Using Customer Satisfaction, Experience, and Engagement Data to Improve the Ease of Applying to WPO’s Funding Competitions

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About Me

- Senior at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
- **Major:** Earth, Society, & Environmental Sustainability
- Grew up in Los Angeles
- Currently interning with Weather Program Office (WPO)!
01. Background
What is the NOFO application?

02. All About ACES
What is the ACES Survey and why is it important?

03. Data Analyses
How did I analyze the data?

04. Survey Findings
What did the ACES Survey reveal?

05. Conclusions & Recommendations
How do we improve the NOFO for the future?

06. Ending Remarks
What are the next steps?
Abbreviations

NOFO
Notice of Funding Opportunity

WPO
Weather Program Office

LOI
Letter of Intent

ACES
Applicant Customer Experience & Satisfaction
01

Background

What is the NOFO application?
What is a NOFO?

- The **Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)** contains information about which WPO research programs are actively soliciting proposals.
- Contains **ground rules** and **key deadlines** for each funding competition.
- The number of competitions, funding availability, and proposal guidelines **change from year to year**.
What does the NOFO process look like?

**NOFO PROCESS SUMMARY**

- **NOFO Announced**: Scientific priorities are determined and NOFO is announced.
- **Proposals Submitted**: PIs submit LOIs and proposals through grants.gov and are notified of submission receipt.
- **Peer Review**: Program managers select 3+ reviewers who then evaluate proposals using set criteria.
- **Proposal Selection**: Program managers review and quality control reviewer evaluations and make selections.
- **Director Review**: WPO Director reviews and approves proposal selection.
- **Legal Review and Award Processing**: Selected proposals undergo legal review before awards are processed.

1WPO program managers work with policy team, partners and stakeholders, and scientific community to develop scientific priorities for each competition within a NOFO.
FY23 NOFO Timeline

- **FY23 NOFO released on Grants.gov**: August 23rd, 2022
- **WPO hosted NOFO webinar**: September 6th, 2022
- **Letters of Intent due**: September 15th, 2022
- **LOI feedback returned to applicants**: October 18th-25th, 2022
- **Final grant proposals due**: November 17th, 2022
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- **NOFO Announced**

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What is an LOI?

An LOI, or Letter of Intent is a 2-page research summary that contains a basic project outline, budget, and description of potential outcomes and benefits.

WPO responds with a non-binding recommendation either encouraging or discouraging the applicant to proceed with a full proposal.
What is the ACES Survey, and why is it important?
What is the ACES Survey?

The purpose of the Applicant Customer Experience & Satisfaction (ACES) Survey is to gather applicant feedback about WPO’s proposal submission/application processes.

A week after the NOFO process was completed in November 2022, WPO launched the ACES Survey. The data collected allows WPO to make informed decisions on how to refine these processes for future competitions.
Contents of the ACES Survey:

- **NOFO Resources**
  - NOFO is released
  - Researchers apply to NOFO
  - Interpreting the NOFO
  - WPO surveys applicants about NOFO
  - NOFO areas of improvement are identified
  - Improvements for NOFO are developed
  - Full Proposal Submission
  - LOI Submission
  - Future Changes
  - Overall Experience
  - NOFO Improvements are implemented for next year

Researchers apply to NOFO, WPO surveys applicants about NOFO, and NOFO areas of improvement are identified. Improvements for NOFO are developed, and NOFO Improvements are implemented for next year.
Research Questions & Data Analyses

How did I analyze the data?
1. What patterns arise that might indicate differences between Minority-Serving Institutions and Large Research Institutions?

2. How do the survey responses differ based on the competition that researchers applied to? What patterns exist, if any, that might indicate internal best practices for WPO?

3. What recommendations can you provide to our NOFO process and/or materials to improve them for future funding competitions?

- Outreach opportunities
- NOFO Resources
- Layout of the NOFO document
- LOI submission process
- Proposal submission process
Survey Findings

What did the ACES Survey reveal?
Findings and Recommendations

How do we improve the NOFO for the future?
What were the most common themes found across the ACES data?

1. Outreach
   Expanding and diversifying applicant demographics

2. LOI Feedback
   The timeliness, usefulness, and clarity of LOI feedback

3. Formatting
   Understanding what a full grant proposal should look like
Finding One: Outreach

Expanding and diversifying applicant demographics
**Institutional Affiliation of Participants**

- Large Research Univ: 58.8%
- NOAA CI: 26.5%
- Primarily Undergrad Univ: 4.4%
- Minority Serving Institution: 2.6%
- Other: 7.4%

**# of Prior Proposals Submitted at NOAA**

- 0 Proposals: 26.1%
- 1-5 Proposals: 49.3%
- 6-10 Proposals: 17.4%
- 11-15 Proposals: 5.8%
- 21-25 Proposals: 2.6%
Recommendation:

Expand outreach efforts for Minority-Serving Institutions (MSI) and non-traditional research institutions.

- WPO strives for **innovative high-risk research** that pays off years into the future
- In order for WPO to fund **new and innovative** scientific research, **diversity is necessary** within the NOFO applicant pool
- As the scientific field changes, **so should the voices being heard and amplified** within NOAA
Finding Two: LOI Feedback

The timeliness, usefulness, and clarity of LOI feedback
## Survey Results:

On a scale of 1–5, rate your agreement with the following statements:

My LOI feedback was _____.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competition:</th>
<th>Constructive</th>
<th>Clear</th>
<th>Returned in a Timely Manner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovations in Community Modeling</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VORTEX–USA</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined LOI Feedback Average</td>
<td><strong>3.28</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.70</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rating is below combined average
The Observations and Social, Behavioral, & Economic Sciences (SBES) competitions used a comment menu to deliver feedback. The Comment Menu feedback system provides general and equitable comments, rather than specific feedback for every LOI.

Applicants were frustrated the comment menu did not provide constructive criticism, nor specific reasons for the decision to submit a final proposal.

"I was somewhat discouraged at the Limited feedback provided...for the SBES competition."

"At least two submissions received identical, word-for-word feedback, but different recommendations about proceeding with a full proposal."

"LOI feedback would have been sincerely appreciated."

"The LOI feedback was unhelpful, nonspecific, and directly contradicted what was written in [my] LOI."
Feedback should provide commentary and/or constructive criticism.

WPO should provide equal opportunities for applicants to receive constructive criticism/feedback, regardless of competition.

LOI feedback should be constructive and foster an environment which allows researchers to refine and improve their research. This is achieved by providing consistent feedback to all applicants.

Recommendation:
Create a feedback system to address LOI submissions across all competitions in a consistent manner.
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86 Days
LOI Timing Feedback

- Survey participants indicated they need more time to prepare finalized proposals after receiving LOI feedback

“Ideally having at least another month between LOI feedback and proposal submission is important.”

“More time is a must.”

“More time is needed (a) to prepare quality proposals and (b) given other commitments/things on one’s plate that co-occurred with the timing of this proposal (and the timing of any proposal, really).”

“[I recommend] allowing much more time between hearing whether or not an LOI is encouraged and when proposals are due.”

“Four weeks is really fast given institutional deadlines to have the final packet for review about 5 days before the due date.”
Time crunches and rapidly approaching deadlines force researchers to rush the process of writing/developing/editing proposals.

WPO should provide enough time for researchers to incorporate feedback provided by LOIs.

Survey participants suggested WPO add an additional two weeks to the NOFO application timeline (a total of six weeks— from LOI feedback receipt to full proposal submission deadline).

Recommendation:
Reschedule key dates in the application process timeline to allot applicants at least two more weeks to complete their full proposal after receiving LOI feedback.
Finding Three: Formatting

Understanding what a full grant proposal should look like
36.2% of survey participants had difficulty finding formatting instructions in the NOFO announcement (closed-ended).

24.6% of survey participants struggled to understand how to properly format grant proposals (open-ended).

This issue is particularly prominent among applicants from smaller research institutions or first time applicants of a WPO NOFO (26.1% of survey participants).

Quotes from Open-Ended Responses:

"Perhaps include in the NOFO [links to formatting], page limits, and readiness levels."

"The templates were very helpful to me as an [early career researcher] with no prior experience submitting these."

"It would be [great to have templates] for things like the budget table and budget justification as well."
Recommendation:

Provide a specific layout and/or template for grant proposals (and other documents) on WPO website.

- Allows researchers to **visually understand the format** each competition requires of applications.
- Researchers will **worry less** about correctly formatting proposals and spend **more time developing research**.
- This helps **optimize the NOFO application process** as researchers write grant proposals, and as WPO reviews proposals.
Acknowledgements

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- Tamara Battle
- Castle Williamsberg
- Cassandra Shivers-Williams
- Melissa Pratt-Zossoungbo
Thank you!

The floor is open for questions.

Congrats Lapenta Interns!

Have a great weekend!

Feel free to reach out to me:

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