

# NORDP *Rules of Engagement* with Federal Employees

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## **WHY REACH OUT AND ENGAGE THESE INDIVIDUALS?**

NORDP does not have a political agenda, nor does it have grant funding targets for NORDP itself; rather, the #1 reason to speak with federal employees is to educate them about NORDP and explore ways in which NORDP might help them in the work of their agency. Federal agencies are much more likely to work with organizations that can reach broadly across universities than with particular members of a university to avoid perceptions of favoritism. Given the AAU and APLU distribution of NORDP members among small and large, public and private universities, NORDP is well suited to meet this need in an elegant fashion.

## **THE LIFE OF A FEDERAL EMPLOYEE**

Most Federal employees are keenly aware of Federal ethics policies; the key principle is to avoid all perception of bias and favoritism. There are differences of interpretation of ethics policies and principles by different Federal agencies and employees within those agencies – respect what you are being told by a particular Federal employee on ethical issues regardless of your past interactions with other Federal employees. Right or wrong, pushing them on this point can only damage a relationship.

Some guidelines for engagement with Federal employees:

1. **Do Your Homework.** Each Federal agency is organized differently and it is important that you understand the role of the person you are interacting with. For example, within NIH a Program Officer can answer questions about the scientific interests and foci of NIH, but a Scientific Review Officer is better suited to answer questions about the review process itself. Note that while NIH Program Officer can only lend a sympathetic ear to grant policy issues, but a Senior leader would be the best contact to discuss high-level policy issues. Understanding the agency and the roles of individuals within that organization before you make contact, will make your interaction more productive.
2. **First Contact.** It's all about patience and polite persistence. You are likely contacting agency leadership and such leaders have many demands on their time. Most are friendly and quite helpful, but it can be hard to get their attention. Ideally, you have met this person at a meeting where you asked if you could contact them later to give them more information about NORDP. This 30 second conversation puts a face to a name. Also helpful is an introduction – this could be either a direct introduction or permission to say “so and so said I could contact you”. If you have to make a cold contact, start with an email request for a phone call or a meeting. Make the subject line of your email clear – something like “Discussion of the National Organization of Research Development Professionals” or “Improving Team Science”. Do not use the acronym NORDP – they will not know it! Also, make sure to make the subject line distinguishable from spam. Wait a couple of weeks to follow up - they may be very time committed. A simple resending of your original email with a “Just checking back on this” will often politely hit the guilt button and generate a response apologizing for the delay. If the second email does not work, try a phone call. Do not leave messages, which can be ignored or lost and viewed as overly persistent, but instead keep trying until you reach the person. Be clear that you have no set agenda, but that your motivation to reach out to them is to simply educate them about NORDP.
3. **The Conversation.** No agenda is required for the meeting, this is just a conversation in which you would like to educate them about NORDP and learn more about the work of that agency. Email or bring (depending on whether you have a phone call or personal meeting) a few brief leave-behind materials such as the *NORDP Brochure* <http://www.nordp.org/assets/brochures/nordp-brochure.pdf> and/or the *NORDP by the Numbers* flyer <http://www.nordp.org/assets/newsletter/nordp-news-2011-1.1.pdf> so they will remember you,

NORDP, and what you are discussing. Be ready to answer related but off-topic questions. If this is a general introduction, conclude by asking about where they think this could go. If you are discussing a particular issue, be sure to leave with agreed upon action items and follow up with an email. Thank them for their time at the end of the conversation. This makes a big difference.

4. **Follow-Up.** Be sure to send a follow up email thanking them for the conversation. You may want to share the [www.nordp.org](http://www.nordp.org) link. Depending on the conversation you might want to send them a Nature or Science article about Team Science if they are less familiar with this approach, see [http://www.nordp.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=107](http://www.nordp.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=107). Also, send a brief email to of the External Engagement Committee ([ExtEngWG\\_E-List@nordp.memberclicks.net](mailto:ExtEngWG_E-List@nordp.memberclicks.net)) and the NORDP Board ([NORDP\\_BOD@nordp.memberclicks.net](mailto:NORDP_BOD@nordp.memberclicks.net)) to let them know that this interaction occurred. If there is something that may be of interest to the broader community, send a note to the full NORDP list ([RES\\_DEV@nordp.memberclicks.net](mailto:RES_DEV@nordp.memberclicks.net)).
5. **Ethics, Gifts and Travel.** The biggest concept to understand is that a Federal employee has to be impartial about their actions, both in reality and perception. Reality is clear cut, perception is less so. Key ethics laws and regulations apply to financial conflicts of interest, gifts and payments, use of Government position and resources, outside employment and activities, and others. Please be sensitive and respectful when a Federal employee says they cannot do something even if it seems nonsensical. Some of the clearer issues are:
  - a. **Gifts** - Federal employees may not accept gifts that are given because of their official positions or that come from certain interested sources ("prohibited sources").
    - i. A "gift" is defined to mean anything of monetary value, and specifically includes transportation, local travel, lodgings and meals, whether provided in-kind, by purchase of a ticket, payment in advance, or reimbursement after the expense has been incurred.
    - ii. A prohibited source is a person (or an organization made up of such persons) who:
      1. Is seeking official action by, is doing business or seeking to do business with, or is regulated by the employee's agency, or
      2. Has interests that may be substantially affected by performance or nonperformance of the employee's official duties.
    - iii. There are exceptions – these are the most relevant exceptions:
      1. A gift valued at \$20 or less, provided that the total value of gifts from the same person is not more than \$50 in a calendar year. So a NORDP coffee mug is OK.
      2. Gifts of free attendance at certain widely attended gatherings, provided that the agency has determined that attendance is in the interest of the agency. So they can be invited speakers at the NORDP annual meeting and not have to pay registration fees.
      3. Modest refreshments (such as coffee and donuts), greeting cards, plaques and other items of little intrinsic value.

Federal employees and agencies interpret these a bit differently, especially given training that emphasizes perception. Some will accept a lunch of less than \$20, others will not. The best guidance is not to put them on the spot and make them feel uncomfortable. This is not a hospitality issue – it is safer and wiser not to offer something if there is any doubt.

- b. **Travel** – There are circumstances where Federal employees can accept travel to meetings. However, this is usually not the case with those who work with grants or contracts and potential recipients of those grants or contracts.
- c. **Appearance of Favoritism** – Keep in mind that when you speak with a Federal employee you are representing NORDP, not your home university. Federal agencies are much more likely to work with organizations that can reach broadly across communities than with particular members of the community to avoid perceptions of favoritism.