected to use that tool to conduct the site-specific classroom observation study.

Now for the assessment team, your role, and responsibilities (slide 26). So I'm transitioning now, to talk about the requirements for applicants who are interested in applying for the assessment team role in the network. You're expected to develop and validate a classroom observation tool that can be used by practitioners. And we really stress here, something that can be used by practitioners to assess different aspects of the classroom environment, and aspects of the classroom environment that are associated with child outcomes. And that's why it is very important that you address associations with child outcomes. The assessment team will be responsible for the measurement development work, including the selection of sites for any initial pilot work you do, as well as validating the measure. Assessment team applicants are expected to participate in the annual network team meetings. You will be part of the network. You're expected to work with the research teams to develop the classroom observation tools, and you're expected to work with the network lead to disseminate information about the classroom observation tool. The sample outcomes and setting requirements for the assessment team are similar to the requirements that I described for the research teams, so I'm not going to go through these again. But it's just here for your information, and also in the RFA.

For the assessment team, the project narrative is shorter (see slide 29) -- five pages less than the space you have for a research team application. You have up to 25 pages to address four criteria -- significance, research plan, personnel, and resources. So in this case, for the assessment team, you have to convince reviewers why it's important to develop a new classroom observation tool to meet the needs that we described in the RFA. And you're also expected to provide a description of the assessment you will develop. And that's usually very important to give reviewers the big picture of what the measure will look like. We understand it's something you're going to develop, so it's possible that you won't have actual items when you submit the application. But as much concrete information as you can provide, in terms of giving them a picture of what the end product will look like -- it's helpful to do that in the significance section. In the research plan section, you're expected to describe the methodology you will use to develop the measure. You want to outline a really clear, iterative development process -- if you're going to start with item development work. How you're going to go about getting feedback, how you're going to decide and select items to include in the measure. Do not assume anything, and provide a sufficient level of detail so that reviewers will have a clear understanding of exactly how you will go about the development process.

So for the personnel requirements, it's likely that your assessment team application will be reviewed by psychometricians as well as content-area experts, so you want to make sure that expertise in those areas is evident in the personnel section of the project narrative. You want to make sure you have personnel who have background in measurement work and that you have content-area expertise in terms of the key personnel. For resources, this is very similar to what I described for the research team. You're expected to describe the resources you will have access to to help you successfully complete the project, both at your primary institution and at any sub-award institutions, and to also describe the resources that you will have available to help you disseminate the measure once it's fully developed. Before we transition to the College Completion Network, I'm just going to check to see if there are any questions I need to address before I turn it over to James.

Mark Gable:

No, I think we're okay.

Caroline Ebanks:
Okay. All right.

James Benson:
So good afternoon everybody. I'm James Benson, and I'm here to speak about the College Completion Network. And for those of you who are following the slide presentation, I am now at slide number 34. Before speaking specifically about sections in your application, I would like for all of us to just step back a few steps and think about some big-picture planning ideas for your application. These are questions to think about as you're deciding about your research agenda for a College Completion Network Research team application. And all of my discussion in ensuing slides here, is going to pertain to research team applications. And then, when I get through the research team application slides, then I'll move to a smaller number of slides that will pertain to network lead applications.

So, following up on the big-picture planning, we expect that all of you have already developed a perspective on the field of research pertaining to degree completion. And we do ask that you present this perspective in broad terms in your application. Also, we are asking that you focus on students at open and broad-access institutions. So it is a good idea to think about the student population at these institutions, as well as the organizational features of these institutions, in particular open access, two-year sector institutions and broad-access four-year institutions.

We also encourage you to think about how your specific research agenda fits within the broader field of post-secondary completion research, because doing so will help you to conceptualize how the strategy you are proposing interfaces with other initiatives to help students, and will help reviewers to understand how you will collaborate with researchers from different disciplinary perspectives within the network. Your application will need to make a strong case that the strategy you are proposing can make a substantial difference in degree completion outcomes for students at open and broad-access institutions. The standard of evidence that we set forward for this program is high. It is consistent with requirements for efficacy and effectiveness interventions under the Education Research Grants program. Thus, it is important to think about the most rigorous method for evaluating your strategy. And we want your strategy to be feasible within the constraints posed by institutions as well as available funds within the program.

So, I'm moving to the next slide, which is "Network Background and Objectives." So researchers in the field of post-secondary education have made important progress toward understanding how to encourage and assist students in the process of applying to college. And recent research shows that students have a great deal of interest in attending post-secondary education. Also, there is a great deal of research going on to improve students' preparation for college. For this reason, we chose to focus this grant program on college completion, and what can be done at the post-secondary level to encourage college completion. Large percentages of first-time and returning college students attend community colleges and broad-access four-year institutions. And unfortunately, large percentages of enrollees at these institutions do not complete degrees. For these reasons, we chose to focus on students at these institutions, as a way of focusing limited research dollars on students and settings with the highest needs.

In the RFA, we outlined five areas that researchers have identified as barriers to degree completion, institutional organizational rules and processes; challenges around financing post-secondary education; limitations to curriculum and pedagogy; insufficient advising; and social-psychological factors such as feeling that one does not belong in college, or lacking social behavioral competencies for persisting in college-level coursework. These are the main areas that we see that researchers have identified. If you see additional areas, you can add them to the conceptual framework in your application. We see the scalable strategies network as a way of encouraging collaboration between researchers, including researchers from different disciplines. Although we do not require formal partnerships between researchers and practitioners, we encourage collaboration between researchers and the sites where the research will be taking place. Our big-picture view of the objectives for this grant program is that testing some of the promising strategies identified by researchers in the last 10 years, and thus producing accurate and trustworthy evidence regarding their effectiveness, will lead to solutions that systems and institutions across the country can adopt and implement.

I'm now going to move to the next slide. So the key -- these are the key requirements for research teams. First of all, you will need to conduct an efficacy study. You will carry out an efficacy study of the strategy or intervention that you will be implementing. If your strategy requires development prior to testing, you will have up to two years of development time before testing occurs, and then your efficacy study should begin in year three. It is also possible for your efficacy study to begin in year two, and this timeline would afford a longer measurement window for looking at college completion outcomes. Collaboration. The RFA asks that you commit to collaborate with other network members. And this expectation is built into the meeting schedule, which specifies two meetings per year in year one, and one meeting each year in subsequent years -- as well as the provision for supplementary studies where through the network lead, network members will be able to propose supplementary studies. Regarding sample, your sample must include degree-eligible students. Applications proposing to including students seeking certificates, will not be considered responsive to the RFA. The focus of the network will be on degree completion of Associate's and Bachelor's degrees.

The outcome requirements. When it is possible for you to track degree completion, the RFA encourages you to do so. Degree completion at four-year institutions is more difficult to track during the five-year grant period, but it can be done if the efficacy study begins in year one. For efficacy studies beginning in year two or year three, tracking degree completion in 150 percent of time is possible at two-year institutions, but tracking degree completion at four-year institutions is more difficult. In such situations, we encourage you to track as closely as possible to degree completion. For example, for four-year college students, matriculating to the junior or senior year, or completing 60 or 90 credits would be outcomes that are close to degree completion, and that are likely to lead to degree completion.

Finally, on the setting requirement. The setting for your research must be open or broad-access institutions. Most institutions know the percentage of students that they accept, and we will accept data provided to us by the institutions. In the absence of such data, we will probably rely on the U.S. News and World Report listings. So, if your institutional data doesn't agree with those listings, it would be a good idea for you to include the data that you have. And you can

report these data in Appendix B. Finally, I would say that if the acceptance rate for the institutions in your study are slightly below 75% but above 70%, we will forward your application to the review panel for consideration.

Next, I am moving to the "Research Team's Significance Section" slide. These are suggestions for strengthening each section of your application. And this first slide is focusing on significance section, first looking at the conceptual frame. A strong application will provide a broad conceptual framework of the main factors that inhibit and promote degree completion for students in the focus setting that is open and broad-access institutions. We don't expect you to be exhaustive, as a book could be written on this topic. Rather, you should provide a broad overview of key factors and how they connect to degree completion. You should focus on the challenges faced by student groups within open and broad-access institutional settings, including the specific setting in which you will be conducting research. Your conceptual framework should be consistent with the research design, the data collection, and analysis plans described later in your proposal.

Next, regarding collaboration and working closely with systems and/or institutions: A strong application will demonstrate that the researchers have a collaborative relationship with the systems and/or institutions in which the research will be taking place. You should describe how you collaborated with state or institutional leaders to plan your study, and how you will continue to work together during your research project. The Institute particularly encourages applications that reflect the participation and input from system-level and/or institution-level leaders and staff. You should describe your history working with the research sites, and how you developed your research plans with input from relevant stakeholders. Explain their objectives for participating in the study.

Next, describing your approach and presenting its theory of action: You should describe the intervention that will be the focus of your research, including its major features or components. Make clear how it differs from standard business-as-usual practices and policy. You should take ample room to discuss the theoretical and empirical foundations for the intervention you have selected. Include a theory-of-change diagram to show how the intervention will lead to the desired student education outcomes, and explain the theory in your narrative. Regarding the relevance and scalability of your approach, you should describe how your program of research will inform policy and practice in open and broad-access institutions. Discuss the number of students currently served by the intervention, if it is already operating, and that will be served during the course of your research project. Next, explain how the intervention has the potential to be scaled after your project, if it is shown to be effective.

Now I'm moving to the next section of your application, which will be the research plan section. Regarding the development process, if you propose to do development work for either one or two years, you should describe the development process. And I encourage you to consult page 40 of the RFA for detailed suggestions. Regarding the research design, your research design should be sufficient to make causal inferences from the results of your research. You should discuss what type of design is feasible, given constraints imposed by the stage of implementation for your approach, and how institutions are willing to implement it during an evaluation. Randomized controlled trials are preferred whenever feasible, because they have the strongest

internal validity for causal conclusions. Regression discontinuity designs can also provide unbiased estimates of the effects of education interventions. Quasi-experimental designs, other than a regression discontinuity design can also be proposed when randomization is not possible. In such cases, you should clearly describe the types of conclusions you will be able to draw from your analysis. And I want to emphasize here, that we do understand that there are situations where randomization is not possible, and those are the situations in which proposing a well-designed quasi-experimental design can really help to strengthen your application and give the reviewers confidence that you will be able to draw the strongest possible inferences from your findings.

For all research designs, strong applications will include the following elements. And I encourage you to see pages 41 through 43 of the RFA for more details on these elements. First, a power analysis that clearly describes reasonably expected and minimally important effect sizes for the intervention, considering clustering of participants at research sites. You should include the relevant parameters for your power analysis, so that review panel members can re-compute your power calculations if they so choose. Next, you should include a clear description of all outcome measures, including academic degree completion wherever possible, as well as intermediate outcomes representing changes that the strategy is intended to affect, such as institutional procedures, faculty practices, or socio-behavioral competencies. Next, you should include an analysis of mediators and/or moderators that will help to explain how or under what conditions the program or policy improves student education outcomes. You should include measures of the fidelity of implementation of the intervention, capable of capturing the core components of the intervention. Fidelity of implementation measures should be sufficient in quality to facilitate analysis of factors that mediate the intervention's impact.

Measures of comparison group practices should also be included, so that you can compare intervention and comparison groups on the implementation of critical features of the intervention, and determine whether there was a clear distinction in what the groups received, or whether both groups received key elements of the intervention. If needed, you can propose devoting a short period of time, for example two to six months, to develop a measure of fidelity of implementation. You should describe your data analysis procedures for all analyses. For example, in an impact study sub-group analyses and fidelity of implementation study, and you should include both quantitative and qualitative methods in your description, if you intend to use qualitative as well as quantitative methods. You must include a cost analysis plan that will help colleges and systems understand the monetary costs of implementing the intervention.

Next, I am moving to the "Research Team's Personnel" slide. Regarding qualifications: Your application should present the qualifications of all key personnel at the primary institution, as well as the sub-award institution or institutions, and as well as the consultants. It is helpful to connect general experience in the field to specific work that will be occurring in the project. Regarding sufficient time to carry out the proposed work: All key personnel should have sufficient participation percentages to carry out the work. This is a factor that review panel members consider when they are assessing whether the project can accomplish its objectives and work plan. It -- oftentimes the review panel members get worried when they see participation percentages of one or two percent. Regarding dissemination: You should discuss the record of dissemination for the project team and/or key personnel. Dissemination to policy, practitioner,

and academic audiences is a priority for the completion network. Regarding management structure, you should identify it, and the procedures that will be used to keep your project on-track, and ensure the quality of its work. This is especially important for projects involving multiple institutions carrying out different tasks that must be coordinated or integrated. Also, please provide an organization chart to illustrate how key personnel will relate to one another on the project. This chart can be placed in Appendix B.

Next, my comments pertain to the "Research Team's Resources" slide. Pertaining to grant management: Please describe your institutional capacity and experience to manage a grant of this -- of this size. Regarding research resources, describe your access to resources available from the primary institution, as well as sub-award institutions. Describe your plan for acquiring any resources that are not currently accessible, or that will require significant expenditures and that are necessary for successful completion of the project. Regarding access to participating colleges and universities: Please describe your access to them, and include letters of agreement in Appendix D documenting the participation and cooperation of these institutions. Regarding dissemination, you should describe your capacity for disseminating information about the findings from your research. For example, your university or research firm may have a communications office that can assist with disseminating the results of your project, or your may have members of your research team who have experience disseminating research to non-technical audiences.

Next I'm going to turn to slide 41, which pertains to "Network Lead Application Roles and Responsibilities." The network lead will need to plan and facilitate network meetings, will need to coordinate network supplementary activities. And this includes coordinating applications by network research teams to do supplementary studies. Will also need to develop and host a network website, and will need to organize briefings and presentations when findings become available from the various research teams. The network lead is responsible for making sure that the network runs smoothly and accomplishes its objectives and goals. The network lead should possess subject-area expertise in the network's field, in either early learning or post-secondary completion, and should be committed to helping the network produce a body of work that will be informative and useful to policy makers, practitioners, and other researchers. I may not have mentioned it, but what I just said for the network lead application and roles is -- it pertains to both the Early Learning and Post-Secondary Completion networks.

The next slide also pertains to both networks, and this is the "Network Lead's General Requirements." Only applicants for a network research team, or in the case of the Early Learning Network, a network research team or an Early Learning Network assessment team, will be considered for network lead. If you wish to be considered as a network lead, you must submit an application that describes your plans and qualifications. You should make sure you provide sufficient information in your network lead application for reviewers to understand your plans and qualifications, since the network lead application will be reviewed and scored separately from your other application to be a network member. You are allowed up to 15 pages of narrative for your network lead application for the Early Learning Network, and 10 pages for the College Completion Network. Your application must meet the requirements set out under General Requirements in this section, as well as awards, in order to be responsive and sent forward for scientific peer review. And the reason why we mention the award requirement, is --

I'm sure you've noted already that the award amounts are different for the Early Learning and Post-Secondary Completion Networks.

In terms of requirements for network lead, your application must include a description of your plans. And those are your plans for how you will carry out the objectives of the research network. In other words, how you will facilitate the work of all of these members of the network, and how you will bring together that work in order to produce a meaningful body of research. You also need to provide a detailed description of your qualifications. In terms of recommendations for a strong application, regarding plans, we suggest that you describe your understanding of the network's goals as they relate to the current fields of research policy and practice regarding either early learning or post-secondary completion. We suggest that you describe your vision of how the network lead will help the network accomplish its goals. And we suggest that you discuss your approach to the six minimum requirements for the network lead, which are: one, planning and facilitating network meetings; two, coordinating network supplementary studies; three, developing and hosting a network website; four, organizing briefings; five, meeting with other relevant parties; and six, providing research and guidance and tools for practitioners.

You should describe how you envision network meetings to run. You might consider including a proposed agenda for a kickoff meeting, and put that in your narrative or in Appendix B. Regarding your qualifications: You should discuss the P.I.'s professional background as it pertains to the network, and you should include a biographical sketch describing the P.I.'s past experience working in a research network or collaboration, would also be helpful. Whether you served as a member or a leader, and you can discuss what the network or collaboration intended to do and what was actually accomplished. You should identify key personnel who will be working to support you as network lead and the role that they will play. You can include information on the educational background and professional experience of the key personnel, just as you do for the network research team application. You should provide information on the percentage of time that each key personnel will devote to the network lead role. You should discuss what resources your university, research firm, or organization provides for the network lead role.

As you will probably notice, these recommendations and requirements are very similar for the network lead, to the network research team when it comes to describing the participation and skills of other key personnel, as well as the resources that your university or firm will bring to the table in order to facilitate the research. In terms -- next slide here, is the "Network Lead Project Narrative." You should -- you should describe your understanding of the network's goals as they relate to the current fields of research policy and practice, for either Early Learning or for College Completion. You will describe your vision for how the network lead will help the network to accomplish its goals. And you will describe your plans for meeting all of the minimum requirements. Finally, I've already covered that information as well as the personnel and resources, so I'm not going to repeat this. So we will move on now to slide number 45.

Caroline Ebanks:
Okay. This is Caroline Ebanks again. James talked about requirements for the network lead role that apply to both topics-Early Learning and College Completion. I'm going to talk about some

additional requirements that apply specifically to the Early Learning Network lead. James went over the four -- what we're considering at least minimum requirements for the Network Lead role. And just to recap, the requirements are planning and facilitating meetings, coordinating the network supplementary study activities, developing and hosting a website, and organizing briefings and presentations. In addition, the Early Learning Network lead is expected to organize annual meetings with the Preschool Development Grant recipients, and to provide research guidance and tools for early childhood practitioners.

And the Office of Early Learning has provided funding for the Early Learning Network lead to carry out these two additional activities -- meetings with their grantees, the Preschool Development Grant recipients, and providing guidance and support to early childhood practitioners in general. I'm going to say a little bit more about sort of some of the specific things that we outline in the RFA. For meetings with the Preschool Development Grant recipients, in your application you should propose a plan for working with IES and the Department of Education's Office of Early Learning to organize and host an annual workshop for Preschool Development Grant teams, both evaluators and practitioners -- approximately 100 attendees for each meeting, to discuss the network's research findings, and to provide technical assistance on evaluation design and measurement of classroom quality. There is more detail about this requirement in the RFA. In addition, for providing research guidance and tools -- some of those activities may include providing technical assistance to early childhood practitioners; hosting webinars or other social media efforts to share information about what the network is learning; to provide advice on how to assess and improve their programs. We expect that the work of the assessment team and the development of the new classroom observation tool, is something that both the Preschool Development Grant recipients and other early childhood practitioners will want to learn more about. The network lead will be responsible for sharing that information as well.

I am going to talk about slide 46-Project Narrative, Network Plans You have to describe your understanding of what the network goals are, and the requirements that are specific to the Early Learning Network. That means the six requirements -- the four general ones that James described, as well as the two specific ones I just described. And making sure that in your plan you talk about the general requirements, as well as the specific requirements of meeting with the PDG recipients, as well as providing guidance and tools for early childhood practitioners.

You want to make sure that all is the requirements are addressed in your project narrative. Please note that there is a different page limit for the Early Learning Network lead. It's 10 pages for the College Completion. The Early Learning Network lead has an additional five pages, a total of 15 pages, because we are asking applicant to address additional requirements in the project narrative.

I'm now going to move on to talking about some of the general application requirements (slide 47-Section VI-Application Requirements). All of these requirements are described in detail in the RFA. A P.I. and project team may only submit one research team application. I've received questions from applicants saying, "Well, can I be a P.I. or co-P.I. on multiple teams?" The short answer to that is, "No." We really want you to think about the fact that we're only going to fund up to four research teams per network. And we want the key personnel on a given team to really

focus their efforts on the site-specific work, or in the case of a College Completion, the types of studies they're proposing to do, and not spreading their time and effort and expertise across multiple projects, given the way that the networks will be structured. For the Early Learning Network, research team and assessment team applicants may apply for the network lead role. James mentioned this as well. And for the Early Learning Network, applicants must choose between the research team and assessment team roles. You cannot submit applications for both of those roles.

Here is some general information about the dates and deadlines (see slide 48). The most important date right now, is the deadline for applications, which is **Thursday, August 6th at 4:30 p.m**. If your application is a second late, it's late. We encourage you to submit early, and to submit on time. And usually, there will be high traffic on the due date. Please allow extra time to upload your grant application. We really encourage applicants to submit a few days early, weeks early if you're able to do. Make sure you submit early or on time, because if it's a second late, we will not accept it.

I am now moving on to slide 49-Schedule of Network Meetings. One of the key requirements will be network meetings. We want to make sure that each research team, the network lead, – and in the case of the Early Learning Network, the assessment team -- that you budget for the meetings in your application. Inn the first year, there will be two meetings -- at least one meeting will be held in Washington, D.C. And in each subsequent year, year's two to five, there will be one meeting per year of the network. And those meetings will be held in Washington, D.C. Part of the reason for having the meetings in D.C. is so that IES program staff and other interested federal agency staff will be able to attend the meetings.

Now I'm going to talk a little bit about other important sections of the application (see slide 50). So far we've covered the roles and responsibilities for each type of application -- for the research team, the assessment team, and the network lead. We've also talked about the requirements for the project narrative, which is the main part of the application. But your application will also include some appendices, budget and budget narrative, and James mentioned this when he was discussing personnel -- abbreviated C.V.'s for key project personnel. So I'm going to talk about the appendices and budget information. Appendix A (slide 51). Appendix A is not applicable for the network competition. It's not applicable for the networks, because Appendix A is reserved for resubmissions of applications. When you put in your application, it's likely you'll have information to include in Appendices B, C, D, and E, but not A. Please be aware of that when you're putting together your application.

For Appendix B (slide 52). In this section of the application, it's a great place to include supplementary information. And I want to emphasize that it needs to be supplementary. We really want your project narrative to stand alone, so all of the key information should be in your narrative, and you're really including information in Appendix B to supplement what you have in the narrative. A detailed project timeline is appropriate for Appendix B. For example, charts, tables with detailed psychometric information about your measures, and figures. Make sure that this information is supplementing what you have in the narrative. Reviewers should not have to go to this appendix to find key pieces of information that you did not include in the narrative. When you include information in Appendix B, and the other appendices that I will talk about,

please make sure that you reference that in your project narrative. So for example, if you have a detailed timeline in Appendix B, there should be a sentence -- perhaps in the research plan section of your project narrative, that says, "Please see Appendix B, page five for my project timeline." Something like that.

For Appendix C (slide 53),you have additional space to include examples of materials. For applicants to the College Completion Network, if you're proposing to develop an intervention or a program, and you have examples of those materials, this is a place where you can provide examples for reviewers to review. For Assessment Team applicants for the Early Learning Network, this is a place where you ca include sample test items for a new measure or sample items from an existing classroom observation tool that you are going to reviseThis is where you will put this information. And again, if you include information in Appendix C , make sure you reference the information in your project narrative.

Appendix D -- Letters of Agreement (slide 54). There's no page limit here, and we encourage you to use as many pages as you need. You should include letters from potential study participants (e.g., colleges, pre-k programs, or school districts). In the case of the Early Learning Network, preschool programs, elementary schools, school districts. You should include letters here -- as many letters as you can get. The letters should be as detailed as possible. They shouldn't look like form letters. It should be clear that your research partners understand what they are agreeing to, and what they are agreeing to do is clearly stated in the letters. You should also include letters from consultants on the projects. Depending on what network you're applying for, if you're using secondary data sources, you should include documentation here, so it's clear that you have access to those data sources, or that you will be able to obtain access once a grant is awarded.

Appendix E-Data Management Plan (slide 55) is required for Research Team applications. So if you're submitting a research team application, you will need to include a data management plan. The page limit is five pages. In your data management plan, you should describe how you plan to provide access to the data sources, how you plan to maintain the data sources over time, and what data sources you will include and provide access to. If you have specific questions about this, please contact myself or James, and we'll be happy to provide you with more detail about the types of information you should include in the data management plan.

For the budget and budget narrative (slide 56), I want to spend a couple minutes here. And one is to address some questions that came up earlier, during the Early Learning section of the presentation. So, several questions came in about the link between the work of the research team and the assessment team around measurement development. As I stated earlier, each Research Team in the Early Learning Network will each receive a maximum award of up to $4.5 million. Four million should be allocated for the three site-specific studies that you are required to conduct. Up to $500,000 (a maximum of $500,000) should be allocated for work with the Assessment Team. And by assessment work, we mean a variety of things. The expectation is that each research team will set aside the $500,000 to work closely with the assessment team on the new classroom observation tool that the assessment team will develop. The Assessment Team is responsible for the primary measurement development work, including item development, field tests, and the selection of sites to pilot test and validate the measure. The

Assessment Team will work with the Research Teams to decide how the funds budgeted for assessment work will be used to support the work of the Assessment Team. We're expecting that members of the research team, with the $500,000 allocated for the assessment work, will budget for project personnel who will work with the Assessment Team on a range of tasks related to the development of the classroom observation tool.
It's not just validation work. We want to make clear that the assessment team should allocate funds for the validation portion of the work -- for developing the measure or modifying an existing measure, and for validating it in their budget. The research team with that $500,000 should allocate personnel time, and effort to provide input to the assessment team around development work, to possibly help with the validation of the measure, and to provide ongoing guidance and support. So, set aside that money. You can provide a very basic description in your budget. Just make sure that you've allocated those funds. Once the grants are awarded, obviously over time there will be more details around the types of support that you will provide to the Assessment Team.

One question that came in was, "Will each research team be able to go off and do whatever they want with the $500,000 for assessment work?" The answer is, "No." What each research team does with the $500,000 will be dictated by the type of input, feedback, help, support the assessment team will need to develop the measure and to pilot-test it and validate it. So for the Early Learning Network, in your budget for the research teams, make sure that you have a clear distinction between the $4 million that you will need for your primary research (three site-specific studies), and the $500,000 that will be allocated for work with the Assessment Team . The Early Learning Assessment team has up to $2 million to spend on the assessment development and validation work, and then the Early Learning Network lead has an additional million, because the additional scope of work includes meetings with Preschool Development Grant recipients, and providing guidance and support to early childhood practitioners. The College Completion Research team -- each team will receive a maximum of up to $4 million, and then the network lead will received up to $1 million.

The last thing I want to say in terms of budget and budget narrative -- please make sure that you include a budget for the primary award and for each sub-award institution. Please make sure that your budget narrative provides a sufficient level of detail about personnel and all of the materials, and resources that you'll need to do the work. There should be good alignment between what's on the budget forms and what you describe in the budget narrative to justify the use of funds. And now I'm going to turn it over to Tom, who will end with some helpful tips about the peer review process and preparing a responsive, high quality grant application.

Tom Brock:
Okay. Thanks to all of you who've been hanging in all this time on the call. I just want to close out, just with some suggestions about how to prepare an application that is both responsive and very high quality.

First, just to underscore a couple of points that have already been made. Please be sure you do not exceed the maximum amounts listed in the RFA for each of the network roles. Even if an application comes in just a dollar over the maximum amount, it will be considered non-responsive and will not go forward for peer review. Sometimes, as budgets in particular are

prepared by budget office's separately, it is very easy for even a slight miscalculation or addition to occur that will put a budget over. So be very cognizant of that fact.

The other thing, which Caroline mentioned -- we do take the due date and the deadline and the time very seriously. That is partly just in recognition of the large volume of applications we receive, and a desire to be fair to all applicants. So the 4:30 deadline, Eastern Time, on August 6th, is firm. As Caroline mentioned, please try to get your application in a bit sooner, if you can. In addition to that, the RFA does lay out certain expectations and requirements concerning formatting and font size and so on. Please be sure you pay close attention to all of those requirements as well.

Many of you on the call probably have applied to IES for funding in the past. But if you have not, I would encourage you to go to the IES website and look into the section about how our peer review process is structured. Briefly, when proposals come in to IES, they are first of all screened internally to make sure they are responsive and compliant with the RFA requirements. Once proposals go through that process, all applications that are considered responsive and compliant are sent out to peer reviewers, who have substantive and methodological expertise in the particular area in which you are working. So, for anyone on the call -- rest assured if you are in the Early Learning Network, your proposal will be read by specialists in early learning. Likewise, if you are applying to the College Completion Network.

Initially, there are usually two or three reviewers who will look at an application, who will read the application very closely and assign preliminary scores to that application. Once that process is completed, IES looks at all of the applications that have been received and reviewed, and makes decisions about which applications will go forward to panel. Typically, there is a process known as "triage" at this point. So, some proposals that do not score very well will not be advanced on to the full panel. Only those proposals that are the highest-scoring, that are considered to be truly competitive for funding, will go forward and then will be discussed by a full panel of reviewers.

As I mentioned a moment ago, initially it is two or three reviewers typically, who will look at a proposal very closely. But once an application goes to the full panel, it will be considered by a much larger number of people. Again, everyone on the panel will have broad knowledge of the subject area in which you are submitting your application. But it's important to be aware that not everybody on the panel will necessarily have read the proposal as closely as the first two or three reviewers. And they will be depending on those first two or three reviewers to explain to the panel what the proposal is about, what the strengths of the proposal are, as well as any possible weaknesses or area of concern. And that will be the focus of discussion for the full panel.

Once this process is done, everyone on the panel, including the original reviewers, will again score the proposal. And those scores are put into a computer. They are averaged, and that results in a final score for the application. It is that final score that IES uses then, to make determinations about which applications will be recommended for funding. I think you're all aware that our resources are limited. We also have very high standards. Historically, we only will fund proposals that score in the outstanding to excellent range. So, sometimes we only get a small number of proposals that actually meet that criteria. Other times, we may get a larger

number, but because of funding constraints we can only support so many. And as you heard about in this networks competition, we do have caps on the number of awards for each of the roles in each network.

Both Caroline and James have explained to you the main criteria that will be used to evaluate the proposals. There are four, significance, research plan, personnel, and resources. But within each of those areas, obviously there's a lot of latitude for reviewers to determine the level of quality that a proposal rises to. As you look at your own proposal, and as you look at the RFA, I want you to make sure you pay close attention to our recommendations for a strong application. That is really where much of the variation lies in how proposals are assessed. And those recommendations come largely from our own experience, having looked at many applications come through our system over the years. So we understand what kinds of concerns are likely to come up. We also know from experience what kinds of issues are likely to lead to more or less successful research projects. So please play close attention to all of those recommendations you see in the RFA.

The criteria and scoring for the network lead are somewhat simpler than for the research teams or the assessment team. There will be two criteria. One is the network lead's plans for managing and facilitating the network. Again, as James talked about earlier in the presentation, we have four major expectations of the network lead. And that is where we are looking for elaboration on what those plans are. And I think reviewers in particular will be looking for how logical and sensible the plans are, how compelling the plans are. They may be looking for indications of creativity. People thinking a bit outside the box in terms of how to make these networks really lively, supportive, collaborative groups.

The second criterion for the network lead relates to qualifications. A question came in earlier, "Does the network lead necessarily have to have a Ph.D.?" Not necessarily. We're not requiring that. But be aware that the reviewers for these proposals are going to be looking at the network lead's background and experience, either in the early learning field or in the college completion field. They'll be looking at the publications. They'll be looking at the training and work history of that individual. And also, I think importantly, at other experience the network lead may have had in networks of this type, which might suggest they would be more or less qualified to play this lead role.

There are several easy things all of you can do to improve your score and improve the likelihood that your proposal will be advanced to full panel. Probably the thing I wanted to emphasize the most when you're writing, is just to put yourself in the reviewer's shoes. Each reviewer is looking at a number of applications. These applications, as you know, are very long. They can be dense. Good, clear writing really does make a difference in scoring. Even if it's only subconsciously. I want to encourage you to think about using diagrams and figures to help explain your more complex ideas, such as your conceptual frameworks, or to lay out organizational charts, or how different groups may be relating to each other. As the adage goes, sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words. At the same time, as a reviewer, I have seen the mistake of sometimes people creating diagrams and cramming so much information into them, that they are printed out with microscopic print, and you need a microscope -- or a magnifying

glass, literally, to see what it says. I can tell you that doesn't fly very well with most reviewers, and it's not a good strategy to pursue. So make sure your diagrams are legible and easy to read.

Another easy tip is just to follow the actual organization of the RFA, particularly in the headings and subheadings you use, so that reviewers can quickly and easily find information. Sometimes questions come up, especially during the panel review, "Did this application provide a power analysis?" for instance. Or, "How did they explain their sample selection?" If you use the headings and subheadings from the RFA, it will be very easy for reviewers to find that information. It may be buried somewhere in your application, but if reviewers can't find it easily, they may overlook it.

A final suggestion is just to share your draft proposals before you submit them. First and foremost, I would encourage you to share, if not your proposals, at least your ideas with the program officers to get their input and suggestions. Both Caroline and James know a lot about these fields. They know a lot about how proposals have done in the past going through IES processes. They can be advocates and advisors for you. I'd encourage you to reach out to colleagues with knowledge in your substance areas. And lastly, I would encourage you all to have at least one proofreader -- somebody who is not closely involved in writing the proposal -- to read through and catch the typos and other errors that again, might even subconsciously on the part of reviewers, lead to a lower score. This last slide provides some information for you to get more information, including of course the website address, where you can get the full RFA. Also, where you can go to get the application package. The email addresses for the two program officers: Caroline, who's responsible for the Early Learning Network, and James, who's responsible for the College Completion Network. So with that we'll wrap up our webinar. We are at time, but we can continue to take some questions if there are any from the group.

[unintelligible]

Are there any questions that have come in through the transom?

Mark Gable:
Will geographic diversity [inaudible]?

Tom Brock:
So, a question arose. "Will geographic diversity play any role?" In the Early Learning Network in particular, it does. Because the particular research objectives are place-based, we want to make sure at the Institute that only fund one project within a given geographic location. So, if we receive two high-scoring applications that are proposing to focus in the same geographic area, for example the same city or the same state, we will only take the highest-scoring application in that case. In the College Completion Network, we don't have the same issue, and reviewers in that particular network, I think will be reviewing -- we will ask them to review each proposal on its own terms. That said, obviously we would prefer to see some diversity of institutions, diversity of locations across the country. But that really will be up to reviewers to determine.

James Benson:

You want to take that, Caroline?

Caroline Ebanks:
Another question just came in, and the question is, "Is it expected that the sample for the Early Learning Network already have pre-k to grade three integrated programs in place?" And the answer is, "No." That is not the expectation. We really want you to work in a particular location, really reflecting whatever is current practice, and to look at -- propose studies to answer the questions in that context. So that is not an expectation or a requirement.

Tom Brock:
Are there any other questions? So, we are not seeing any more questions coming in at this time, so we will end the webinar. But if you have other questions or thoughts, please follow up with the respective program officers. Thank you very much for your interest in this particular funding opportunity, and we wish you the best of luck in your proposals.

[end of transcript]