SPA Proposal Process Appendix C: Avoiding Common Problems

Proposal submission is a complicated process that involves managing a wide range of factors, some of them expected, and some . . . well, not. Most proposal submissions go smoothly. When something doesn't go as planned, the SPA RA will do everything in his or her power to troubleshoot quickly and effectively so the best possible proposal gets to the sponsor on time. In order to do this, SPA needs two things: time and good communication.

Indeed, improved management of time and communication can help eliminate most of the proposal problems listed below. Here are the issues we encounter most often, along with suggestions on how to avoid them.

Waiting too long to involve SPA in the proposal process:

Six weeks ahead of the proposal deadline may seem early to initiate a UVMClick funding proposal or contact your SPA RA with questions about an upcoming proposal submission, but you should consider this initial check-in with SPA one of the most critical steps in preparing your proposal. Many of the questions addressed at this stage are basic and have to do with the sponsor guidelines for the funding opportunity: How much funding can you ask for? What will the sponsor cover in terms of indirect costs, graduate tuition, travel, or effort? Is there a minimum effort requirement? What is the deadline? The earliest starting date? What size font are you allowed to use?

Immersed as you may be at this stage in the content of your research, such questions can seem trivial and beside the point. But **many of these questions have major implications for the proposal's development, particularly the budget**. Leaving these issues until just a couple weeks before the proposal is due can result in budget mistakes that require changes late in the process, which can delay approving the proposal and ultimately delay submission. Contact SPA early so you can cover the administrative questions and go forward with your research confident that you have what is required to submit.

Too little time between "ready to submit" and the proposal deadline:

The PI has the ultimate responsibility for the accuracy, timely completion, and compliance of the proposal, so **why does SPA request two full business days to review the proposal before the deadline?**

One reason is the number of proposals SPA submits. On any given deadline date, your SPA RA will likely need to balance several proposal submissions from several departments and PIs, possibly to different sponsors using different proposal submission systems. Even if everything goes perfectly, reviewing multiple proposals and submitting them on time requires advance planning.

If there is a glitch, whether an error comes to light in the proposal materials or the proposal submission system doesn't function properly, the SPA RA needs time to address it and a direct line of communication to the PI/UA to get timely input on decisions that must be made about the proposal. Though the accuracy of the proposal is up to the PI, SPA RAs routinely find in the course of their review small errors or omissions that could cause a proposal to be rejected or not reviewed at all, even after Chairs and Deans have given their approval.. If the PI doesn't give the "ok to submit" until a couple of hours before the deadline, that leaves very little time to review the proposal and respond effectively to unexpected developments.

Finalizing subawards too close to the proposal deadline:

Subawards always add a layer of complexity to an application, and because of this most proposals with subawards should have subawards finalized and ready to be reviewed on route well ahead of the due date. We suggest at least three days for a submission ready proposal. (See below for more on how subawards are a complicating factor).

In order for the PI to finalize his or her budget and proposal in time to route and submit, he or she needs to have all finalized subrecipient materials to add to the proposal and budget. To get these materials from a single subrecipient requires a fair amount of back-and-forth communication between the PI/UA and their counterparts at the collaborating institution. Add more than one subaward, and the time needed to get this piece done begins to add up quickly.

It is the PI/UA's responsibility to upload complete and accurate subaward material to UVMClick for review. Any PI/UA submitting a proposal with Subawards should work with his or her RA early to understand the requirements for Subawards at time of proposal development.

Downplaying the importance of administrative details and requirements:

Understandably, the research content is foremost in the PI's mind, but even the best science can be derailed by failing to attend to seemingly insignificant administrative details, and part of the PI's responsibility is to ensure his or her application adheres to all application requirements. **Read the sponsor guidelines carefully every time you submit and adhere to every rule.**

SPA is here to help with interpreting the sponsor's guidelines regarding page limits and allowable content, and given enough time ahead of the deadline to review, can sometimes catch errors and give feedback on recommended corrections if needed. Don't make the mistake of thinking "that's just administrative," when something as small as a single extra line of text or a single hyperlink could make the difference between your proposal being reviewed or not.

We suggest finalizing the administrative components of a proposal as early as possible.

Not reading available terms and conditions at time of proposal:

These are not always readily available at time of proposal, but if they are, take the time, in consultation with your research administrator, to make sure that UVM has the structure in place to bill and administer the award.

Cost Policy and cost category mistakes:

SPA's website has extensive information on direct cost categories, and your SPA RA can help you clarify whether you are using the correct cost categories. Some of the most commonly misused categories are:

Participant/trainee support costs:

These costs for things such as stipends, travel, registration fees, or tuition paid to or on behalf of participants or trainees (but not employees) in connection with conferences or training projects. For example, paying the travel and registration costs of a non-UVM employee to attend a conference are participant/trainee support costs, whereas paying an individual to provide a service would be a consultant or vendor cost, and paying an individual to "participate" in a research project by consenting to be a research subject would be research/human subject costs.

Equipment and equipment maintenance:

Equipment means tangible personal property (including information technology systems) having a useful life of more than one year and a per-unit acquisition cost that equals or exceeds $5,000.

Research subjects costs:

These are reimbursements to individuals who are participating in a research project. The individual may be reimbursed for travel, paid an amount for subsistence, and given incentives such as cash or gift cards.

Patient Care Costs:

Costs of routine and ancillary services provided by hospitals to individuals participating in research programs and are beyond costs normally covered by a patient's insurance. PI/UA should work with the Office of Clinical Trials to ensure these costs are budgeted accurately.

Honoraria

Generally we request that payments made to speakers be classified as speakers fees and not honoraria.

Cost Sharing:

In general, cost sharing should be explicitly defined on the proposal, and any sources of cost sharing should include the approval formsin UVMClick prior to routing. PI/UA should work with the SPA RA to ensure that sources of cost sharing are allowable. For example, the use of funds from another sponsored project as a source of cost sharing is often not allowed without explicit approval. Additionally, PI/UA should work with department chairs and deans to ensure that all cost sharing sources are approved and documentation is included prior to routing.

In general, providing voluntary cost sharing or more cost sharing than is required on the proposal adds significant burdens to administering an award, and for the majority of sponsors provides no additional benefit for the competitive review process. As such, UVM in general dissuades PIs from including voluntary cost sharing on a proposal.

See cost sharing policy for details.

Incorrect Appointment Months for Project Personnel:

PI/UA should review all personnel included, to ensure that each individual has the correct appointment type-- Calendar, Academic, or Summer--for the proposal. This reduces confusion at time of routing and additional administrative burden if awarded.

Missing Graduate Student Requirements:

Proposals must follow the requirements established for including graduate students on sponsored projects found here: http://www.uvm.edu/spa/?Page=budgetdevelopment.html#graduatestudentsupport. In particular, PI/UA should include the correct salary used in his or her business unit for graduate students and include at least the minimum required tuition remission allowed by sponsor guidelines.

Providing redundant cost information in budget justification:

The best practice is for PI/UA to provide the least amount of specific dollar amounts in the budget justification to meet sponsor requirements in order to prevent inconsistencies between proposal budgets and budget justifications.

Communication gaps, particularly when coordinating between multiple departments or groups:

In cases where a proposal has multiple PIs from various departments, SPA recommends designating one administrative point of contact, usually the lead PI's UA. This will help ensure that all contributors to the proposal receive the same information and follow the same guidelines throughout the proposal process. This is especially critical on the day of submission, when time is short and streamlined communication between SPA and the department can make the difference in whether or not a proposal gets submitted correctly and on time.

Applications that are out of synch with the funding opportunity or sponsor goals

Sometimes a PI doesn't discover this error until after the proposal has gone in, when the sponsor writes to inform the PI that the subject matter or scope of the project or human subjects enrollment criteria do not fit the goals of the sponsor and/or funding opportunity. Before you decide to submit a proposal, do some legwork to confirm that your field and your particular project fit into the sponsor's mission and the specific parameters of the funding opportunity.