



To: Deans of CEFNS, SBS, CHHS, CAL, COE, W.A. Franke COB

From: David R. Schultz, Vice President for Research 

Date: April 2, 2018

Subject: Continued improvement of services and practices for proposal submission

Research, scholarship, creative activity, and public service supported through sponsored projects continue to grow significantly at NAU. For example, in the most recently completed fiscal year, FY 2017, NAU's expenditures on research as reported to the National Science Foundation for the annual survey of Higher Education Research and Development reached its highest level achieved so far, \$46M, while total sponsored projects expenditures reached \$79M.

In response to this growth, and to support its continuation, we have taken steps over recent years to bolster resources to help prepare and submit proposals for funding and to administer grants and contracts awarded. Most recently, we have created a more functional Office of Sponsored Projects (OSP) by combining the previously separate offices of pre-award and post-award administration, as is an industry standard, and through the earlier implementation of an electronic proposal routing system (Cayuse) to improve efficiency, as done by other research universities. We have also begun more focused training and mentoring of OSP staff, increased our emphasis on providing the right balance of professional grant administration and customer service, and instituted several customer feedback mechanisms to better assess progress in these efforts and to identify where we can do better.

All these steps have been necessary to improve service and also to handle the increased volume of proposals submitted, which has reached about 600 per year, and the number of awards being administered that is approaching 1000 per year. We expect that growing faculty interest and success in seeking sponsored projects will continue, increasing these numbers further. However, with this volume of submissions and awards, handling proposals to be submitted close to the sponsor deadline has increasingly caused difficulties, not only for OSP staff, but most importantly for faculty investigators, external partners, and sponsors.

These difficulties take several forms. To begin with, submission of a proposal transmitted to OSP close to the sponsor deadline is increasingly likely to be unsuccessful owing to sponsor grant systems being unable to cope with the volume of last minute submissions. That is, last minute submissions jeopardize the chance of even being able to successfully upload the required documents to sponsor submission websites, which often become slow or unresponsive during the days and hours approaching deadlines.

Also, without sufficient time to check for compliance with sponsor requirements (checking that all required elements of the proposal are in place, that the form and contents of human or animal subjects research managements plans comply with sponsor requirements, and that budgets conform to sponsor requirements, etc.) proposals are increasingly likely to be rejected by the sponsor without review.

Transmission of a proposal to OSP for review and submission to a sponsor without sufficient time also impedes or abrogates checks for fulfillment of NAU requirements such as approval of commitments and budgets by the Colleges and academic or research units, which are also seeking to cope with handling the present and anticipated future increase in submissions volume. Furthermore, submissions near the sponsor deadline actually impede review and submission of other proposals that are received by OSP well before sponsor deadlines, jeopardizing success not only of the last-minute proposal itself but of submission of proposals received by OSP earlier before sponsor deadlines from other faculty members.

To mitigate all these difficulties, the best practices of our peer research universities is to require submission of proposals to the sponsored projects office sufficiently in advance of sponsor deadlines. Imposition of these internal deadlines balances the requirement of sufficient time for university and unit review and approval with the need for faculty members to produce the best proposal possible given their other wide ranging commitments.

To this end, universities typically require completed proposals be transmitted to the sponsored project office between 3 and 5 business days before the sponsor's deadline. Surveying the institutions designated by the Arizona Board of Regents as NAU peers, 13 of the 15 peers have stated internal deadlines that range from 2 to 10 days before the sponsor's deadline as documented on their sponsored projects websites.

Therefore, effective May 1, 2018 NAU will require proposals be completed with the following time line:

- (1) **At least fourteen days* before the sponsor deadline** – The principal investigator must contact OSP regarding the intent to submit a proposal to an identified sponsor and program announcement if applicable. If the proposal will be complex (e.g., multi-institutional) additional time should be allocated at each stage of the proposal preparation and submission process. In cases where NAU is the proposed sub-recipient additional time may be required depending on the prime recipient's institutional deadlines for transmission of the proposal package to their office of sponsored projects.
- (2) **At least four days before the sponsor deadline** – A complete program package (proposal summary or abstract, project budget, budget justification, project narrative, statement of work, forms required by the sponsor, subcontract forms and budgets if applicable, and commitment letters from external parties) should be transmitted to OSP via Cayuse. Final review of the proposal package will occur during this time window by OSP, other applicable institutional offices such as technology transfer, and the faculty member's unit and College. The technical narrative should be a complete version for format and compliance review; the principal investigator may make only final edits during the review period, and such changes should not impact the budget or institutional commitments.
- (3) **At least two days before the sponsor deadline** – The entire proposal must be complete and OSP will not allow any further changes to elements of the proposal package including the technical narrative unless

changes are required to correct errors per the sponsor's guidelines. OSP will submit the proposal package to the sponsor at any point within two days of the sponsor deadline in order to help ensure successful submission (including receiving confirmation from the sponsor submission systems) and to balance the workload of review and submission of all proposals pending submission.

- (4) **Proposal packages received with less than the required four-day lead time** will require an explanation of the extenuating circumstances that resulted in the late proposal and approval by the Dean (or Associate Dean for Research) and Vice President (or Associate Vice President) for Research. If approved, best efforts will be made to complete a sufficient review to allow submission by the sponsor deadline, but late proposals will not receive priority over those complying with the required lead times. Furthermore, if an award is made based on a late submission, the PI and the College will be responsible for covering costs incurred as a result of proposal errors such as unapproved cost sharing commitments, inaccurate rate calculations for indirect costs, or unallowable commitments of resources. Because of all of these factors approvals for late submission should be rare.

OSP will continue to adopt best practices that have been established by our peer institutions and to deliver continuous attention to and improvement of a proper balance of customer service and professional sponsored projects administration. We clearly recognize the importance of maintaining a close partnership with faculty members and their Colleges and units in order to provide the service required for success of sponsor project activity and NAU's research enterprise as a whole.

*All references to "days" means "business days."