Bridging the Gap: How to create a proposal budget that makes award administration a snap

OSR & SeRA Seminar Series

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Why Are We Here?

• Picking your battles – Identify when it is prudent to be highly specific vs. flexibly vague as you strategize a budget.

• Tackling travel - As the majority of sponsors are moving towards heavily scrutinizing ambiguous and/or unbudgeted travel, let's be proactive in including realistic, reasonable, and adequately detailed travel budgets.

• To name or not to name? - How to determine and subsequently advise faculty on when it is truly beneficial to name non-key individuals on a proposal.

• When the rubber hits the road – Why it is so important at the pre-award stage to consider the post-award landscape in which a project will actually exist.

• Trimming the fat – Determining what budget items are truly negotiable and/or dispensable vs. those that are integral for successful award execution.

• Mechanism mechanics – When a sponsor is willing to negotiate the type of award mechanism (e.g., grant vs. contract, fixed price contract vs. cost reimbursable) why and how it is beneficial to work with post-award as you determine the best option.
Picking Your Battles

When being strategically flexible is prudent and when it is not:

• TBN postdocs vs. TBN grad students
• Travel: differentiating between foreign and domestic, naming conferences etc.
• Equipment
• Consumables
Tackling Travel

• Travel: Domestic vs. foreign: check the guidelines for pre-approval and/or rebudgeting restrictions.

• Encourage PIs to be as accurate as possible when proposing conference attendance – if there’s a chance they’ll go to an international conference, account for that whenever possible/appropriate.
Tackling Travel

Be realistic about what it really costs:

- Conference Registrations
- Airfare
  - Fly America, Open Skies exceptions etc.
  - In flight wifi
  - Baggage Fees
- Ground Transportation (in both departure and arrival locations)
- Lodging – gsa.gov
- Meals – gsa.gov
To Name Or Not To Name?

• What does it really mean to name someone as key personnel?

• Naming “figurehead” PIs: why to avoid, plus alternative options

• Naming post-docs and grad students as key personnel: why is this almost always more of a cost than a benefit [to everyone]?
When The Rubber Hits The Road

Know the history/department/sponsor (do your research)

• Maybe the proposal guidelines and the institutional official say that budgeting stipends is allowable, but the specific department is unable to pay their grad students this way for some reason.

• Maybe all postdocs are mysteriously referred to as adjunct lecturers in one single department on campus (actual real-life example) – this would be good to know before budgeting fringe benefits at the staff rate incorrectly.

• If you’re an old hat at budgeting but new to the department, acknowledge that you have a learning curve.
When The Rubber Hits The Road

Build an informed budget

• Don’t guess! If a PI is asking to budget a cost with which you’re unfamiliar, don’t just talk to your pre-award teammates. Go to post-award too (assuming, of course, those individuals aren’t one and the same). They’re used to working with these faculty and they’ll probably know exactly what to do.
When The Rubber Hits The Road

Try to minimize prior approval requests and budget shortfalls from occurring before an award even begins

- Remember that these budgets are more than just a handful of pages in a proposal. If that proposal gets awarded, everyone - i.e. post award, the sponsor, internal and external audit, etc. - will refer to and use that budget over a number of years. Make it easy on everyone.
When The Rubber Hits The Road

Build an informed budget

• Use formulas that don’t require a PhD in advanced mathematics to understand/retro-engineer.

• Make notes! Be transparent! If you did something funky with the fringe rates because the sponsor budget template was forcing you into a formula, make a note on the internal budget (or somewhere else that others will see it).
When The Rubber Hits The Road

Build an informed budget

- Be consistent - Chances are good that regardless of your school or department setup, you’ll be working with the same post-award administrator(s) over and over.

- Build a relationship.

- Ask questions as you work through a difficult budget.

- Leverage your resources!

- And remember: even though you may not work for the same department, you’re all on the same team.
Trimming The Fat (and saving the meat)

Must haves, nice to haves, and dream to haves
Trimming The Fat (and saving the meat)

Must Haves:

• People –
  • as a direct cost
  • as part of mandatory committed cost sharing
  • …or, for personnel at no project cost, a solid explanation for how this is not voluntary committed cost sharing

• Fringe benefits (always in proportion to salaries)

• Consumables/supplies for experimental labs/groups
Trimming The Fat (and saving the meat)

Nice to Haves:

• Escalations – inflation is real

• Travel

• Equipment
Trimming The Fat (and saving the meat)

Dream to Haves:

- Food – maybe, but generally unlikely on most research awards
- Recruitment and relocation costs – might be technically allowable, but can you really afford it?
Mechanism Mechanics

Grant vs. Contract

- Grants – generally more flexible – it’s a partnership with the sponsor

- Contracts – generally less flexible - it’s a procurement transaction
Mechanism Mechanics

Contracts

• Federal vs. Non-federal

• Fixed Price vs. Cost Reimbursable
Questions?
We’re All In This Together!

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