



Working with USAID:

Guidance for Institutions of Higher Education

Institutions of higher education have played a variety of critical roles in the design and delivery of USAID development assistance. In an effort to further strengthen the historic working relationship between USAID and the higher education community, the Agency has formulated a comprehensive guidance package. That guidance is outlined below.

After visiting each of the links below, prospective partners should be well positioned to grow and enhance the long-standing collaboration between USAID and the higher education community worldwide.

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Working with USAID: Guidance for Institutions of Higher Education

I. Understanding Agency Objectives and Priorities

In order to develop programs capable of securing USAID collaboration and/or receiving USAID funding, it is essential to recognize that the vast majority of USAID's resources are used to support and implement Mission programs overseas. Missions constitute the critical core of the Agency's entire operating structure. Mission strategies, objectives and program priorities guide the allocation of nearly all USAID program funds. If an institution can convincingly demonstrate how a proposed activity will clearly advance Mission objectives and programming priorities - in a cost-effective and timely manner - the chance of receiving USAID funding support is significantly improved.

The best way to investigate Mission programming priorities is to thoroughly explore the Agency website. Suggestions on how to conduct an effective search are provided in Section III A - "Investigating Program Priorities"). A thorough investigation is critical to determining whether and how your institution's interests and expertise might enable Missions to be more successful in their development assistance programs. By focusing on Mission programming priorities, higher education institutions are much better positioned to compete for USAID funding.

II. Applying for Agency Funding Support

There are numerous ways in which the Agency provides funding opportunities. These include Requests for Assistance (RFAs), Requests for Proposals (RFPs), Invitations for Bids (IFBs), and Annual Program Statements (APSs). These opportunities are advertised at USAID's procurement web site: <http://www.usaid.gov/>

The successful pursuit of such opportunities requires applicants to clearly address and advance the program priorities set forth in any given solicitation. Cost-effective programs with clear monitoring and evaluation plans will be more competitive. In addition, the Agency prefers programs that foster added value, heightened impact and increased returns on investment through alliances with other institutions in the public and private sector. (See USAID's GDA Business Model in Section III D - "USAID's Business Model")

A. Opportunities Targeted to Institutions of Higher Education.

USAID offers the higher education community a broad range of opportunities to deliver, shape, and assess the Agency's development assistance programs. These opportunities, advertised and described at <http://www.hedprogram.org>, include university partnership programs, institutional capacity development, applied research, and critically important advisory services for Missions, Regional Bureaus and Technical Bureaus. The program is structured in a manner that allows nearly any institution to identify opportunities appropriate to that institution's experience, interests and expertise.

Finally, as noted above, USAID Missions, Regional Bureaus and Technical Bureaus also issue solicitations, RFAs and RFPs that provide higher education institutions with various opportunities to be engaged in Agency development programs. Interested institutions should check <http://www.grants.gov> and <http://www.fedbizopps.gov> on a regular basis.

B. Unsolicited Concept Papers and Proposals

If your institution has a good idea which is linked to an Agency sector or specific country strategy, for which there are no competitive opportunities, USAID accepts, for review, well-conceived, innovative unsolicited concept papers and proposals that advance U.S. foreign assistance objectives (as these are articulated in the Agency and Mission websites).

Interested parties should thoroughly explore the Agency and Mission websites (per the guidance provided in Section III A of this guidance document) in order to design activities that will clearly advance USAID's priorities in the sectors and countries where you wish to operate. In addition, institutions should closely follow the guidelines for unsolicited concepts and proposals that are found in Section III B of this guidance. Please note that USAID will not support proposals that operate only in the U.S. and will not fund infrastructure development in the U.S.

The Agency looks forward to working with the higher education community in the achievement of critical development objectives around the world. If you have questions or would like additional assistance, please contact Gary Bittner at (202) 712-1556.

III. Specific Requirements & Recommended Approaches

A. Investigating Program Priorities

USAID recommends the following approach to investigating program priorities.

Begin your inquiry by visiting www.usaid.gov. Click on “Locations” to see the various regions where USAID is operating. Click on any region of interest to your institution. Upon arriving at the webpage for that region, we encourage you to explore all the articles and links. However, one should pay particular attention to the red box in the upper right corner of the page.

The red box provides links to the specific Missions and country programs, as well as links to the Congressional Budget Justification. As noted in the guidance above, a thorough investigation and understanding of the mission program priorities is essential to developing a proposal worthy of Agency consideration.

Start by clicking on the “Countries” link. This will provide you a brief description of the country program, as well as links to such important information as the strategic plan for that country, the Congressional Budget Justification for that country, and the annual report.

Please note that the Congressional Budget Justification (CBJ) is very important. Once you click on the link to the CBJ, you will notice a red box in the upper right section of the page. The CBJ text for each country in the region can be visited by clicking on the appropriate hyperlink. It is essential to review and analyze this material very closely. As you formulate proposal ideas, be sure that they address and advance the achievement of the objectives and program priorities described in these pages. In addition, note the budgets and recognize the financial constraints facing the country and Mission programs.

After a thorough review of the country webpage and the CBJ, click on the link to “Mission Web Sites.” This link can be found in the red box in the upper right hand corner of the regional page and/or the country page. It can also be found under the Locations box on the USAID homepage.

Most mission web sites will provide links to the current strategic plan. All mission web sites will provide detailed descriptions of their programs, a list of partners, and examples of their specific programming activities. Once again, it is essential to review and analyze this material very closely. As you formulate proposal ideas, be sure that they address and advance the achievement of the objectives and program priorities described in these pages.

If you still have questions after conducting the investigation described above, please feel free to contact Gary Bittner by phone at (202) 712-1556.

B. Guidelines for Unsolicited Proposals & Concept Papers

In general, unsolicited concept papers and proposals should clearly articulate how the proposed activities will clearly advance USAID's program priorities in the sectors and countries where you wish to operate. (See Section III A and Section III F for suggestions on how to investigate Mission and program priorities.) If an institution elects to provide a concept paper or proposal, the following format is required/highly recommended:

- I. Introduction
- II. Development Problem
- III. Importance of Problem to USAID
- IV. Proposed Program
- V. Projected Impact
- VI. Contribution of Program to USAID
- VII. Estimated Budget
- VIII. Capabilities Statement (may be submitted as an appendix)

The information expected in each of these eight sections is described below. In order to have a chance at receiving funding, proposals and concept papers should follow this guidance very closely.

I. Introduction

A brief, one to two paragraph statement that summarizes the development problem to be addressed, the importance of the problem to USAID, the proposed program, the projected impact of the problem, and how that impact will contribute to the achievement of USAID's objectives and programming priorities in the target country.

II. Development Problem

Clearly define and explain the specific development problem to be solved.

III. Importance of Problem to USAID

Clearly demonstrate how and why this development problem is of critical importance to the specific programming priorities set forth by the USAID Mission.

Given the Mission's existing programming priorities, why should this problem be addressed by USAID? Please note that Missions establish strategic plans and program priorities in order to optimize the impact of USAID's limited resources. Development problems that fall outside the scope of those program priorities will not secure funding support.

IV. Proposed Program

Clearly describe and detail the program to be conducted by the applicant.

V. Projected Impact

Clearly set forth the impact the program will have on the development problem. This is not a description of the program or a statement of proposed outputs. This is a compelling statement of "so what." It is an argument that convincingly establishes the projected impact of the proposed program and the grounds for making such claims and projections. The Agency is not seeking mere assertions or statements of hope, faith or conviction about anticipated impacts. The Agency is seeking a rigorous argument that convincingly demonstrates how the program will have specific and measurable impacts on the development problem. This discussion should include a monitoring and evaluation plan that specifies how the applicant will measure the impact of the program.

VI. Contribution of Program to USAID

Clearly demonstrate how and why this program and its specific projected impacts are of critical importance to the specific programming priorities set forth by the USAID Mission. How do the proposed program impacts serve and advance the achievement of the Mission's existing programming priorities? Why should this program be funded by USAID? Please note that Missions establish strategic plans and program priorities in order to optimize the impact of USAID's limited resources. Development programs and program impacts that fall outside the scope of those program priorities will not secure funding support.

VII. Estimated Budget

Set forth the budget for the activity, including matching by the applicant and contributions from other entities.

VIII. Capabilities Statement

Describe the personnel, resources, and institutional track record. Communicate the ability of the institution to successfully conduct the proposed activity.

1. Additional Requirements for Unsolicited Concept Papers

To be considered, a concept paper shall be no more than five pages and must contain the following minimum information: 1) cover letter that contains the principal contact information, signature, type of organization, and submission date; 2) program description including title and outline of program objectives, concept paper's objective, proposed activities, countries, duration of proposed work, and how the anticipated results support the accomplishments of USAID global, regional or country specific objectives; and 3) estimated budget (including host country counterpart as appropriate) and encourage matching of 25%. We suggest that you use the criteria ([see below](#)) for full proposals, in developing your concept paper.

2. Additional Requirements for Unsolicited Proposals

To be considered, full proposals shall be no more than 15 pages and must contain minimum institutional, technical and financial information as indicated below:

Institutional: Proposal cover letter contains the authorized CEO or equivalent official's name and signature, the name and contact information of the principal investigator, the type of organization, and proposal submission date. A cover letter must also be submitted (fax copies are acceptable) from the counterpart institution(s) in those instances in which such arrangements are part of the proposal.

Technical: Program description includes title and abstract; organization's "capability statement" the proposal's objectives; location of activities; implementation methodology; anticipated measurable results; monitoring, evaluation and sustainability plans; and duration. The proposal must explain how the anticipated results support the accomplishment of USAID global, regional or country-specific objectives and to what extent host country collaborators have participated in the design process. In order to be competitive, proposals should be explicit regarding how the proposed program supports USAID's sector and country development strategies.

Financial: The proposal explains the planned sources of financial support. USAID encourages 25% match which can be cash or in kind. A letter from the responsible financial officer committing to the match and supporting the proposed budget is required. In instances in which collaboration with a host country partner institution is planned, include any host country and

institutional matching contributions - including funding from added partners (private and public firms, NGOS., PVOs, foundations and civil society organizations) designed to promote the sustainability of the partnership.

To manage the review of unsolicited proposals in an orderly manner, USAID recommends the following target dates for submitting proposals: October 1st, January 1st, April 1st, July 1st. Please submit full proposals in a Microsoft WORD file and send it to the following e-mail address: GBittner@USAID.GOV

3. Criteria for the Review Process

If the requirements for concept papers or full proposals are complete, then USAID will conduct a review. Concept papers, meeting the minimum requirements stated above, will be reviewed for consideration of full proposal development. Full proposal reviews will consider the following:

The extent to which the proposal supports USAID's mandate and objectives

The overall technical merits of the proposal

The proposed management structure

The monitoring and evaluation plan

The proposed financial plan, encouraging the 25% matching requirement and counterpart and other partner contributions, as appropriate

The requested amount of USAID funding

The anticipated short and long-term impact of the project and the nature of the on-going relationship between institutions

The qualifications, capabilities, and experiences of the organization and personnel

The nature and proportion of activities to be delivered in the host country(ies)

Upon receipt of concept papers, the review is expected to take 20 calendar days. Upon receipt of full proposals, the review is expected to take up to 45 calendar days due to the USAID's decentralized operations, particularly the overseas missions. If you have any questions or concerns about your concept paper or full proposal, please contact Gary Bittner by phone at 202/712-1556, or by e-mail at GBittner@USAID.GOV

C. USAID's Alliance Business Model

The Global Development Alliance (GDA) is USAID's commitment to change the way we implement our assistance mandate. GDA mobilizes the ideas, efforts and resources of governments, businesses and civil society by forging public-private alliances to stimulate economic growth, develop businesses and workforces, address health and environmental issues, and expand access to education and technology. The website is located at: http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_partnerships/gda/

Institutions of higher education are encouraged to submit proposals under this main mechanism consisting of an Annual Program Statement located at: http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_partnerships/gda/

Proposals submitted under this mechanism are considered to be competed. Therefore, universities need not concern themselves with the stringent criteria stipulated for unsolicited proposals (ADS 303.3.5.5)

D. Program Priorities & the Congressional Budget Justification

USAID funding is decentralized; in other words, missions and operating units are allocated funding based on program priorities. When reporting to Congress, the Agency is required to demonstrate how its resources were used to achieve those priorities and accomplish results. Agency personnel are evaluated on the extent to which the programs they fund and manage contribute to achieving those priorities and results.

Missions employ performance indicators as a means of measuring how and whether a given activity is actually achieving its intended changes and expected results. Indicators can be qualitative or quantitative, but they must be useful for management purposes. Mere head counts, i.e. number of people trained, are rarely adequate unless the matter being counted has a clear impact that markedly advances the achievement of result.

Once you are familiar with each mission priorities, focus your attention on the specific program priorities discussed in their strategic plan. These will provide your best "point of entry."

If an institution wishes to increase its chances of receiving Agency funding, it is essential that the institution's proposed activities enable Missions to achieve the priorities, results and objectives that guide Agency funding decisions.

Please note that any given proposal is competing with a multitude of other proposals aimed at helping Missions meet these same priorities, results and objectives. In addition, funding

resources are limited. To the degree an institution's proposal can demonstrate a comparative advantage and a relatively higher return on investment, the greater its chances of being funded.

The Congressional Budget Justification (CBJ) provides Congress and the public with an excellent description of the objectives, results, priorities and financial resources that determine Mission investments and programming activities. The Agency strongly recommends a thorough reading of the CBJ prior to developing a proposal for Agency consideration.

As one completes the investigation and research described in this guidance, prospective applicants should keep asking the following questions about any prospective activity or proposal:

1. So what? If this activity were to be conducted, what impact will it have on the development needs of the target community?
2. So what? What local institutional capacity will be developed or strengthened as a consequence of the activity and how will that institutional capacity help USAID's work – particularly the work of the Mission?
3. So what? What specific Mission results are effectively served and advanced by the proposed activity?