Best Practices for Successful Proposal Submission

Each year UVM submits roughly 1,200 proposals for research funding, and along the way, we have learned some basic practices that can help ensure the process goes smoothly, whether you are asking NIH for $5,000,000, or asking a small non-profit for $5,000. Below, we have mapped out the recommended timeline and best-practices approach to working with SPA to submit your proposal.

Six weeks or more before the proposal deadline, the PI/UA should:

1) Create a UVMClick record. At a minimum, plan to provide the following information within the UVMClick Funding Proposal:
   a) **Sponsor and Deadline:** Be sure your funding proposal has this information, in the form of a UVMClick record to capture all relevant proposal information. The UVMClick record will feed into a report to your RA, keeping your proposal on your RA's radar as the deadline draws closer, so be sure the date you enter as the deadline is accurate.
   b) **Proposal Guidelines:** Now is the time to upload sponsor guidelines to the UVMClick funding proposal and send questions to your SPA RA to work out answers to basic questions about funding levels, F&A rates, allowable costs, cost share requirements, and any regulations or proposal elements that will add complexity and require time and planning. (See below section on proposal elements that add complexity.)
   c) **Preliminary Budget:** If you have budget numbers at this stage, even if they are rough estimates or merely a personnel list, give these to your UA for review. This will allow you to develop your budget in line with UVM's fringe and F&A rates and will reduce the need for last minute adjustments.

Five weeks to two weeks ahead of deadline:

The PI/UA should be working during this period to finalize the administrative pieces of the proposal, sometimes in consultation with their SPA RA and sometimes on their own. This can include such things as:

1) Finalizing the budget
2) Communicating with subrecipients to ensure timely availability of all subaward materials (PI and/or Dept. Admin.)
3) Checking off compliance requirements (PI/UA -- see Proposal Development section of this document for more details).
4) Use this time to **reread the Sponsor Guidelines carefully**. Make sure you know the rules that should guide and restrict your proposal budget (F&A limits, effort requirements, unallowable direct costs) and documents (page limits, font requirements, rules regarding hyperlinks, etc.), so you can avoid last minute changes.
5) **Note what has changed since your last submission to this sponsor.** For example, the new Human Subjects and Clinical Trials forms for NIH proposals require much more extensive information at the time of proposal than proposals submitted before January 25, 2018. **The HS/CT forms can take experienced PIs up to two days to complete**. Even if your proposal is a resubmission, take the time to get up to date on the latest rules and requirements so you are not left scrambling on the day of the deadline.

During the proposal development period, the PI/UA should feel free to contact the SPA RA with questions as they arise. Asking for consultation early allows time to ensure accurate information. Finalizing the budget can involve several rounds of consultation and revision.

Asking questions early in the process can help avoid frantic last-minute revisions and errors. For departments who submit frequently, or in the case of quite simple proposals, there may not be much contact with SPA during the intervening weeks. Whatever the case, your goal is to use this time to get the proposal ready to route for approvals and submit.

Two to one-and-a-half weeks before the deadline:

By now the proposal should be nearly ready, and the PI/UA should contact the SPA RA to clear up remaining questions and make arrangements to a route. **Proposals should route no later than one week before the deadline.**

During the routing process, it is important to plan ahead and **consider the reviewers' availability**. If your proposal is complex, it can add time to the review. Some recommendations:

1) Notify your reviewers ahead of time so they can work your proposal review into their schedule. What days are they on campus and what time are they available to look at your proposal?
2) Find out who will be out of town or out of the country. Routing when your Department Chair or Dean is away not impossible, but it does warrant advanced planning to account for time differences and email availability.
3) Talk to your SPA RA about other proposals they have on their schedule. UVM's SPA office has four RAs to cover all UVM's outgoing proposals, for over 300 PIs. Having a conversation about their competing priorities can go a long way toward getting things routed on schedule.

Two Full Days Before the Deadline:

The PI should have his or her proposal ready to submit **two full days before the deadline**. Proposal submission deadlines are periods of intense activity for SPA's RAs. To give each proposal, the customary review, **SPA requests two business days ahead of the deadline to review** your proposal for submission. Some tips:

1) Submitting prior to the deadline allows time to fix errors or resolve technical issues.
2) Expect your Department Chair, College Dean and/or SPA RA to have some feedback on your proposal even after you have declared it ready to submit. For example, the RA may notice an issue with the final application that you need to fix, which may then need to be reviewed and approved a second time by your Chair and Dean, or we may run into technical issues with the submission system. The PI/UA must be available around the deadline for the submission to make final corrections, if necessary.
3) Communication is key to a smooth proposal submission day. The PI/UA must stay available, by phone or email to the SPA RA, until after the deadline has passed.

The following circumstances **add complexity** to the proposal process and should prompt the PI/UA to **allow more time to develop and review proposal:**

Subawards

When a PI plans to add a subrecipient to his or her proposal, there is typically a fair amount of communication back and forth between the UAs at each institution. For the PI to route and submit the proposal, all subaward documents, including but not limited to the budget, justification, and scope of work must be finalized in enough time to review and request corrections from the subrecipient well in advance of the deadline.

Multiple Project Budgets or Components (program projects, for example)

Every additional project is an additional budget to finalize, an additional group of personnel to account for (think of the bio sketches!), and, if several budgets must add up to fit within a total direct costs cap, a seemingly endless round of tiny adjustments and places for small mistakes to hide. Simply based on the budget complexity, multi-project proposals should be initiated within UVMClick at least 8 weeks ahead of the deadline.

These are complicated proposals to route and submit, too. In some cases, sponsors can require that each individual project of a multi-project proposal be a stand-alone submission that is linked to the others, turning a single proposal into several full proposal submissions. Add a technical glitch or an error that becomes known on final review, and it becomes clear that aiming to submit before the day of the deadline is a good idea. As with all proposals, these proposals should be submission ready two days ahead of the deadline to allow adequate time for review.

International Collaborations

International institutions may not be familiar with the proposal requirements for U.S. federal sponsors. It can take significantly more time for these institutions to complete the necessary proposal requirements than a domestic one. Additionally, any communications between PI/UAs at each institution can be significantly delayed due to differences in time zone.

International Sponsors

PIs should propose their budgets in US dollars. If there is a chance that the sponsor could award the proposal in a foreign currency, the PI's department assumes a financial risk, since fluctuations in the exchange rate between time of proposal and time of award can make the award come in at a lower dollar amount that is needed to complete the scope of work. Any fees associated with changing currency are the responsibility of the department. It is important for departments and PIs to have this conversation early in the proposal process so they can properly evaluate the risks of submitting a proposal to the sponsor in question.