

USCERA – FAQs for PIs and Unit Approvers

Introduction

USCeRA is the university's electronic research administration system. Faculty create and submit proposals through USCeRA to get unit head's and dean's office approval of proposal submissions prior to review by the Sponsored Awards Management (SAM) office. SAM office approval is required for all proposals. For general user instructions, please visit the [SAM's user guide](#).

FAQs for CAS Proposal Principal Investigators (PIs)

1. When should I create a new proposal in USCeRA?

As soon as you know you'll be submitting an external proposal, you can create and save a new proposal in USCeRA. The approval process should be complete at least three days before the sponsor's due date. This allows a couple of business days for your unit head and dean's office to review – if they have questions, they may send the proposal back to you for corrections. We recommend submitting in USCeRA as early as possible. A member of the CAS Grants team can help you complete the USCeRA forms – email casgrant@mailbox.sc.edu for assistance.

2. What attachments are required for a USCeRA proposal to be considered ready for submission into the approval stage?

At a minimum, you need to attach 1) a budget; 2) budget justification; and 3) project summary or abstract. If you have a subaward, you need to attach their budget, budget justification, statement of work, institutional letter of commitment, and subrecipient commitment form (new SAM requirement, template [here](#)). You should consider allowing some extra review time when your project involves subawards – if you or a member of the CAS Grants team identifies issues with the information submitted, this will allow time to work with the subawardee to make revisions before USCeRA submission.

If your proposal requires additional forms/templates that your SAM representative will need to review or sign in advance of submission, also attach those here (e.g. a sponsor-specific financial questionnaire).

3. I am submitting a Letter of Intent, not a full proposal – do I need to submit a proposal in USCeRA?

Generally, letters of intent don't require a budget component, so a USCeRA submission isn't required. Contact your [SAM representative](#) if you're unsure.

4. In the USCeRA form titled Personnel and Effort Expended on the Project, what should I include?

Enter the effort in months (or percentages) for key personnel for the first year of the project. The salary entry should match the amount requested for the corresponding person for the first year of the project.

5. I am applying for a Fellowship for faculty – if selected, the fellowship will be paid directly to me – do I need to submit a proposal in USCERA?

Yes. Fellowship applications often raise numerous issues; in particular, when the fellowship requires the applicant to spend time away from campus. Issues, including salary, benefits, and teaching relief, often come up and need to be addressed before work on the fellowship proposal is started. It is strongly advised that you have a discussion with your department chair/school director and the associate dean for research when considering a fellowship application.

Fellowships that require the faculty member to teach at another institution will not be supported by the college.

6. The fellowship I'm applying for is for a fixed amount, do I still need to include a budget in USCERA?

Yes. The level of support provided by a particular fellowship is often set by the funding agency, but a budget and budget justification must still be uploaded in USCERA. The budget may be short and simply state that the amount requested is set by the funding agency. The budget justification should address how this money will be used – for salary, for travel, for course buyouts, etc. Any potential co-funding from the department or college should have been discussed prior to submission in USCERA as well as indicated in the comments section of Proposal/Award Processing form.

7. How do I know what indirect cost rate to apply?

It depends on the type of project you're proposing (research or service), what the sponsor allows, and where the project work will be conducted (on-campus or off-campus).

To qualify for the "service rate", the proposed work cannot be research. An example of a service project might be a government contract to conduct a survey. Typically, it is easy to differentiate between service and research.

For proposals where the majority of the work takes place off-campus, PIs can use the off-campus rate. Off-campus activities that qualify for the off-campus rate must meet two criteria. 1) The majority of the work/research by all participants is conducted off campus and 2) most of the funds are spent on expenses incurred off campus. Examples of off-campus research projects include field work or cruises to collect ocean data; typically, they are short-term projects. It is exceedingly rare for a multi-year research grant to qualify for the off-campus rate.

8. My sponsor will not pay indirect costs or administrative fees (or has limit less than 49%) – how do I document that?

In the USCERA Proposal/Award Processing form, Project Costs section, answer “Yes” to the question, “Are you proposing to use an indirect cost rate lower than USC’s negotiated rate?” Your reason for using a lower rate is: “the sponsoring agency has a formal policy limiting indirect costs.” Either upload the sponsor’s policy or provide the URL so proposal approvers can review the sponsor’s guidelines.

9. I’ve submitted my proposal in USCERA, but just realized I made a mistake on one of the forms or uploaded the wrong attachments – can I withdraw my proposal?

You cannot withdraw a submitted proposal, but you can contact your unit head and ask them to return the proposal to you.

10. My project includes a stipend for a graduate research assistant, do I have to include funds for tuition in my project budget as well?

Yes. Tuition should be included at the current rate per credit hour as shown on the [Bursar’s Office webpage](#). In cases where a sponsor specifically disallows tuition or student fees, you should make a note in your budget justification about how those costs will be covered (from an existing start-up or research incentive fund).

Grant budgets including support for graduate research assistants (GRAs) should also include funds to cover the cost of GRA health insurance, using published student health insurance premiums as a basis for the budget estimate. GRA health insurance costs should be included on the same budget line as GRA tuition, so they are excluded from the modified total direct cost base for calculating indirect costs. Current GRA health insurance premiums are posted [here](#). There is no cost for GRA health insurance during the summer months.

11. The sponsor requires cost share – what documentation do I need to include in USCERA?

Unless you have written confirmation that the college (Dean’s office) is providing a cost share, this cost share will typically go under the “Department” section of the USCERA Cost Share form. You will need to discuss this with your department chair/school director and, if appropriate, Associate Dean for Research prior to USCERA submission. If you are cost sharing academic year salary, you should also include the fringe benefits and typically the indirect cost on the sum of salary and fringe to count toward the cost share commitment. You can only cost share your time once, and you should not exceed 35-40% of your time as a cost share in any one year. This is especially important if you are submitting more than one proposal in which you are cost sharing academic salary. If both are funded and you exceed the allowable cost share, you will have to decline one or more of the proposals. If you are providing the cost share from start-up funds, this still goes under “Department.” When your project involves cost share, we recommend allowing a couple extra days for USCERA review, in case additional clarifications or discussions are required.

Topping off salary for prestigious fellowships, such as the Guggenheim, ACLS, Fulbright, and NEH, is not a cost share and, therefore, cost share should NOT be checked.

12. Do I need advance approval from my unit head for faculty release time to be included in my proposal?

If you are asking for teaching relief or buying out a course, your USCERA proposal form should indicate “yes” (‘faculty release time’ on Proposal/Award Processing form General Questions tab). You should talk with your department chair/school director prior to USCERA submission about being granted teaching relief or a course buyout. In your budget you will need to set aside money, including fringe, to pay for the course buyout. The detailed rates for a course-buyout can be found in the College [document library](#).

If you are on campus, “faculty release time” or a “course buyout” does not absolve you from your normal faculty duties, such as committee work, advising, etc., nor does it release you from the normal expectation to be at work on campus.

13. What are sole source considerations?

The answer is “yes” if you: 1. have co-PI(s) from other institution(s); 2. are purchasing a piece of equipment and only one vendor can provide it (do not answer yes if you have a preferred vendor, but that vendor is not the only one that can provide the piece of equipment); 3. have a consultant that you’re paying over \$10,000 for the entire award period (it can be \$3,000 per year for five years). Please note that you have to complete one certification per item (if you have two co-PIs at two different institutions, one piece of equipment, and three consultants then you need to complete six sole source certifications – to add a certification you need to click “Add Certification” link under Tools on the main page of the proposal (Proposal Summary). The sole source justification should explain why you’re using that particular co-investigator, company, consultant and not someone else or another company.

14. My proposal needs to be submitted via Grants.gov – do I prepare the Grants.gov forms or does someone else do that?

For most applications, the official applicant is the University of South Carolina (i.e., not an individual PI). Individual PIs can request Grants.gov user accounts affiliated with USC to prepare their own applications, or they can contact the CAS Grants Team to coordinate preparation of the Grants.gov forms. Ultimately, the Grants.gov submission requires SAM office approval, and should be complete and ready for SAM review and submission at least three business days prior to the due date. We recommend contacting the CAS Grants team early to develop a submission timeline and communicate expectations.

FAQs for Unit Approvers (Chairs and Directors)

1. If the proposal indicates that it will require more than one account to be set up, but there is only one budget attached to the proposal, should I return the proposal to the PI?

Yes, return the proposal and ask the PI to submit a separate budget for each intended account. There should be a separate account for every separate unit (i.e., department/school or college) represented in the project’s budget. Separate budgets simplify tracking and collection of indirect costs when awards are made and projects are established.

Budget Review Tips as of 8/6/2023

(*rates cited are for general guidance, are subject to change)

- 1) Did the PI provide a due date and link to sponsor guidelines?
- 2) Did they use the CAS budget template? (preferred, not required)
- 3) Faculty salaries – are proposed salaries based on current rates?
- 4) Salary escalation of 2-3% is recommended in out years for faculty and full-time staff, but not required – depends on sponsor and funding availability
- 5) GRA stipend amount depends on unit (generally \$22k - \$30k/year for AY + Summer)
- 6) Fringe benefits – confirm current rates are used – ensure health insurance is included for all full-time staff and faculty during academic year (no insurance for 9-mo faculty during the summer).
- 7) For existing USC full-time employees or faculty during academic year, actual health insurance plan costs should be included (ask CAS Grants Team to confirm). When unknown or TBN, use highest full-family insurance for estimates (also keep in mind that personal situations can change, so good to have a buffer for fringe costs by budgeting for full family).
- 8) If course buyout is proposed, ensure compliance with CAS policy (generally, one course = 10-20 % of 9-month base salary + fringe benefits + health insurance + indirect costs depending on faculty's course load – note, by approving in USCERA, you are approving buy-out if funded)
- 9) Tuition – include tuition for all graduate students. Current rate is \$572.25/credit hour – most GRAs take six credits in fall, six in spring, three in summer = estimate 15 credits/year for full-time (12 month) GRA unless justification says otherwise.
- 10) GRA health insurance applies during academic year only (not charged during summer) = \$3,091/year (Fall only \$1,303; Spring only \$1,788; Note, students are covered by insurance in the summer).
- 11) GRA tuition and health insurance are excluded from modified total direct cost base for calculating indirect costs
- 12) Subawards – ensure we have budget, budget justification, letter of commitment, and SAM “subrecipient commitment form” for each subaward – all need to be routed in USCERA with USC PI's proposal (be sure sole source certification for subaward is also in USCERA)
- 13) For subawards, only include first \$25k of each sub in the modified total direct cost base for calculating indirect costs
- 14) Indirect costs - If anything other than standard on-campus research rate of 49% is applied, understand why and be certain that a justification is provided in USCERA (note that insufficient funds to complete the scope of proposed work is not a justification!)