Application Development and Process Streamlining: A Guide For Funders

*Updated: April, 2020*

**Introduction**

Development of a Request for Proposals (also called Call for Proposals or Request for Applications, henceforth referred to as “RFP”s) and associate application portal technology is a complex task for the funder. It may involve taking into account the opinions of multiple internal stakeholders such as the board, IT, scientific program directors, and administrative staff, as well as resource-based challenges in the form of available staff capacity and funding limitations.

This guide is the product of a series of conversations with private biomedical research funders and university research administrators involved in the Nonprofit Funder Research Institution Partnership. It is intended to provide a set of basic guidelines funders can use to make efficient use of their time during the initial development and subsequent revision of their funding application process. It will offer an overview of the university sponsored research process, best practices on program timing and communications, strategy, and general best practices on application maintenance over time. Implementation of these guidelines along with other best practices detailed in various NFRI resources can **improve their RFPs**, **attract higher quality applicants**, **and streamline administrative processes** that cause headaches for staff on both sides of the funding equation.

**Overview of the university sponsored research process**

Funders entering the process of crafting an RFP will typically fashion their documents with the principal investigator (PI) in mind as the primary audience member. However, there are in fact, multiple audiences who may hold responsibility for some aspect of the grant submission process. Development of an RFP with clear language and multiple audiences in mind can eliminate administrative roadblocks down the line once funding decisions are made. In a worst-case scenario, a university may not be able to accept an award if the proper authorized officials have not been notified of a proposal submission.

There are two key audiences who will consult your RFP – **investigators** and **research administration staff**. Each group will have different priorities when doing that first brief scan of your application materials.

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| **FAQs from Investigators** |
|  * Is this funding opportunity a match for my research interests?
* Am I eligible to apply for this award?
* What is the award amount and duration?
* What is the deadline?
* What is the success rate for those applying for this award?
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In addition to the above, **grants administration staff** will have questions regarding the potential financial and legal liability an institution will take on should the PI commit to carrying out the research tasks outlined in a grant proposal. The university offices involved in the grant compliance process will vary in name, but in general will include the Office for Sponsored Research, Finance, Institutional Review Board (IRB), Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), Legal, and the specific Departments/School for whom the PI works.

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| **FAQs from Research Institution Grants Administration**  |
| * Is the budget compliant with funder and institutional guidelines?
* Do we have the resources, space, and staff support (student and/or administrative) necessary to commit to this project?
* Is this proposal something the faculty member should be spending time on?
* Is there a cost share requirement?
* Are there any compliance, intellectual property, or confidentiality issues?
* If the application is a Limited Submission competition, does the institution have the time needed to put together an internal review committee?
* If the funder is a private foundation, how many and what type of applications have we submitted to them in recent history? Is this the best application for us to submit to this particular funder?
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Please note that the funder does not bear responsibility for contacting each of these departments - by requiring sign off on a grant from an **Authorized Official (AO)**, you can verify that there is someone on the university end who will review the submission for any potential compliance issues or administrative roadblocks. Do not ask a faculty member to sign off on official documents, as they do not have signing authority for the research institution. Ideally, the grant application portal can be set up to allow separate electronic sign off and submission of the proposal by the AO. If this is not possible, we recommend utilizing our [**Application Cover Page Guidelines**](https://www.healthra.org/application-cover-page-guidelines_april-2020-mf022021/) for recommendations on how to request this information from investigators at the beginning of the grant application process.

Given the varied needs of investigators and research administrative staff, funders should target both audiences in their grant communications. In the following section, this document will outline best strategies for doing this.

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| **A Note on the Importance of Timing** |
| Much like your own institution, universities have annual rhythms. Whenever possible, **give institutions at least 3 – 4 months advance notice** regarding new funding opportunities or when changes in historical application cycle deadlines are on the horizon.  |

**Funder communications**

Broadly speaking, the RFP is a tool that allows the funder to communicate their desire to support progress in a specific area of research from a potentially wide pool of applicants. In order to receive applications from those whose work is the strongest match for your mission, information related to the creation of a competitive application must have the three following qualities, which will be explored in further detail below:

* Clear Language
* Consistent Messaging
* Convenient Access

**Clear Language**

Vague requirements can create points of tension between an investigator and the research administrator staff. For example, an RFP may include guidelines to the tune of “We prefer that you do not include indirect costs (IDCs) in your budget.” From the funder perspective, this phrasing offers the potential to maximize the dollars that go to direct research while also leaving the door open to award investigators who may be working within strict guidelines to recoup indirect costs.

However, this style of language can be more harmful than helpful. It generates tension between the various stakeholders assembling an application for submission. The investigator will want to minimize or eliminate IDCs in order to appear more attractive to the funder and maximize their research budget. Conversely, the research administrator has a responsibility to include IDCs in the grant budget so as to recoup some of the very real costs of the administrative labor, space, and equipment needed to maintain the research enterprise. This conflict can be resolved through the use of clear and specific language such as “Indirect costs are limited to 20%”. This allows the funder to set indirect costs at a level they feel comfortable while eliminating difficulty and stress for applicants.

While indirect costs are just one example, there are a number of categories where clarity of language is crucial.

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| **Be Clear: What Are Your Limiting Factors for Award Receipt and Expenditures?** |
| * **Late Submissions**: Set clear standards. If you make exceptions for emergencies, natural disasters, etc, state this in your application instructions.
* **Signature Policy**: Requiring a presidential signature on a proposal creates undue administrative burden. Let applicants know you will accept a signature from an **Authorized Official** instead.
* **Budget Categories:** What are your allowable costs?Are they fungible?
* **Limited Submissions:** Are they limited by campus, university system, DUNS number, etc.?
* **Indirect Costs:** How much and what specific charges are included? See the Research Project Support Costs guide for additional guidance.
* **Subawards:**  who should receive any indirect costs? Is the total subaward value a direct cost?
* **Cost Sharing**: Is it required?
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**Consistent Messaging**

Over time your RFP and application portal will likely evolve to address changes in technology, new advances in your field of research, funding priorities of board members or donors, and broader industry trends. To keep pace with these changes, funders should establish an **annual review of all elements of your RFP and application portal** to ensure that they reflect your current administrative guidelines and funding priorities.

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| **Quick Check: Is My Message Consistent Across all Communications Platforms?** |
| * Funding announcement emails
* Website
* FAQs
* Webinars
* Flyers and Press Releases
* Application Portal
* Individual Email or Phone Communications by Staff
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**Application Maintenance Over Time**

Establishment of regular review processes of your communications materials and application portal provides important safeguards against the proliferation of inefficiencies and errors in your processes that may have negative effects on application quality. This revision process need not happen annually, but funders should aim to incorporate feedback from applicants/university administrators, internal staff, review board members, and neutral third parties. Together, this will give you a robust set of data from which you may set about revising your materials.

**Applicants** Create open channels for applicants and research institution administrative staff to communicate with you via email and phone. If you are open to receiving comments, make this clear on your website. In addition, consider incorporating a request for feedback as a part of your communications to applicants during your funding cycle – perhaps when offering feedback on a rejected proposal (see the [Guidelines for Giving Applicants Feedback](https://www.healthra.org/guidelines-for-giving-applicants-feedback-mf022021/) for more information).

**Internal Staff -** Staff provide valuable perspective in that they are familiar with nuances specific to your organization, but provide a fresh set of eyes. This review doesn’t need to be limited to scientific program staff, either.

**Review Board Members -**Participants in your internal and/or external review boards are already strong champions of your mission. In addition to their familiarity with your applicant pool, they bring perspective from other review committees they serve on, enabling them to share valuable “notes from the field”.

**Peer Funding Institutions**  and **Professional Organizations -** Feedback from colleagues within research institutions or other funder institutions can help broaden perspective. Seek them out through professional organizations such as:

* [Health Research Alliance](http://www.healthra.org)
* National Organization of Research Development Professionals
* National Council of University Research Administrators