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Seed Funding Effective Practices

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WHAT IS SEED FUNDING?

Seed funding supports the preliminary work necessary to build competitive proposals for external funding or to provide an avenue to conduct exploratory research that may lead to new research initiatives. This work includes data collection and proof of concept. Yet, building an equitable, synergistic collaborative team that can provide breadth of technical expertise strengthens the likelihood of the team's success, as well as the broader impacts/societal relevance of the research, which is important for follow-on funding. Seed funding provides important resources that can be used to help create a more equitable research climate by allowing a wide range of faculty to gain experience and demonstrate effectiveness in leading research, collaborating with colleagues, and managing students. While the dollar amount of seed funding and scope of work may vary across internal opportunities, equitable practices for awarding seed funds are important in every case.¹

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SEED FUNDING

Developing a seed funding program provides opportunities to bolster research productivity within institutions, particularly for scholars who may need a to generate preliminary data and establish the feasibility of their project in to secure external funding. It is important to be intentional about establishing the seed funding program, including considering who is being awarded, what is expected from those who are awarded, and how to track or assess the outcomes of funding. Those considerations should be at the forefront when establishing a program. Four key considerations for seed funding are:

Centering equity

Equity must be central to every aspect of the seed funding program, from solicitation to post-award. This includes being clear and transparent about eligibility, criteria for award, evaluation for award selection and accountability. Seed funding processes must further be inclusive, and work to shore up equity and inclusion goals. The request for proposals (RFP) should specify:

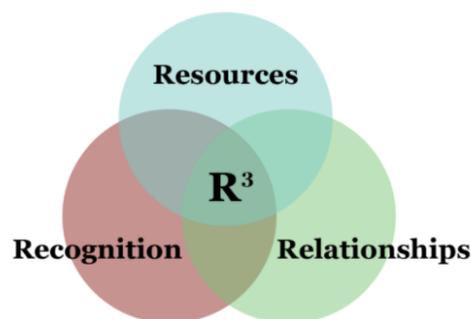
- Who is eligible (e.g., tenure track, non-tenure track, rank, librarians, staff, collaborative projects, solo projects, etc.)?
- In making eligibility decisions, the funding unit should consider which groups most need access to resources for career success (for example,

¹ <https://www.brown.edu/research/conducting-research-brown/finding-funding/internal-funding-opportunities/research-seed-funds-guidelines>



members of underrepresented groups in any given discipline, early career scholars, caregivers, etc.).

- If applicable, the RFP should mention which kinds of applicants or projects will be prioritized for funding.
- For collaborative projects, the RFP should require the team to articulate their use of equitable collaborative processes and specify how the collaboration furthers the specific professional advancement needs of each member of the team, referring to UMass ADVANCE's three Rs of equitable collaboration—access to Resources, Recognition, and Relationships. Inequitable collaborations can arise when members of the team, for example those at lower ranks, do not gain access to resources, recognition, or relationships for their work, being treated in exploitative ways. Another form of inequitable collaboration is when team members are only symbolically included on the team, perhaps as an attempt to appeal to funding priorities. Equitable collaborations are those that ensure that all team members are engaged in real ways, and benefit from the collaboration.



- How funds can be used (e.g., faculty salary, research assistants, hourly pay, etc.), ensuring

equitable practices, such as ensuring that funding is used to support the work carried out on the grant, in inclusive ways. If faculty members already have research funds through RTF or start-up monies, scholars can be instructed to explain what funds they have available, and what funds are already committed to other projects.

- What criteria will be used to evaluate the proposal (e.g., a scoring rubric, priorities of the award, etc.).
- There should be agreement on evaluation criteria and priorities of the program that are clearly defined and presented to reviewers, including how criteria regarding equity and inclusion impact final decisions.
- Consider broader impacts for equity. Identify ways that proposals can advance equity in their respective disciplines.
- Clearly articulate program expectations post-award.

Consider institutional goals

The priorities of the institution, which can be at the department, college, institute, or campus-wide level, should be considered in seed funding programs. For example, interdisciplinary collaborations may advance university goals and, as such, could be a priority for seed funding. Seed funding proposals should be feasible, building on strengths of the institution, while also advancing the institution toward strategic goals—including goals for faculty diversity and equity, as well as external funding.

Create a robust program

The creation of a research seed funding program involves establishing clear processes and procedures, from the initial RFP to post-award support and assessment of funding impact. Seed funding programs should benefit faculty and advance the mission and goals of the institution. Consider the funding model and sustainability for the program. Programs should not “pop up” and then disappear, but be part of a consistent, measured approach that researchers are aware of, and continually assessed based on the goals of the program.

Identify institutional strengths

External funding agencies often consider the institutional context of a proposal, (e.g., are the resources available to the investigators adequate to support the project?). Seed funding projects that capitalize on institutional resources, faculty expertise, geographic location, or local community populations may be more successful in attaining follow-on funding. Seed funding programs

should provide information so that all faculty can access institutional resources and describe those resources in proposals. If resources are available to all, programs can encourage applicants to address institutional strengths—including equity in access—in external funding applications.

Identify potential external funding opportunities

Seed funding proposals should articulate how the funding will strengthen proposals for external funding opportunities, showing a clear link between seed funding and external opportunities. Seed funding units must think through how to support applicants equitably in finding these opportunities.

Review process for seed funding programs

In evaluating seed funding proposals, program administrators should meet with the selection committee to decide on peer review criteria to be used before looking at any of the applications. This pre-evaluation discussion should remind committee members of goals and common biases in selection processes. During this meeting, the development of a rubric containing specific evaluation criteria depending on proposal characteristics should be discussed, with particular attention to criteria established to enhance equity and inclusion. The committee should then apply these criteria consistently to each proposal during the individual written reviews and refer to the criteria again when making final decisions.

After seed funding decisions have been made it is important that awardees understand what is expected of them. Seed funding programs should intentionally decide what constitutes a successful seed funding project at the outset to help define the metrics that should be evaluated. Considerations include:

- What is the time frame for the award?
- What information will be used to report back to the seed funding program?
- How should PIs address changes to the seed funds such as shifts in scope of work or issues with budget?
- What is the expectation for follow-on funding?

Ultimately, it is critical for seed funding programs to center equity and to think through the desired outcomes and impacts of the seed funding awards to best plan appropriate programmatic activities.

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