SPA Proposal Process Appendix B: Best Practices for Proposal Submission

Best Practices for Successful Proposal Submission

Each year UVM submits roughly 1200 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 and/or UA should:

1) Create an InfoEd record and contact your SPA RA. At a minimum, plan to provide the following information to your RA:
   a) **Sponsor and Deadline**: Be sure your RA has this information, preferably in the form of an InfoEd record that captures all relevant proposal information. The InfoEd record will feed into a daily 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 send these to your SPA RA and to work out answers to basic questions about funding levels, F&A rates, allowable costs, whether there are 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 RA and request a budget worksheet. 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 and/or 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 (with SPA RA)
2) Communicating with subrecipients to ensure timely availability of all subaward materials (PI and/or Dept. Admin.)
3) Checking off compliance requirements (PI and/or 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. Based on our own experience since the implementation of these forms and anecdotal evidence from other institutions, **the new 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 aren’t left scrambling on the day of the deadline.

During the proposal development period, the PI should feel free to contact the SPA RA with questions as they arise. Asking for consultation early allows the RA time to ensure accurate information while balancing other competing deadlines. Finalizing the budget requires 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 very 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 and submit.

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

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

During the routing process, several people will review the proposal, so it is important to plan ahead and consider the reviewers’ availability. If your proposal is complex, has multiple PIs, involves multiple departments, or has graduate students involved, each of these elements can add time to the route. 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 is 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 of UVM’s outgoing proposals. Having a conversation about their competing priorities can go a long way toward getting things routed on schedule.
4) **If there is a graduate student on the proposal,** the Dean of the Graduate College will review the proposal for adherence to UVM’s standard practice for graduate tuition budgeting. Training grants and fellowship proposals must get approval in order to submit, so allow time for this additional review.
5) **If the proposal has multiple PIs,** each PI will receive the proposal in the route and be asked to sign off, and if the proposal is a collaboration between multiple departments and colleges, the Chair of each involved department and Dean of each college will be included in the route. This can add time to the route, so plan accordingly.

**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. In order to give each proposal the attention it warrants, 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 SPA RA to have some feedback on your proposal even after you have declared it ready to submit. Your RA may notice an issue with the final application that you need to fix, or we may run into technical issues with the submission system. The PI and the 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 UA and PI 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 and 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. In order 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 biosketches!), 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 contact SPA at least 8 weeks ahead of the deadline.

These are complicated proposals to route and submit, too. Often there are multiple departments involved, so routing can take longer. 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 comes to light 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 given to SPA with the “ok to submit” 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 UAs or PIs at each institution can be significantly delayed due to differences in time zone.

International Sponsors

Whenever possible, 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.