Reading an RFP Workshop Transcript

Intro: Welcome to the University of West Georgia Office of Research and Sponsored Project's Online Workshop Series. I am Julie Hawk, the Research Development Coordinator. This workshop will cover some basic strategies for reading a Request for Proposal or Funding Announcement.

Slide 1: It is helpful to think of RFPs as a long and detailed assignment sheet. As such, they must be read strategically, carefully, and thoroughly. Some RFPs are fairly short, but some can run up to 70 pages.

Slide 2 (Inset of the larger slide): This presentation will walk you through strategies to get as much out of an RFP as possible as efficiently as possible. Additionally, we will discuss how to read the text, but also how to divine the subtext of what you are being asked to do.

Slide 3 (reading strategies overview): Most of you likely already have an arsenal of reading strategies at your disposal, but we will go over some that are particularly helpful when reading a genre that is less familiar. These strategies will help with comprehension upfront and also provide shortcuts for reference when you're writing the proposal.

Slide 4 (Previewing): Beginning the process with a quick preview is a good way to get a sense of an RFP, particularly with regard to its relevance to your research or project as well as whether it fits in your timeline. Previewing an RFP is very similar to previewing a journal article or other text: start with the introductory material, and then read the headings as well as text that is emphasized in bold or italics. Additionally, make sure you look for key dates and steps in the process. This first step can tell you whether the RFP fits with your work or not, saving you time in the longrun.

Slide 5 (Annotating): After your preview of the RFP, if you still think it is relevant to your research or project, you will need to read the text thoroughly. A passive read-through is not enough here. You should do this reading with pen, pencil, or highlighter in hand—whatever way you actively read, you should employ here. RFPs are detailed documents, and you can't afford to miss any of the information. While everyone annotates different, common strategies include making checklists, using highlighters or post-it notes to call attention to important information, good old-fashioned underlining, and color coding. Whatever works for you, use it, but do engage with the text in an active way.

Slide 6 (Things to look for): No two RFPs are exactly alike, and they can differ greatly from agency to agency, but there are still common things to look for, which we will go over here. You should highlight the following information, which should be present in most RFPs or a document that the RFP might send you to: 1. Important dates—obviously the final deadline is something you need to know, but also are there deadlines for other components, such as a final date to send a draft for review, or a deadline for a letter of intent? Perhaps an informative webinar will take place on a certain date. Make sure you have all of these important dates noted. 2. Required components—Almost all grant proposals require at least a narrative and a budget, but many require other documents as well. These might include letters of support, institutional information,

CVs of the PI and co_PIs, etc. You need to have a list of all of the needed documents so that you don't come up short at the last minute. 3. Constraints—make sure to note if there are any limiting constraints on who may apply. For example, some require a 501(c)(3), which we can work with, but that does require additional steps, as we have to work the UWG's Advancement office. Some require that the PI have a PhD or hold a certain rank. Some will require that during the grant period, you do not teach. You need to know upfront what the constraints are so that you don't waste time if you or the institution is not eligible for the grant or otherwise cannot adhere to the grant's guidelines. 4. Review Criteria—Knowing the review criteria is like seeing the rubric for an assignment before you complete it. It helps you tailor your proposal to the audience, making sure you hit on each of the important aspects that reviewers will be looking for. Most RFPs will give you some sense of review criteria, and government funders, especially, tend to be very specific and detailed with this information. The more familiar you are with that information, the better. 5. External links to follow—This one is an easy one to miss, but it is extremely important to follow any that they provide.

Slide 7 (Links to Follow): There are several reasons why you should never ignore links provided by an RFP. Often there will be an FAQ that will answer questions you might have if you didn't follow the link. Alternatively, sometimes the actual application instructions are not included in the RFP and are, instead, located in another place. Again, you will have questions about how to proceed unless you follow this link. Often there are other documents to read in concert with the RFP. A good example of this is with any NSF education-focused grant. These RFPs always include an almost throw-away sentence telling you to refer to a document entitled Common Guidelines for Education Research. This document is longer than the RFP itself, and it contains information that can make or break a proposal. Without following that link, the proposal writer will not know the language that NSF expects you to speak in terms of the hierarchy of education research. Avoid the temptation to not click that external link! Finally, many RFPs offer a link that takes you to past successful grantees. Usually you will not get an entire sample application, though sometimes you do (NEH provides samples, for example). Often, though, you will get an abstract of the projects that were funded. Studying these can help you a great deal to think about the priorities of the granting agency, the rhetorical positioning of successful applicants, and where your project fits into the general funding landscape of the agency in question.

Slide 8 (Proposal Requirements): An RFP will give you the information you need with regard to all the requirements that you must meet for an application to be accepted. It is important that you make sure you are aware of each of these requirements.

Slide 9 (Eligibility): It is important to know that both you as the PI and the institution itself are eligible to apply for the grant. You need to know this as soon as possible so as not to waste time if eligibility is a problem. Many grantors require that grantees be a 501 c 3. Again, while UWG is not itself so categorized, we use the UWG Advancement office, which is a 501 c 3 to accept such funds. You need to know if this is required upfront, however, because the process is a little different when ORSP liaises with Advancement. Sometimes you might find an RFP for which IHEs are not eligible. Some education grants, for example, are meant for k-12 educators only, so

this is an important thing to check for. You will also need to make sure you meet the requirements to be the Principle Investigator. Some grantors require a terminal degree, and some even require a tenure track or even tenured professor to be the PI. Co-PIs, too, can have limitations, though they are usually a bit looser than those for the PI.

Slide 10 (Content and Format): Some funders have very specific requirements on both content and format. While they can vary widely from funder to funder, it is very important to know to look for guidance in the RFP for both things.

Slide 10 (Content—Approach): Whatever the RFP asks you to provide in your completed proposal application, make sure that you provide all of that and nothing more. While there is no set list of what funders will ask for you to include in a proposal application, you can count on there being at least a narrative and a budget. Usually, the RFP will give you a length limit for the narrative, but not always. In the even that you don't have a length limit, typically we urge you to be succinct. However, for grants with large government funders such as NEH, ED, NSF, etc, proposals can run quite long, and you do want to use as much available length as possible without going even the slightest bit over the requirement. Other possible components include projct abstract, budget narrative or justification, letters of support, current and pending support, and CVs for all key project personnel. Finally, some funders will ask for these documents to all be uploaded as one PDF, whereas others have portals that utilize separate attachments. Often, the order you upload things matters a great deal as well, so be sure you look carefully for those kinds of instructions regarding the content.

Slide 11 (Format): In some cases, if you don't follow the formatting requirements to the letter, your proposal can be rejected without review. It is, therefore, imperative that you make sure you follow every instruction, no matter how insignificant you think it might be. Formatting requirements include (but are not limited to) length requirements, font size and type, allowable margin space, line spacing, allowability of tables, graphs, images, bulleted lists, and headings. When funders do include length requirements, those requirements can be in page counts, word counts, or character counts. In some cases, there is a portal that literally does not allow you to go over the limit, but more often, you have to make sure you have not exceeded the limit yourself. While the ORSP is here to help you in every way, including making sure that your formatting follows the instructions, the process will go much smoother and faster if you are clear on the formatting requirements from the beginning and plan accordingly.

Slide 12 (Case Studies): The following examples will help you get a sense of the range of things you might see in RFPs. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it should be a good starting point for thinking through strategies for reading a variety of RFPs.

Slide 13 (NSF): NSF is one the most well-known government agencies, and they have opportunities for almost every discipline, but of course particularly for those in the STEM fields. NSF has seven directorates and, within those directorates, a myriad of programs and designations, some of which cross-cut several directorates. In short, the NSF landscape is a bit confusing, so if you're interested in an NSF grant in particular, spending time on their website is a good idea. Their RFPs do tend to look similar, though you need to use both the RFP and the

quite long document entitled "proposal and award policies and procedure guide," or PAPPG for short. Both documents are crucial in understanding the detailed requirements for an NSF grant. In addition, some RFPs within NSF directorates will point you to other documents. For example, grant proposals that deal directly with education research will point you to consult the Common Guidelines for Educational Research. In cases like this, you need to consult each relevant document carefully, keeping them in conversation with one another. The links provided here will take you to two NSF grants, the Early CAREER grant and the Research at Undergraduate Institutions grant, or the RUI. In addition, from here you can access the PAPPG for 2020.

Slide 14 (NEH): NEH, or the National Endowment for the Humanities, has several programs for a variety of disciplines within the humanities. Most NEH opportunities are for institutional grants, though there are some, such as the Summer Stipend, that are awarded to individuals. The links provided here will take you to two NEH grants, the Connections Planning Grant and the Dialogues on the Experience of War Grant. These are both old versions of the grant, as the next cycle's RFP has not yet come out. Exploring the RFPs will, however, give you a good sense of the kinds of thing NEH requires.

Slide 15 (Foundations): Foundations vary so widely in their goals that it is imperative that you research the organization itself—well beyond the RFP—in order to speak to the motivations and larger goals of the organization. For those of you working on proposals to foundations, we can talk about this more specifically in smaller groups. This slide offers just two examples, both of which are popular with UWG faculty. The Spencer Education grant is an example of an extremely competitive and prestigious foundation grant, and the requirements for a Spencer are very similarly rigorous to those of a government funder. Conversely, the local Community Foundation of West Georgia offers an Impact grant every year, and the requirements for it are much looser. The parameters of the expectations are also very different, it should be noted. The Community Foundation, that is, wants to support projects, not research, whereas Spencer expects rigorous research with equally rigorous evaluation. Some of that information you can glean from the RFP, but some of it requires a bit more digging, which is why both working with ORSP in the early stages of your project and digging deeply into the foundation you are trying to break into are so important.