THE
UNIVERSITY
OF RHODE ISLAND
DIVISION OF RESEARCH
AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT

USING THE REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP) TO
HELP WRITE A FUNDABLE PROPOSAL
REV APRIL 2016

OFFICE OF
RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

Getting to know a request for proposals (RFP)—sometimes called a program announcement (PA) or funding opportunity announcement (FOA)—is an essential step in writing a successful proposal. Requests and announcements are detailed guides to understanding the content, structure, and format necessary for your proposal to even be considered for funding. Following the RFP guidelines will not necessarily guarantee your proposal will be funded, but failing to follow the RFP makes being funded highly unlikely.

Read RFPs carefully: They will not only aid you in writing an effective proposal, but they will also allow you to determine if the program is a proper fit for your research. There is little point in writing an effective proposal if it is to be rejected based on either a small technicality or an overall failure to meet any of the program objectives.

When first reviewing RFPs, you should pay close attention to the following:

- **Note program goals.** Every program is formed out of the specific needs and objectives of an agency. Projects are then funded based on how likely they will allow the agency to fulfill its needs and satisfy its objectives. Program goals will not only allow you to determine whether or not the program is a good fit for your project, but they will also assist you as you write your proposal. As you are writing, keep asking yourself, *"Am I clearly showing how my project meets the program goals?"* Be sure to have people who review your proposal read the program goals so they can ask this question as well. The same applies to overall agency objectives. The better a project fits the goals and objectives of a program and overseeing agency, the more likely it will be funded.

- **Review eligibility requirements.** Agencies often place eligibility restrictions on institutions and principal investigators (PIs) submitting proposals to particular programs. For institutions, they may place limits on the number and type of proposals to be submitted, the total amount of funds awarded to an institution during a particular period of time, etc. For PIs, agencies may place limits based on title or tenure status, citizenship, when a person received a Ph.D., proposals currently submitted to the agency by the PI, the amount and types of funding currently awarded to the PI by the agency, etc. Contact the Office of Sponsored Projects (OSP) if you have eligibility questions.

- **Determine submission deadlines.** Some programs accept full proposals while others require pre-proposals and/or a letter of intent. Others give a list of submission dates throughout a given period of time with an expiration date for competition. For any submission deadline, it is important to understand all that is required to be realistic as to whether or not it is feasible to meet the deadline. Most agencies will not accept late submissions. When possible, set a personal submission deadline prior to the agency's actual deadline in the event any problems should arise. Also, allow for time to gather the necessary signatures, develop the budget, and get your proposal submitted through Cayuse—the University's proposal submission portal—and approved. All full proposals and most pre-proposals must be submitted via Cayuse. The OSP can assist you in developing your budget and with first-time proposal submissions via Cayuse.

- **Investigate funding limitations.** Agencies place a wide variety of limitations on funding for particular programs such as total cost, direct costs, and indirect cost rates allowed. Some agencies also require cost-sharing or matching funds that can vary greatly by type and amount. Keep in mind that such funding requirements must be approved by your college/university administration before a

proposal can be submitted. Agencies regulate funding periods as well. Each of these funding restrictions must be factored into your proposal and can greatly affect the design and scope of a project.

- **Review anticipated funding.** For most programs, agencies list a specific amount of funding available. This information along with an anticipated number of awards to be given can be most helpful in establishing a scope and budget for a project if no total cost limit is specified. It can also assist in determining the likelihood of a project being funded. Note that funding rates can vary widely by programs within a single agency. You might want to consider submitting a proposal to an agency that offers a higher funding percentage. This is especially true for young, less established investigators. Piecing together a few smaller grants before attempting to land a big award is often a prudent strategy.

- **Assess application procedures and guidelines thoroughly.** Most of the large federal agencies have general guides to be followed when submitting proposals. Visit the Office of Research Development (ORD) website and click on "Proposal Writing Guides and Resources" for agency-specific information. These guides describe in detail the content and format to be used in developing a proposal. Details include specific agency forms to be used, number of pages for various sections of a proposal, type and size of font to be used, margin size, etc. Often what RFPs contain are supplemental instructions to application procedures. These instructions indicate additional forms to be included, forms not to be completed, budget restrictions, institutional support required, etc. Failure to follow proper procedures and guidelines may go well beyond having your proposal downgraded by reviewers. Such oversights may cause your proposal to be outright rejected without being reviewed! The ORD can assist you in reviewing your proposal for compliance with the RFP, as well as offering feedback on how well your proposal meets the program goals, etc. Visit the ORD website and click on "Who Can Help Me?" for assistance.

- **Examine review criteria.** The criteria by which reviewers will rate your proposal are listed in the RFP and/or agency general guides. Often, agencies have overall criteria listed in the form of questions to be asked of each proposal submitted. Intellectual merit, significance, broader impacts, and innovation are just a few examples of agencies' overreaching concerns. In addition, specific programs often have additional review criteria by which proposals are judged. Within your proposal you should have specific, easily identifiable answers to each of these criteria questions or give justifications why particular elements do not apply to your project. Some agencies even go so far as to require you to address specific criteria in the summary or introduction of a proposal therein emphasizing their significance.

- **Be aware of award conditions and reporting requirements.** Most award conditions are standard, but with more complex projects involving subcontracting, hiring personnel, and constructing or renovating labs and buildings, conditions can become quite involved and require a great deal of time and effort on the part of a number of individuals to make sure all award conditions are met. The same holds true for reporting requirements. You may wish to meet with post-award personnel in the Office of Sponsored Projects to make certain all demands can be met in a timely fashion. If not, your project may be delayed causing you to miss a project deadline. This in turn may cause your funding to be delayed which may jeopardize the success of your project even further. You may also not be able to receive new awards from an agency until conditions and requirements are met.

- **Note program officer(s) contact information.** You are welcomed and encouraged to contact program officers, but you also want to be smart about how you utilize them. The job of a program officer is to make sure program goals are clearly defined. By making sure investigators are well

informed, officers can best meet the mission of the agency and ensure the most meritorious proposals are awarded funding. You can contact program officers and run projects by them to gauge interest and make certain you are submitting to the proper program. However, before contacting an officer in this regard, review the program goals and objectives and make sure you have a clear grasp of exactly what it is you wish to do. Their job is not to help formulate your research. Their job is to assess how well you can serve their agency's needs. For more specific questions regarding concerns such as budgetary issues, eligibility requirements, or formatting issues, consult the RFP once more before making a call or sending an email. Often most answers are contained within.

- **Review related agency programs if any are listed.** Some agencies list programs generally related to the RFP. Reviewing these listings can be helpful in a couple of ways: You may come across the listing of a program that is a better fit for the project you are trying to fund. You may also find some potential funding sources for future projects.

If you have any questions or would like more information on any of the topics listed above, contact the appropriate Research Development staff member for your college or call (401) 874-5971.