2023 Seeding Solutions Q&A Transcript

June 9, 2023

This document includes questions posed verbally and in writing by the 2023 cohort of Seeding Solutions applicants. Each question is listed in bold text with the corresponding answer below. Any additions made upon reviewing the meeting recording to help clarify a response are written in [brackets].

Q: **What is the difference between "Research Methodologies" and "Research Techniques" in the application instructions for the project description? They're currently supposed to be two different sections.**

A: The two bullets within the "Full Proposal Project Justification and Approach" under the Proposal Information heading are redundant [bullets 3 and 4]. For bullet number 3 ["A detailed account of the procedures or methodology…"] please present your workplan with enough information to justify the method(s), convince the reviewers that it's tractable and demonstrate alignment with the expertise on your team. For bullet 4, please insert "See above."

Q: **Are we able to use figures, tables, equations, etc. in our applications?**

A: No, Blackbaud Grant Making (BBGM) [our grants management system] cannot support anything other than basic text. One of the upload documents at the end of the application [Attachments tab] is a project narrative which will allow you to integrate rich text, figures, and equations.

Q: **To clarify, will the project narrative need to be separated from the figures? For example, if I have five pages of text for my project description, do I need to isolate the figures of rich text?**

A: You can separate them, but there is a space to upload an integrated document.

Q: **If you are collecting the project description/narrative both as basic text in the online application and as a PDF with integrated figures, which will the reviewers see?**

A: The reviewers will see both, but they will see the plain text first. We have a high level application document that the reviewers look through first that just has the text responses to everything. We do that because they're searchable, if anyone is using Control + F to find key phrases; it's also easier to organize. Any attachments that you submit along with your project – your timeline, budget, CV/Biosketch – will also be made available to the reviewers and they're clearly labeled when the reviewers interact with them. They'll know that they're looking at in the project description and they'll be directed there if they have questions about facts and figures. In this program we're also allowing people to submit a five-slide PowerPoint to give a high-level overview that can be very helpful in terms of giving people a sense of what the project is about and why it's exciting, so it is recommended applicants use it.

Q: **You list the attachment file as project description which means we will include a lot of information; for example, the figures, tables and the budget forms. So, we'd basically only provide one PDF for the project description, right? So, for the budget forms everything will be followed? Will it be put in the PDF files? Because we don't know the system right now. What I mean is do we need to generate a PDF file for budget forms or other things? Or do we just submit the excel files?**

A: Every attachment, except for the budget and the PowerPoint, will be submitted as PDFs. The budget will be an excel file.

Q: **Regarding the timeline, you have "Milestones by Year" and "Timeline", are they different or are they the same thing?**

A: The milestones should be tasks to be completed each year towards the overarching objective of the proposal. You have your overarching research goal, the objectives and then the tasks to be completed, those milestones that must be completed for year 1, year 2 and so on.

Q: **When you say the text in the online application will be HTML format, does that mean we can decorate it with HTML tags?**

A: Unfortunately, no, it will be strictly letters, numbers and the basic punctuation marks. Anything other than that will need to be in the PDF upload.

Q: **I have a question for the Overall Goals section. How should we interpret "overall" goals and objectives? "Overall" might mean one overarching goal and then a series of smaller goals and within those smaller objectives to help to obtain those goals.**

A: We want to provide the investigator some flexibility to respond and lay out their proposal. The intent of laying out the objectives and these annual milestones is to summarize the workplan and how that workplan will help fulfill or enable you to achieve the outcome of the project. You may have more than one targeted outcome. We need to provide that flexibility because we are spanning seven different Challenge Areas/Initiatives. We are happy to follow up 1:1 to think about how best to represent your work with that framework.

Q: **Within the Narrative, you have the PDF that is going to be uploaded now, you also have figures that will be uploaded separately as PDFs. Now when I turn in the narrative, that's going to be submitted as a PDF, do we not include the figures in that? Or is one set of figures going to be enough?**

A: You can include the figures in the project narrative. If you have additional figures that don't fit into the project narrative because they suit a different part of your project better, or if you want to pull them out to have them emphasized so you can use that either as supplemental material or just repeating and reorganizing the material you've already submitted. The PDF for just pictures and tables is optional. The project narrative is the only required part which includes figures.

Q: **What level of detail are you looking for in the data management question?**

A: For the full proposal there is a requirement that you commit to making your data publicly available and adhering to FFAR's protocols regarding ensuring that that data is adequately notated, that there's adequate metadata for those. The details of ensuring that data management plan are part of the Grant Agreement. So, once you are awarded, we will work with you to ensure that your data management plan conforms with FFAR's requirements. We're happy to provide those requirements beforehand.

Q: **We are a for-profit business that is submitting an application, and we plan on publishing the great preponderance of the data from the project, but some is proprietary to our business and would sort of end our business if we published it, is it understood that we can publish some but not all of the data? Is that permissible?**

A: We do have methods in place to protect and ensure that you get adequate value out of your research. That said, we are mandated to have all the data generated from these projects publicly available. What I would suggest is that if you have specific concerns, again, reach out to us to discuss where those boundaries are. But know that we are working to push these projects into that pre-competitive space. One thing which might help is to say, "we aren't going to publish our data for 4-5 years, something like that, but then we intend to publish it." If you can put a time delay on there and say 'for proprietary reasons' or similar, that's what we're looking for—is reasonableness—but that, at some point, you do intend to release information unless it's patented, copyrighted or trademarked, in which case we understand that.

Q: **Can you explain more about copyrighting the data?**

A: Computer programs and algorithms are often copyrighted. There's trademark, where it's like a company secret, where it's the math or something that's trademarked, so you wouldn't want to make that available. But for the most part, if you're a company, you're likely to have results, you're going to file a patent. And once the patent is published, you're more likely and able to make the results available.

Q: **Our solution is an AI model, those algorithms are not patentable under US law, essentially the datasets are what generates the artificial intelligence, it's the training data that develops the model, so a big part of our innovation is the technology we've developed to generate this data. To publish it undermines the business; we intend to publish the preponderance, but to publish the whole set is a problem.**

A: You just need to make that very clear in your application.

Q: **Do we have a chance of winning with that kind of caveat in our data plan?**

A: One of the criteria of the program is whether the project falls within the pre-competitive space. If it's more towards patent research, it is less likely to be funded.

Q: **Are the different Challenge Areas going to be equally funded? Or will the winners be the applications that meet the review criteria? There's not a minimum amount of funding per area?**

A: That's correct, we do seek to distribute funds across all Challenge Areas/Initiatives. We don't obligate funding to every Challenge Area/Initiative, so it is possible that none of the applications within a Challenge Area met our criteria for a specific year, and that doesn't affect whether each Area gets funded. Each Area starts with an equal sized bucket, and then funds are distributed from that bucket according to the priorities of that Challenge Area/Initiative.

Q: **Where should I put student tuition separately from stipends and fringe benefits for the graduate students on the budget?**

A: It's usually easier to put all costs associated with supporting your grad students into the grad student line in the additional personnel section of the budget. If your institution doesn't like that and it will make reporting very difficult for you during an active award, we have allowed people to put more nuanced descriptions of what's going on with their graduate students in the Other Direct Costs lines at the bottom of the tab. You'll see it just above the Indirect Cost (IDC) section on each annual tab.

Q: **I am in the middle of transitioning, and we are trying to figure out if I will keep my PI status at UC Davis but changing departments or at UC Riverside. Currently I'm listed as a Co-PI.**

A: Co-PIs have a lot more flexibility than PIs. If you switch institutions during the application phase, as long as we have correct contact information for you at the time the project is funded, that's all we'll need. If you switch while the project is active, we might need to update your email and phone number but as a co-PI, thankfully the administrative lift associated with an institution change is pretty light. Especially since you are moving within the University of California system, it's unlikely to affect your peer review. Only changes to the scope of work tend to need a deeper discussion.

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Q: **Can a senior research associate be listed as a co-PI?**

A: If your institution is comfortable defining them as a co-PI, then yes.

Q: **The FFAR Matching Guidelines say tuition cannot be charged as a direct cost on awards. Does that include the value of the student's stipend?**

A: "Tuition" meaning the cost of a student's education, is not tied directly to any one project. It is tied to the student's enrollment in a school. However, "tuition remission" is often part of the compensation package offered to students who work on a project. So "Tuition" is a handy shorthand but tuition [the cost associated with student's enrollment] is not what is included on the project; what gets included on the project is the percentage of the student's compensation that correlates to the effort they spend on the project.

Q: **What do I do if my institution doesn't cover tuition?**

A: If tuition is not covered by your institution, then you don't need to include it on your budget. If a charge is not allowable by your institution, we won't contradict that.

Q: **Is tuition allowable? Because I have been including tuition remission and fringe as one lump sum in the graduate student line.**

A: That's perfectly fine.

Q: **For matching funds, what kind of proof/letter/detailed information is needed as part of the proposal submission?**

A: Every application which includes match requires the applicants to submit letters from the matching funders which are non-binding but confirm the amount of support the matching funders want to give. Essentially, if you had been talking to X Company and they had said "$100,000 sounds great, your project is really interesting," FFAR would need a letter on X Company's letterhead signed by an authorized signing official stating the level of support over however many years they are interested in giving. Those letters are non-binding, if you are not selected for funding the matching funder is not on the hook to provide it. If you are selected for funding, we follow up with you and the matching funder afterwards and collect an official certification. There is a template for that available on our website, as you fill out your application you will be directed to the correct template to use, so you can distribute those to your funding partners as soon as you're ready.

Q: **To follow up, that includes cash and in-kind [match], yes?**

A: Yes, we will need the same documentation for cash and in-kind support.

Q: **Specifically, what kind of information do you need for in-kind [match]?**

A: We need to know what it will be covering and how you calculated the value. By FFAR's definition, in-kind is any value added to the project which is not money. For example, donations, volunteer time, stuff like that. Because it doesn't have a bank transaction somewhere, we need a quick explanation of why it's worth what is being stated. For example, why is this piece of donated equipment worth $5,000 instead of $10,000? We rely on fair market value.

Q: **Can I use pending proposals as matching funds?**

A: Pending applications for funding must be finalized before the project Start Date and must be for the same project (i.e., same goals and objectives, same Principal Investigator). [We allow expenses up to 90 days before the Start Date upon awardee request; applicants will spend at their own risk but do not need FFAR approval if the expenses occur after the Start Date and before Execution Date.]

Q: **Will FFAR help to identify matching funds?**

A: Applicants are responsible for finding their own match for Seeding Solutions, but other funding opportunities from FFAR may have match pre-arranged. Please subscribe to our newsletter for updates! If you are having a lot of trouble finding matching funders, please contact us.

Q: **Should the matching letter specify which specific budget lines are being supported by the matching funds?**

A: It doesn't need to, but some extra detail doesn't hurt. Typically, funders are interested in supporting a specific piece of the project. At the end of the day, what we're looking for is the total and the type of support.

Q: **In-kind match generates IDC, but IDC must be paid in cash. But that match doesn't come in cash. How do you solve that?**

A: We can either reduce the IDC rate applied to your project so that the amount of IDC being charged is consistent with 10% of cash match, or we can allow that slightly higher IDC level which is our default. We include in-kind in our IDC calculation because our default rate is significantly lower than most schools' federally negotiated rate. Many schools have trouble with a 10% IDC rate, so our policies are arranged in such a way that every possible dollar is maximized for the benefit of your school.

Q: **Can the IDC be changed to exclude in-kind without affecting the IDC of the rest of the budget?**

A: Essentially, yes. We calculate the IDC from the total match amount. If you don't want in-kind to accumulate IDC, we calculate the rate which will result in the correct dollar amount and apply it to the FFAR and Match portion of the award.

Q: **Can I charge IDC to FFAR funds but not cash match?**

A: No, the IDC on FFAR funds must be equal to or lower than the IDC applied to the matching funds.

Q: **When are the grants actually awarded? (This is an important input to creating a project plan for the application).**

A: Award decisions are announced no later than mid-December. Subsequently signed grant agreements establishing the project's start and end dates are typically finalized within three months of notification (i.e. by March 2024). The time required for finalizing the grant agreement and the project's start date largely depends on the PI's capacity to verify match contributions and address any other budget and documentation concerns.

Q: **Can matching funds be spent on project expenses prior to the receipt of grant funding?**

A: Note that the match cannot be spent before the start date of the award. In rare circumstances, FFAR can adjust a project's start date prior to finalizing the award documentation. Please contact FFAR to explore this flexibility if there are urgent time constraints related to initiating the project.

Q: **Regarding input of Indirect Cost in the FFAR budget template, how do I enter/adjust the rate for the matching funds since these will be charged higher IDC rates?**

A: Contact the FFAR Grants Team at grants@foundationfar.org to adjust the IDC rate on the budget template to any rate 10% or below. The same IDC rate should be applied to both FFAR funds and match.

Q: **Budget: We are building hardware that will cost ~$9000/ea (and building ~40 of them). We will be sourcing individual components, each < $5,000. Where should we put this, in capital expenses, or other materials? Should we attach a BOM (bill of materials) with approximate prices of individual components? (this will also apply to the parlor sensors)?**

A: Anything that's more than $5,000 is typically considered equipment in scientific research. There is also a line item called Materials and Supplies. If you have components you aren't sure how to classify, there are some blank Direct Cost lines at the bottom of the tab.

Q: **Can you clarify if IDC can be excluded from matching funds?**

A: Yes, but if you exclude it from the match it will also be excluded from the FFAR funding. I will add the caveat that if you have one matching funder who is not willing to contribute IDC, other matching funders are allowed to come in and offer IDC as part of their matching contributions.

Q: **Please let me know whether IDC for matching partners is capped at 10%. At the moment, Kansas State IDC rate for the matching partners is 52%. How do I handle this situation?**

A: IDC on matching funds is capped at 10% of the overall match. However, how that 10% is distributed among your matching funders is up to the institution. If you have other matching funders who would prefer not to contribute IDC, the higher IDC from KSU may end up being about 10% of the total match. What we're looking at is the net overall funding amounts, so how things are split out between matching funders is totally up to you.

Q: **Biosketch: What are "products" for private industry? For example, I was a software engineer contributing to public-facing products, but many engineers worked on different aspects of the products. Do these products count towards biosketch "products" and how should I refer to them and give context?**

A: Part of the reason for a biosketch is to show a peer reviewer that you have the expertise and the competence and the skillset to provide a high probability that if you get the money, this will be a successful project. So, you would want to think about things that are going to make you appear to be credible towards achieving the goals and objectives of the project. What's your expertise? And that's backed up by either publications, prior grant awards or the fact that you have produced products that show that you can deliver the project.

Q: **Is the donated use of equipment or space that is not owned by the grantee itself (i.e. an analytical instrument or experimental farm that is bought and/or maintained by other sources of funds) considered in-kind match?**

A: Not quite. But resources which cost money to access (i.e. fees to use a piece of equipment or to use a field on the experimental farm as well as laboratory analytical fees) can be considered project costs. If those fees are paid, it's cash match; if they're waived, it's in-kind match.

Q: **How is IDC calculated?**

A: IDC is 10% of Total Cost, so the overall match amount will be 90% Direct Cost and 10% IDC, and IDC is always considered cash.

Q: **I wondered if there is any specific format for the main proposal? Is there any template to follow?**

A: The BBGM application online is the template to follow.

Q: **What's the best way to follow up if I have more questions?**

A: the Grants@foundationfar.org email is always the best place to ask administrative questions. Scientific questions can go to the Seeding Solutions point of contact Ryan

Comella at rcomella@foundationfar.org, or to the SPD associated with your specific Challenge Area/Initiative, who you can find on the website.

Q: **Is travel to a conference an allowable cost?**

A: Yes, there is a space for Conferences and Meetings on our budget template. If you're not sure if your travel plan is allowable, we advise you to check with your institution. Most institutions have more restrictions on travel than FFAR does.

Q: **We are working with some farmers, and they are supplying access to their land and providing agronomic management and crop yield information; can we claim some of that as fair market value for in-kind, as they're donating their time and land for use as part of our research project?**

A: It depends. If those activities described would be considered standard overhead or operating costs that they would incur even if they were not participating in the project, we'd consider that IDC, and IDC must always be cash. If you are compensating those farmers in any way, or they would normally take a fee and they've chosen not to take a fee, those situations would be match. If the fee is paid, we would consider it cash match. If it's waived, we consider it in-kind.

Q: **What do you expect to see under "How data will be analyzed or interpreted"?**

A: Think of that as parallel to preparing a manuscript. So, you have your data collection and then you have how you analyze and interpret the data.

Q: **I have funding, but the funding decision is made year by year. It is hard to get the funding agent to write a commitment letter right now. What kind of letter do you think you'd accept—to say, "if you're funded, you can use our match?" What kind of documentation do you prefer?**

A: At this stage of your application, any match documentation you submit will be non-binding. We have a template letter we need you to collect from the institution supplying the funds which explains which project the match would be for and how much they anticipate contributing. It doesn't need to be very long or very detailed. During the application stage, their letter could say something like "our funding is renewed every year, but we expect to be able to fund the full life of this project." We do require that everyone who is selected for funding certify their total match for the full life of the project before we release funds. If you are selected for funding and your match situation is complicated, we will work with you to get everything set up properly. We are very flexible, and we will work with you to make sure that match is certified in a way that suits everybody's needs.

Q: **Are we supposed to include a section on DEI in the proposal?**

A: The RFA does emphasize the importance of DEI in this application, and the project description and narrative are a great place to include it. The stakeholders section is also another great place to include DEI efforts, if you have any.