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Department of Defense  
OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND SECURITY REVIEW

## Transcript of VBFF Questions and Answers

- 1) Will a recording of this webinar available?**
  - A. The Webinar slides are available on the Basic Research Office (BRO) website (<https://basicresearch.defense.gov/Programs/Vannevar-Bush-Faculty-Fellowship/>). A transcript of the full FY21 Webinar (this document) is also available. In addition, a Proposer's Guide is also made available on the AcquTrak registration web-site, at: <https://acqupass.noblis.org/ApplyVBFF> ("Additional Information").
- 2) Can the collaborators receive funds from this single PI proposal?**
  - A. Yes, collaborators can receive a portion of the funds, if they are in eligible institutions. For example, collaborators in foreign Universities would be ineligible to receive VBFF funds. See also section C-1 of the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA).
- 3) What do you mean when you say all disciplines?**
  - A. Previous versions of this program included all disciplines. Currently, there are no limitations per se to which scientific disciplines the VBFF Program is interested in, as long as they have DoD relevance. The FOA contains descriptions of a range of scientific topics of potential interest to the DoD. See also section 5.3 of the VBFF Proposer's Guide.
- 4) Are reference letters required in the White Paper package?**
  - A. No.
- 5) Is it better to have the recommendation letters from academia or from the DoD?**
  - A. The choice is up to the proposer. The letters should explain why you are a standout scientist. For more guidance please refer to section 5.8 "Recommendation Letters" of the VBFF Proposer's Guide, for further details.
- 6) Roughly how many are typically invited to submit a full proposal?**
  - A. Approximately 10-15 percent.
- 7) Can you show the email contacts again?**
  - A. The presentation slides have been made available (see question #1). In addition, the contacts are listed in the FOA.
- 8) How detailed should the budget be? What is the limit?**
  - A. The limit is \$3 million for five years for the whole program, so roughly \$600K per year. The proposal must contain cost justifications in some detail, and more guidance can be found in section 5.7 of the VBFF Proposer's Guide. For the White Paper, a very brief indication of how the funds would be spent is sufficient.
- 9) Are multiple White Paper applications allowed?**
  - A. As currently stated in the FOA, the PI may submit only one application, although it could be interpreted that more than one White Paper can be submitted, but only one proposal can be subject to consideration, if invited. If more than one White Paper is submitted, each one will be judged on its own merit, according to the criteria in the FOA, but there would be only one proposal invitation at the most.
- 10) It was stated that reviews and travel will be required if one wins -- due to the pandemic, will Zoom or WebEx for example be allowed?**

- A. Yes. We will not force anyone to travel under current circumstances. Annual program reviews, for example, have been delayed as a result of safety considerations during the pandemic.

**11) What is the burden of preliminary data?**

- A. Preliminary accomplishments and results should provide a good indication that the idea will work. That being said, this program does not ask that a large data set exists to provide a quality proposal. The VBFF emphasizes disruptive advances in basic research, and whether the proposed idea is visionary, as opposed to incremental. If the question refers to data that is necessary to conduct the research, that is left to the discretion of the proposer, but it should be emphasized that the PI should not rely on data being provided by the DoD.

**12) Is it practically necessary that links to DOD researchers be already established, or can this be part of the proposal plan?**

- A. Established links to DoD researchers are not required, although they may be helpful. The proposal plan should include plans for potential interactions with the DoD in general, and DoD Lab researchers, if those are not already existing. Please see Section 5.3 of the VBFF Proposer's Guide for details.

**13) Can you please say something about the budget, and what it can be used for: postdocs, grad students, salary?**

- A. Graduate and post-doctoral students are desirable, because part of the program is developing the next generation of scientists. See section 5.7 of the Proposer's guide.

**14) Are international Institutions (in Europe) and their scientists allowed as collaborators?**

- A. Yes, but they cannot be paid by VBFF funds.

**15) Can the same concept be under review elsewhere at the same time, such as the AFOSR MURI competition?**

- A. Yes, but you will be asked to disclose that fact as part of the application process. For example, you must list all pending and previous grants. Please note this in the White Paper as well. It should be added that the VBFF being a single-investigator program and the MURI being a multi-disciplinary team effort, you would have to demonstrate extraordinary justification of why the same concept satisfies two contradictory objectives.

**16) How detailed and how long should the White Paper be?**

- A. The FOA provides this guidance: three pages. Emphasis must be placed on why this proposal merits consideration. Footnotes are allowed. Detailed budget information is not necessary. Please refer to the FOA, and section 4 of the VBFF Proposer's Guide for more guidance.

**17) Can you give an example of what qualifies as "Basic Research" for example for someone in particle physics...only a new particle discovery is basic research? Developing a new type of semiconductor device would not be considered basic to a particle physicist.**

- A. Opinions can vary as to what is defined as "basic research." Here, we emphasize the exploration of new fundamental phenomena and ideas, as long as these have potential relevance to the DoD mission. More guidance can be found, for example, by looking at the proposal abstracts of previous awardees, which can be found on the Basic Research Office website (<https://basicresearch.defense.gov/Programs/Vannevar-Bush-Faculty->

[Fellowship/](#)). The VBFF Proposer's Guide also describes the program philosophy, and the types of research of interest to the VBFF Program.

**18) Can you please share details on the format of the White Paper such as required sections, limit of pages etc.?**

A. This information is described in the FOA.

**19) Are letters of recommendation ideally from external institutions? DoD Program Officers who have previously funded the PI?**

A. No, DoD program Officers who have provided funding would not necessarily be ideal choices for the letters of recommendation. These must come from people who you think are best capable of providing convincing affirmation your scientific abilities and innovation. They must have known you well (professionally), and they themselves would be considered in high standing.

**20) Are social sciences included among the disciplines considered?**

A. Social scientists are not excluded, as long as the proposed research satisfies the objectives and criteria of the program. See also sections 5.2 and 5.3 of the VBFF Proposer's Guide.

**21) Should the White Paper include a tentative budget?**

A. Yes, but one line may be sufficient. Section 3 of the VBFF Proposer Guide provides more suggestions on mentioning the budget requirements in the White Paper.

**22) Would psychological sciences across the board be relevant – cognitive neuroscience is but one sub-discipline of psychological sciences?**

A. If the idea is exploratory basic research, has potential DoD applications, and with transformative impact, it may be considered relevant. However, it must also be significantly different from the subjects of research of other agencies and programs, to justify why it should be funded by the VBFF. See also question 20.

**23) Is collaboration with Government labs allowed? Can they receive a portion of funding?**

A. Collaboration is allowed but the Government labs will not be funded under this program. Research collaborators should be chosen for their scientific contribution in support of your research.

**24) Is it OK to apply, if you don't have tenure at the time of the white-paper deadline (but are only days away) but you \*will\* have tenure by the time of the full proposal (if invited)?**

A. The tenure requirement must be present at the time of the white paper submission deadline.

**25) Are the funded projects equally distributed across areas of interest (including 'other')?**

A. No. Funding depends on the merit of the individual submissions.

**26) In terms of letters of recommendation from DoD personnel: are there any conflicted-out personnel? (OSD, USD-RE, JCS, ...)**

A. Yes, such relationships would be problematic and are not recommended.

**27) Has the FOA come out?**

A. Yes. Please visit [grants.gov](https://basicresearch.defense.gov/Programs/Vannevar-Bush-Faculty-Fellowship/) or follow the link from the OSD web-site (<https://basicresearch.defense.gov/Programs/Vannevar-Bush-Faculty-Fellowship/>)

**28) Does the institutional grants office need to register and submit the White Paper, or can the investigator do it?**

- A. The investigator can submit the White Paper. See the FOA for additional guidance, and the registration web-site (<https://acqupass.noblis.org/ApplyVBFF>).
- 29) The FOA shows the White Paper deadline of August 28. Am I mistaken?**
- A. You are not mistaken. It's currently set for Aug 28. Please check to see if there any extensions. [Additional Note: The deadline for White Paper submission has since been extended to September 04. Note that the registration deadline is September 02.]
- 30) Regarding eligibility: I have been teaching full time for 25 years and am heavily involved in research, but am not on tenure line. May I apply?**
- A. No.
- 31) Are the Fellows allowed to pay their summer salary?**
- A. Yes.
- 32) Are NSWC Labs are acceptable collaborators/DOD linkage?**
- A. Yes. All collaborators must be justified on the scientific merits of their contributions. It is crucial to describe how your idea may be relevant to DoD, but not necessary to demonstrate that you have pre-existing connections.
- 33) If I have two high-risk/high-impact ideas, and would like guidance which direction best meets the DoD mission, is it allowed to contact the Program Officer to discuss prior to submission of the White Paper?**
- A. The Program Officer will not provide any evaluation of the merits of an idea but can provide limited guidance concerning the potential DoD relevance of an idea.
- 34) Will the recommendation letters be asked to comment on the specific project or just on the PI?**
- A. On the PI.
- 35) Can international students be paid or the students need to be domestic?**
- A. Students in your academic institution can be funded, regardless of citizenship, although the PI must be a US citizen or permanent resident (see the "Eligibility" section in the FOA). Students in foreign institutions would not be eligible for funding. [Additional Note: Given the current circumstances, this program does not place restrictions on the location of the students to be funded, as long as they can dutifully contribute to the research and are employed by your, or another eligible institution.]
- 36) Can the letters of recommendation come from foreign institutions?**
- A. Yes.
- 37) Since the fellows will travel to a variety of related activities, should the funding budget for the grant include these activities as well as direct-related grant travel? If so, would more details on travel requests be provided if a full proposal is asked?**
- A. The only requirement is attendance at the annual program review, but effective conduct of the research is likely to include other travel, e.g. conferences, lab visits, etc. Detailed travel descriptions are not necessary in the White Paper, and estimates should be provided in the full proposal.
- 38) Does the registration for the webinar suffice for the registration for White Paper submission?**
- A. No. Please visit the registration web-site (<https://acqupass.noblis.org/ApplyVBFF>) and follow instructions therein.

**39) Can funding be provided for services to industrial collaborators? This would be for materials or access to specific labs (such as consumable chemicals) not at the university. Not necessarily personnel costs.**

A. Yes, however, such costs must be justified and carefully considered from a budgetary perspective.

**40) Would computer engineering/computer architecture be relevant?**

A. You would need to justify such an idea as basic instead of applied science.

**41) Are recommendation letters required for the White Paper submission?**

A. No.

**42) How about for economic related research?**

A. That would not be of particular DoD relevance.

**43) Is there a minimal requirement for the effort of the PI?**

A. There is no fixed threshold. The proposal must show that the PI provides a necessary, and substantive contribution to the research effort.

**44) Can you clarify what the expectations are with regards to training future scientists?**

A. Postdocs and graduate students are a critical part of the VBFF program. Vibrant and productive labs are critical. See also the discussions in sections 5.5 and 5.6 of the VBFF Proposer's Guide.

**45) Can the budget/project include training for the fellow - e.g., sabbatical?**

A. A short sabbatical may be considered acceptable if it can be demonstrated that it is necessary, and directly relevant to the proposed research. For example, the VBFF being a single-investigator program, it could be argued that the PI requires this sabbatical in order to increase necessary skills and knowledge, if the research topic has some overlap between scientific disciplines. However, one must also consider the impact on the overall research project; in that particular instance, it may be more beneficial, for example, to invite a collaborator to train the PI, so that the oversight of the research at the PI's lab can be maintained. The justification for the request must be considered carefully, so that the reviewers can reasonably understand that it is in the best interests of the program.