**Pre-Award Guidance – Preparing Successful Proposals**

**February 2014**

This document is designed to provide you with practical guidance for developing complete and competitive proposals, very critical in the present funding environment.

**Writing the Proposal**

Writing a competitive proposal means that you have clearly defined the problem(s), the proposed technical activities, and the benefits of your proposed work. The proposal should leave no doubt in the reviewer’s minds that your project merits research support, that its size is manageable and appropriate for the work to be undertaken, and that you are skilled to complete it as proposed. The budget and proposed work should be consistent with each other, both in accuracy and scope.

A competitive and successful proposal should:

* Be clear and concise
* Persuade and justify
* Contain an appropriate amount of information to eliminate potential gaps
* Meet sponsor needs
* Contain an accurate and appropriately - sized budget
* Target reviewers’ interests (if known)
* Specifically follow sponsor proposal guidelines
* Meet the proposal submission deadline

**Proposal Elements**

**Title Page**

The title page of the proposal generally contains the following information: Principal Investigator (PI), Project Title, Sponsor Name, PI and CMU contact information, Project Start and End Dates, Amount Requested, CMU OSP contact authorized to conduct negotiations, and date submitted. Note that many funders, including agencies of the U.S. Government, have standard title page forms that require only specific information.

**Abstract/Summary**

Depending on the requirements of the sponsor, the abstract or summary can be anywhere from one paragraph to one page long. Always consult the sponsor guidelines first, when available.

**Project Narrative (Body of Proposal)**

The critical part of the proposal is the project narrative (also known as the scope of work or technical description). Governed by sponsor requirements, when available, this section is generally a detailed technical description of the project, including such subparts as goals, research methods, and project/technical significance. Often, a bibliography is required or desired, depending on the sponsor and its requirements.

**Facilities Available**

Some sponsors, like the National Science Foundation (NSF), require information outlining facilities to be used during the course of the project period and which contribute to the success of project deliverables. Provide specific information in the proposal and directly outline how the facility or facilities contribute to the completion of project goals.

**Personnel**

Sponsors, including but not limited to such federal agencies as NSF and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), require the curriculum vitae for Principal Investigators (and possibly for co-PIs and other personnel), including information detailing relevant experience, publications, and current/pending support (see immediately below for additional information). Where required and/or desired, the project narrative should include detailed information on the activities of personnel associated with the project.

**Current and Pending Support**

Current and pending support forms/requirements, such as those required by NSF, include information on all current and pending support for ongoing projects and proposals, including continuation awards (which continue into the future). U.S. agencies, such as NSF, require a list of all other sources of support broken down by PI percentage of effort. This is to ensure that the PI is not overcommitted with existing work and hence can dedicate the time proposed in the application.

**Budget**

The budget and budget justification (see the following section) are often the proposal components requiring the most care and attention. The budget must clearly outline all project costs, justify them and adequately document them. The PI should clearly state to the sponsor how much the entire project will cost and what the specific categories are. *It is also very important that the budget accurately reflect the project narrative, meaning there should be complete consistency between the two sections.* Before submitting the proposal to OSP, the PI should consult the departmental business manager during preparation of the proposal. OSP pre-award staff are available to assist the PI and the business manager in reviewing the budget prepared by the PI and business manager.

**Budget Justification**

The budget justification describes and justifies the budget to the sponsor. This section should not be overlooked. Budget items, which require documentation by NSF and other agencies, include the following:

* Salaries, wages, and fringe benefits: List all senior personnel, the months to be funded and rates of pay.
* Capital equipment: Justify all equipment exceeding $5000 and having a two-year useful life.
* Travel: State the type and extent of all travel and explain its relevance to the project. Itemize costs for all travel outside the continental United States. Include the dates of foreign visits or meetings. Fare allowances are limited to round-trip economy rates. A good justification will have conference titles, purpose of trips, and etc, although at times some conferences will not have been announced. U.S. Government sponsors generally require the use of U.S. flag carriers for foreign travel, unless it is not possible for a particular flight.
* Other direct costs: Identify specifically what is included and estimate costs for: materials and supplies, publication costs, consultant services, computer costs, graduate tuition remission, and subcontracts. Justify how these costs can be tied specifically to the research. If you have questions regarding the justification of computer costs, please refer to the equipment discussion link on the OSP website.
* Indirect costs: Specify the current negotiated rate.

**Subrecipient Documentation**

It is vitally important that all subrecipient documentation be submitted to OSP prior to proposal submission. The main components are: 1) Project Scope of Work/Project Narrative; 2) Budget; 3) Budget Justification; and 4) Institutional Letter of Support (whether this is from CMU or from another institution). If CMU is the sub, all such documents must be routed and approved per normal procedures, and OSP will provide the requisite letter of support. If another entity is the sub to CMU (CMU is the “prime”), that institution should provide all the components above to CMU so that they are part of the complete proposal package to OSP.

**“Leading Practices” in Pre-Award Proposal Development**

Based upon practical experience in the field of research administration, here are some leading practices to help ensure success in proposal development and submission:

1. Always read the sponsor guidelines *first*.
2. Plan ahead to ensure enough time for orderly proposal development.
3. Submit the complete proposal to OSP at least 4 business days prior to the sponsor deadline to ensure complete review of your proposal.
4. Make sure that there is complete consistency between budget numbers in the project narrative (where noted) and the corresponding budget numbers in the budget section.
5. Ensure that there is complete consistency between the project narrative and budget/budget justification.
6. The budget should be sufficient for accomplishing the project goals. Avoid excessive budget costs that may be interpreted as excessive or “bloat” by the peer review committee.
7. Establish cost sharing or matching commitments early in the proposal development stage, to avoid any last minute surprises close to the sponsor deadline.