Welcome to “A Beginner’s Guide to Sponsored Project Solicitations”. This is one of the introductory mini-courses in Northwestern’s Sponsored Project Online Training series.
• If you have previously joined us for other mini courses in the Sponsored Project series, you will be familiar with the Sponsored Project Life Cycle. The topics covered in “A Beginner’s Guide to Sponsored Project Solicitations” will fall within the “Proposal Development and Submission” phase.

• This mini course will introduce learners to the sponsored project solicitation - or, more simply, the “solicitation” - and to the processes of reading and evaluating a sponsored project solicitation.
Course Description

• Critically evaluate a solicitation for eligibility and feasibility

• Demonstrate how a solicitation provides guidance for developing a sponsored project proposal

• Identify main components of a solicitation and essential structural information

• Discuss supplementary information and how to acquire it

More specifically, this course will:
• Explain how to critically evaluate a solicitation for eligibility and feasibility limitations
• Demonstrate how a solicitation provides guidance for developing a sponsored project proposal
• Identify the main components of a solicitation and the essential information required to assemble a well-constructed proposal
• Discuss supplementary information common to many types of proposals and how to acquire it
When you have completed this mini course, you will be able to:

• Understand basic terminology common to solicitations and sources of solicitations
• Confirm investigator eligibility and application feasibility in response to most types of solicitations
• Identify special requirements and key risk areas that may be problematic
• Extract the key pieces of information from a sponsored project solicitation in order to develop and submit a complete proposal
• And finally, employ strategies to acquire supplementary information, when necessary.

Before we dive into the solicitation itself, let’s review some basic terminology and important background information that will help you along the way.
### Key Terminology

#### Sponsored Project Solicitation
- Request from a sponsor for project proposals
- Application requirements
- Submission information
- Review criteria
- Award terms and conditions

#### Proposal (or Application)
- Document submitted to a prospective sponsor outlining the proposed project
  - Project goals
  - Methods
  - Time lines
  - Personnel
  - Budget

• One of the ways - if not THE main way - that sponsors engage researchers is via sponsored project solicitations.

• A **sponsored project solicitation**, or simply a “solicitation”, is a request from a sponsor for proposals for specific research, development, or training projects. The solicitation outlines application requirements, submission information and deadlines, review criteria, and award terms and conditions.

• A **proposal** is the document submitted to a prospective sponsor outlining the proposed project, including project goals, methods, time lines, personnel, and budget. The terms “proposal” and “application” are often used synonymously.
Solicitation Synonyms

- Solicitations have a variety of names depending on sponsor and/or proposal type.
- Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
  - **Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA)**: Public solicitation in which an agency announces plans to award funds to support research projects.
  - **PA, RFA, RFP**: Types of FOA’s
  - The review process is the same for all types of solicitations.

- While these terms are often used interchangeably, there are slight differences between them. This is often the case when it comes to the Federal government. For example with agencies in the Department of Health and Human Services, a Funding Opportunity Announcement is a public solicitation in which an agency announces plans to award funds to support research projects, usually as a result of a competitive review process. PA’s, RFA’s, and RFP’s are different subtypes of FOA’s.

- For the purposes of this mini-course, we will not go into the subtle differences of these types because the way we review all solicitations is the same.
Sponsor Categorization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federal Government</th>
<th>Non-Federal Entities</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Executive branch departments (e.g. Depts. of Defense, Health and Human Services, Justice, Education)</td>
<td>• State and local governments</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Independent agencies (e.g. United States Agency for International Development (USAID))</td>
<td>• Foundations/nonprofits</td>
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<td>• Industry</td>
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<td>• International entities</td>
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- Sponsors can be grouped broadly in two categories: U.S. federal government and non-federal entities. Federal government sponsors include executive branch departments (like the Department of Defense) and independent federal agencies (such as the U.S. Agency for International Development or USAID.) All other sponsor types fall under the heading of non-federal entities. These sponsors include state and local governments, foundations and nonprofits, industry, and international entities.
- Knowing a sponsor’s type can provide you with a helpful frame of reference, but don’t let yourself be fooled. Sometimes a sponsor’s category is not obvious based on its name. For example, the National Institutes of Health is a Federal agency but Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute or PCORI is NOT - it’s a foundation.
- Other prime examples include:
  - The Corporation for National and Community Service
  - National Endowment for the Arts
  - Small Business Administration
  - And finally, the National Science Foundation
- Despite what their names may lead you to believe, all of these are independent Federal agencies.
Solicitation Variation by Sponsor

<table>
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<th>Federal Government</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Standardized solicitations</td>
<td>• Wide variation between organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Subject to Federal laws and regulations</td>
<td>• Larger, established sponsors: more formalized</td>
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<tr>
<td>(e.g. Uniform Guidance)</td>
<td>• Small private nonprofits: more unique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Similar (though not identical) terms are</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>common</td>
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• You will encounter variation in solicitations by sponsor type and by individual sponsor. Generally speaking, solicitations from Federal government sponsors are fairly standardized. This is largely due to the fact that all Federal sponsors are subject to laws and regulations that guide the use and management of Federal funds for sponsored projects. These regulations include the Office of Management and Budget Uniform Guidance.

• This is not to say all Federal solicitations are created equal. Individual departments and agencies create their own policies and procedures. A solicitation from NIH can look very different from one issued by the Department of Defense. That said, you tend to see similar terminology and requirements in Federal solicitations, especially those from a single agency or department.

• On the other hand, with solicitations from non-Federal sponsors there is wide variation between organizations. Solicitations can take the form of anything from a public call for proposals to an e-mail invitation sent directly to an investigator.

• One generalization that can be made is this: larger, established sponsors, such as state governments or major corporations, like AbbVie, tend to have a structured, formalized solicitation process whereas solicitations from smaller, private foundations and nonprofits can be particularly unique and
far less predictable.
Finding Solicitations

• Northwestern University Offices
  • Office of Research Development (ORD)
  • Office of Foundation Relations (OFR)
  • Corporate Engagement

• General online search resources (e.g. SciVal, SPIN)
  • Grants.gov

• Organization-specific websites (e.g. NIH, NSF)

• A side note on finding solicitations: If you are working in a research administrator role, in most cases, a potential Principal Investigator for a project will bring to your attention opportunities in which they are interested. However, if you would like to find out more about identifying potential sponsors and locating opportunities for funding, there are valuable resources to assist you, including
  • Northwestern University offices engaged in the identification and cultivation of sponsors and other partners. These include the Offices of Research Development, Foundation Relations, and Corporate Engagement.
  • General online resources for identifying funding opportunities, for example, SciVal Funding and InfoEd SPIN
  • The grants.gov website, which consolidates solicitations from various federal agencies and departments; and finally
  • The websites of individual organizations, including foundations as well as federal agencies, like NIH and NSF.
Your experience can help frame your approach to solicitations from a common sponsor, but don’t be lulled into complacency. In all cases, do NOT let assumptions about a sponsor cause you to be careless or uncritical in your review of a solicitation.

Treat each solicitation individually - even those from the same sponsor. As we discussed earlier, you will see a lot of standardized terms and language in Federal solicitations. But two different solicitations from the same agency - even the same program area - are not the same.

When it comes to reviewing solicitations, the importance of strict attention to detail cannot be overstated. As you will see over the next few slides, your effectiveness at reading and evaluating a solicitation directly impacts the proposal development process and the quality of the final product.
Evaluating a Solicitation: Eligibility & Feasibility

**Eligibility**

- **Institution** (e.g. institute of higher education)
- **Principal Investigator** (e.g. experience factors)
- **Area of research** (e.g. fit with a specific NIH institute)

**Feasibility**

- **Proposal-related**: Immediate time and resource availability (relative to submission deadline)
- **Project-related**: Future resource availability and accessibility (e.g. PI effort commitment)

Once you have the solicitation in hand, the first thing to do is to determine if it would be a worthwhile opportunity to pursue. There are two main considerations: eligibility and feasibility.

**Eligibility** of the institution, an individual investigator, and the project itself must be assessed to ensure that a project would be eligible for funding.

- Some solicitations stipulate that funds will only be granted to certain types of institutions, for example institutions of higher education or nonprofits. Others might require that a PI meet certain criteria, such as being an early-career investigator. It is also important to check that a PI’s area of research is covered by a given solicitation. NIH, for example, is made up of many institutes and centers, and typically only one - or some - of them participate in any given solicitation.

**Feasibility.** You will also have to consider proposal-related and project-related feasibility factors.

- Proposal-related feasibility relates to immediate real-time and resource availability. Look at the submission deadline relative to the day you’re reviewing a solicitation. Consider all that needs to be done in the interim in order to assemble a complete proposal. Then determine if it is realistically feasible to submit an on-time proposal to the sponsor.
- Project-related feasibility relates to required resources. In other words, will all of the resources needed to execute the proposed project be accessible and available. This includes personnel, facilities, and equipment. For example, some solicitations require a defined level of effort from the PI. You would need to consider available effort of the PI in light of other pre-existing commitments and assess whether the PI would have sufficient
effort available should an award be made.
A third consideration related to both eligibility and feasibility is Northwestern-specific allowability. In other words, will Northwestern University policies allow for a proposal to be submitted and/or an award to be made in response to a particular solicitation?

Regarding **eligibility**, Northwestern policies mainly affect personnel- and project-related factors, for example, the allowability of an individual to serve as a PI. A special project-related issue to consider is limited submissions. With limited submissions, a sponsor limits the number of proposals from a single institution in response to a solicitation. In these cases, the proposal development process is coordinated across Northwestern by the Office of Research Development.

Regarding **feasibility**, factors to consider are award terms and cost-sharing.
- Award terms include funding mechanism that the award would be made by, for example a grant versus a cooperative agreement. Award terms also include possible points of negotiation related to intellectual property, confidentiality, and/or publication rights.
- Cost-sharing represents the project costs that would normally be borne by a
sponsor but instead are covered by the University or a third party. When cost-sharing is required by a solicitation, the university must commit a certain amount of its own resources toward the project. As such, there are cases when a cost-sharing requirement would be prohibitive.

When evaluating allowability, you should engage with your department, school, and the Office for Sponsored Research. To find out more, click on the on-screen links to access Northwestern resources online.
Once you’ve confirmed with the investigator that the eligibility and feasibility thresholds for a particular solicitation have been met, it is time to dive into the details of the solicitation.

Just as blueprints provide a guide to builders for constructing a house, a sponsored project solicitation tells the research administrator how to construct a proposal. In other words, a solicitation explains what to do in order to produce a complete and accurate final product that is acceptable to a sponsor for review.

It is very important to review a solicitation in detail. To carry out our building analogy, an oversight in reading the blueprints could be the difference between building a beautiful ski lodge or building a beautiful ski lodge but failing to include the floor supports. In sponsored research terms, it’s the difference between producing a solid proposal that lands an investigator a multi-million dollar grant versus having a proposal rejected for an administrative error.
• In reading a solicitation, the first step is to determine the technical versus administrative components. The PI will be responsible for the technical portion and will work with their research team to complete these components. The Research Administrator will assemble the administrative components of the proposal.

• During the remainder of this course, we will review key areas outlined in a solicitation as related to the most common administrative components. These include:
  • Formatting and submission requirements
  • Budget
  • External collaborations
  • Compliance and
  • Special requirements
Formatting and Submission Requirements

Format Requirements
• Required documents (e.g. application form)
• Page limitations (entire proposal and individual sections)
• Formatting (fonts, margins, file format)

Format Requirements
• Deadline (date, time, and time zone)
• Proposal preliminaries (e.g. Letter of Intent (LOI))
• Application means (e.g. sponsor application system)

ALWAYS create a proposal record in InfoEd!

Formatting and submission requirements outline critical details that vary across sponsors. Formatting requirements include:
• The specific list of documents that need to be included in a proposal, including any relevant application forms
• Page limitations for the entire proposal and for individual sections of the proposal; and
• Any particular document formatting requirements such as fonts, margins, and document file format.

While these items might sound trivial, sponsors will reject proposals that do not follow the guidelines.

Submission requirements outline submission deadlines and method. That is, when and how the proposal should be submitted to the sponsor.
• Submission deadline includes not only the date but also the time and time zone.
• Be sure to note any items that are required in advance of submitting a proposal to a sponsor. For example, a Letter of Intent (or LOI), that provides notification to a sponsor of a PI's intention to submit a full proposal at a later date.
• Finally, application means. Most of the time proposals need to be submitted using a particular application system, such as Fastlane for NSF, grants.gov for NIH, or any number of systems unique to individual sponsors. On occasion, a proposal may need to be emailed directly to the sponsor. Keep in mind that at Northwestern, proposals to grants.gov are submitted system-to-system directly from InfoEd to the government by OSR; submission via other systems happens outside of InfoEd. Regardless of submission means, you will always create a unique proposal record in
InfoEd as a standard Northwestern procedure.
The second item to review closely in the solicitation is the budget structure. In order to properly construct the proposal budget, pay attention to the following items:

- Project period length (For example, many NIH solicitations provide up to 5 years of funding for an individual project.) and whether there are base and option periods
- Estimated funding levels and any applicable award ceiling (For example, an award maximum of $200,000 for a one-year period)
- Facilities and Administrative (or F&A) rate and limit. There are various F&A rates, and these rates change periodically. When reviewing a solicitation’s provision on F&A, pay attention to exactly which rate is required and any sponsor limitations on F&A.
- Whether there are any costs explicitly required or disallowed as budget line items.
- When it comes to required costs, a particular item of note is cost-sharing. As discussed earlier in this course, a requirement for mandatory cost-sharing must be considered when assessing allowability and feasibility. If such a requirement is allowable and feasible, then cost-shared expenses must be factored in when constructing the project budget.
- Finally, pay attention to the format and level of detail required for the budget justification. The budget justification or budget narrative is the description of the budget in a narrative format. A requirement for a high level of detail in the justification and/or supporting documentation can impact the amount of prep work you need to do when assembling a proposal.

For more information about these elements, visit the OSR’s web page on
budget development using the on-screen link.
• Requirements relating to entities outside of Northwestern i.e. Subcontractors, consultants, other service providers
• Pay attention to budget and compliance requirements
• Allow for extra prep time when subcontractors are included

New Subcontractor Request Instructions
Subcontracting on Sponsored Programs Policy

• If a Principal Investigator plans to engage collaborators outside of Northwestern University on the project, it is important to look at the solicitation’s requirements relating to external collaborations. These external collaborations include subcontractors, consultants, and other service providers outside of Northwestern. In particular, pay attention to budget and compliance-related points. There may be cases where a solicitation’s terms or Northwestern policies prohibit or limit engaging with a certain type of collaboration, particularly as a subcontractor.
• As soon as you know that you will be engaging with a certain party as a subcontractor, make sure that they are in InfoEd. If not, then you will have to make a request to add a subcontractor. Note that all subcontractors are subject to a careful screening process coordinated between OSR and the Office for Export Controls at proposal stage. This process can take only a couple days but sometimes can take a week or more. Including a subcontractor also requires gathering information from the subcontractor so that you can complete various parts of the proposal. Be sure to allow sufficient time in advance of a deadline to account for screening and information collection.
• For more information about adding a subcontractor or to read Northwestern’s policy regarding subcontracting on sponsored programs, click on the on-screen links.
• Conflict of Interest (COI) requirements: Disclosures vs. Determinations
• Research with animal subjects/ human research participants (IRB/IACUC)
• Other certifications

• Identify the assurance requirements around items such as conflict of interest, research with animal subjects and human participants, and any other certifications.
• Most of the time certification of compliance in these areas is not required until the award stage, but some solicitations do require it at proposal stage. If so, additional coordination and time will be required as part of the proposal preparation process to make sure the PI has provided all required information and signatures. This is particularly true when it comes to conflicts of interest.
• Pay attention to whether a solicitation requires COI disclosures or determinations. In most cases disclosures are required, and an investigator need only provide a statement regarding potential conflicts. However, if determinations are required, then an investigator’s disclosure statement will have to go through a full review by Northwestern’s Conflict of Interest Office.
• **Requirements related to administrative component areas**
  e.g. budget currency conversion, letters of commitment

• **Additional administrative requirements**
  e.g. facility use, reporting requirements

• **Confirm interpretation of all requirements - contact the sponsor if necessary**

• Finally, pay attention to any special requirements outlined in the solicitations. Special requirements can relate to any of the administrative component areas we already discussed. For example: requirement to convert the budget into a foreign currency or provide letters of commitment from external collaborators

• Requirements can also add an administrative component in addition to the above. For example, an extensive description of facility use or involved reporting requirements.

• Confirm your interpretation of any special terms of which you are unsure with your OSR grants officer and, if necessary, the sponsor point of contact for the solicitation. Two different people can reasonably disagree on the interpretation of the same terms, especially in the case of somewhat unusual requirements. It is important that your interpretation and, consequently, the way you go about preparing a proposal conforms with the sponsor’s request.
A number of sponsors have general resource documents to supplement the instructions contained in individual solicitations. This practice is particularly common among federal agencies.

It’s a good idea to become familiar with these overarching guidelines and application formats, including the NSF’s Grant Proposal Guide (GPG); the DOD General Information and Program Announcement; the PHS 398 Form Instructions, which apply to all agencies in the Department of Health and Human Services, and within DHHS, the NIH’s SF424.

It’s also a good idea to pay attention to notifications of Federal grants policy changes and agency-specific changes as you can expect to see these updates reflected in future solicitations. The OSR website and listservs regularly communicate important sponsor and policy changes to the Northwestern research community. Click on the onscreen link to find out more about the OSR listservs, including how to subscribe.
Don’t learn the hard way - follow these tips and tricks from seasoned research administrators to avoid common pitfalls!

- Physically print out the solicitation or convert the solicitation to a PDF and highlight important/relevant sections (CTRL+F)
- Read the entire solicitation!
- Use checklists: OSR Tools & Checklists
- Take advantage of resources at Northwestern as well as at other institutions.

- Physically print out the solicitation or convert the solicitation to a PDF and highlight important/relevant sections. Using the PDF approach, you can utilize the CTRL+F shortcut in order to find specific items throughout the solicitation.
- Carefully read and review the details of the entire solicitation. While time might not always be on your side, the effort put into the reading on the front end may lead to fewer problems later on in the proposal process.
- Use checklists. Use existing checklists to help organize your review of a solicitation and guide proposal development. OSR has a number of checklists available on its website, which you can access via the onscreen link. Your school or department may also have checklists specific to your unit.
- Take advantage of training and informational resources at Northwestern as well as at other institutions. Attend webinars and brown bag presentations, and search online resources, such as those provided throughout this course, to find out more information.
Review Course Topics

• You should now be able to identify the following terms:
  – Solicitation
  – Request for Application (RFA)
  – Program Announcement (PA)
  – Request for Proposal (RFP)
  – Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA)

• Now it’s time for a review of the topics and definitions that have been covered in this mini course. Take a few minutes to read through the topics and see if you can recall them. If you are unclear on the topics, you may return to the slides that cover the topic. Remember that you can locate slides by referencing the title slides on the left of your screen. Pause the course now while you answer each question.

• And finally, remember that you can view this course at any time for reference.
Congratulations!

• You have now completed *A Beginner’s Guide to Sponsored Project Solicitations* mini course.

• Please do not forget to fill out a post course evaluation.

*Your feedback is meaningful in order to provide the most effective training resources, exercises and content as possible.*

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• Thank you for participating!