NOAA WEATHER PROGRAM OFFICE

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

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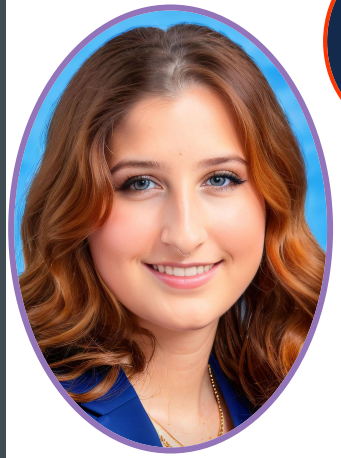
About Me



- Senior at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
- **Major:** Earth, Society, & Environmental Sustainability
- Grew up in Los Angeles
- Currently interning with **Weather Program Office (WPO)**!

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Abbreviations

NOFO

Notice of Funding Opportunity

WPO

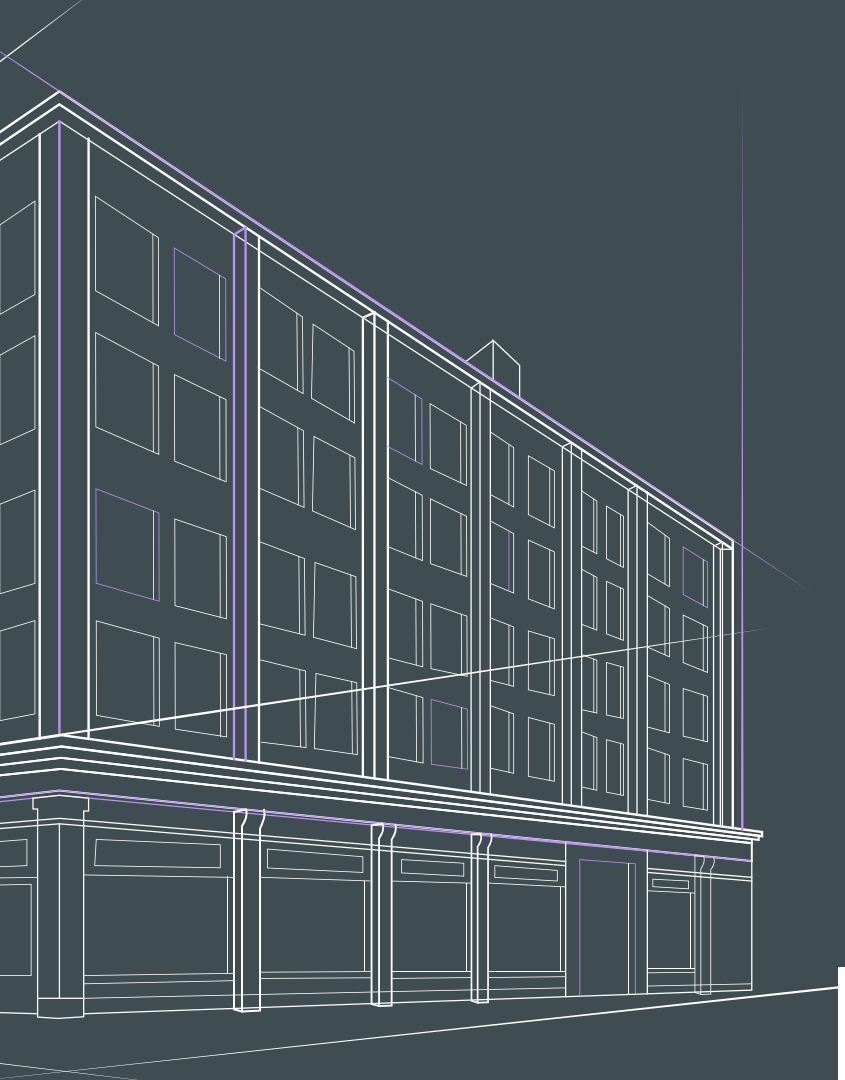
Weather Program Office

LOI

Letter of Intent

ACES

Applicant Customer Experience & Satisfaction



01

Background

What is the NOFO application?

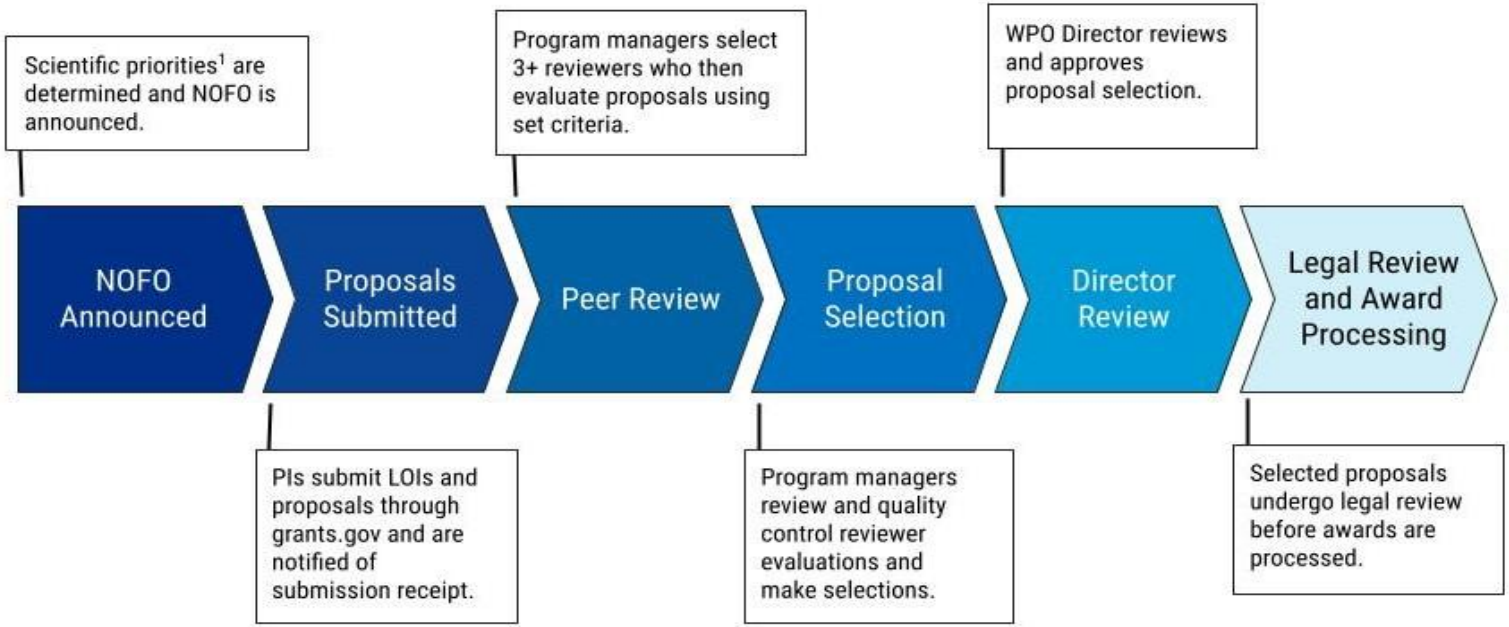
What is a NOFO?

- 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**

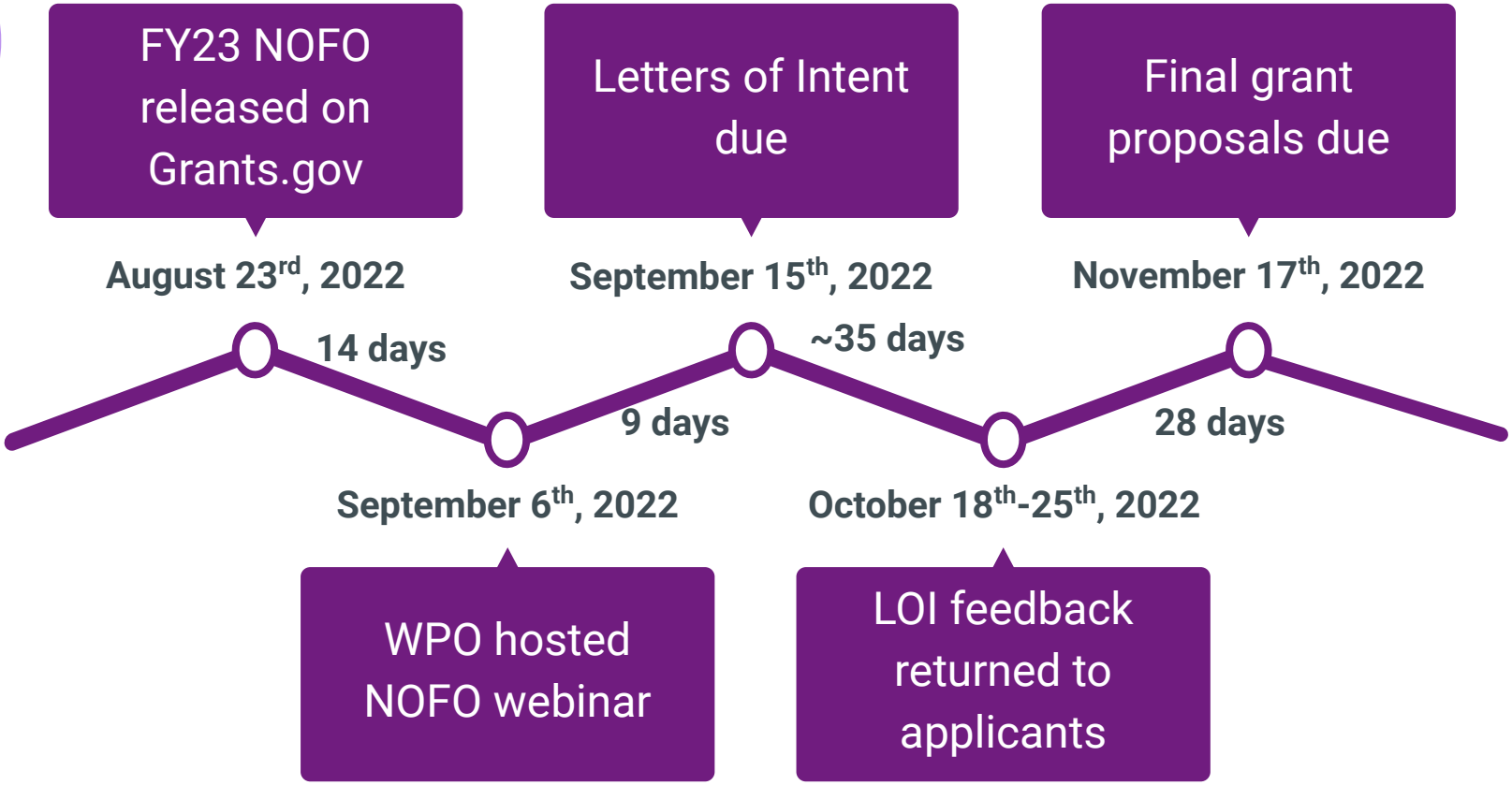
What does the NOFO process look like?

NOFO PROCESS SUMMARY

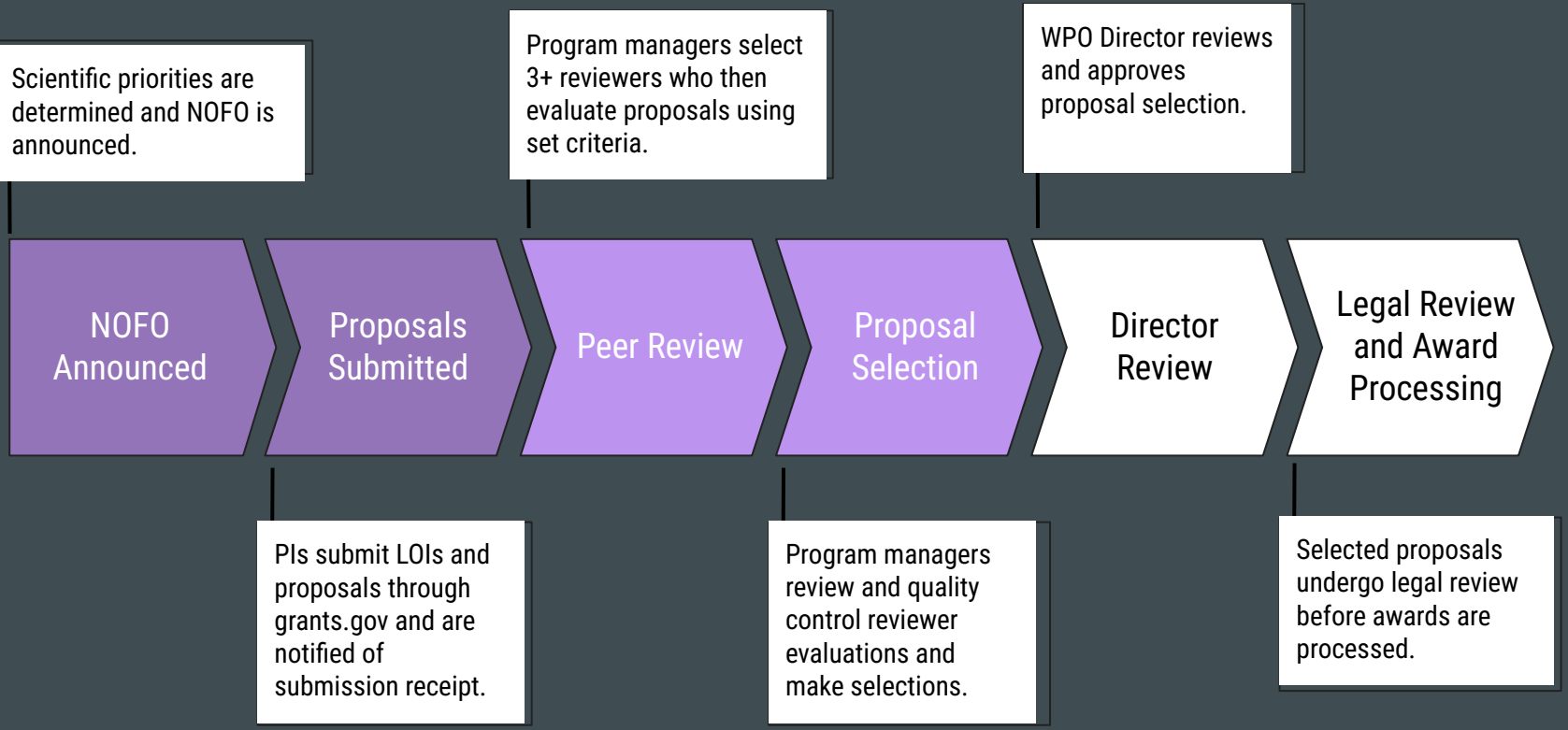
[1]WPO program managers work with policy team, partners and stakeholders, and scientific community to develop scientific priorities for each competition within a NOFO.



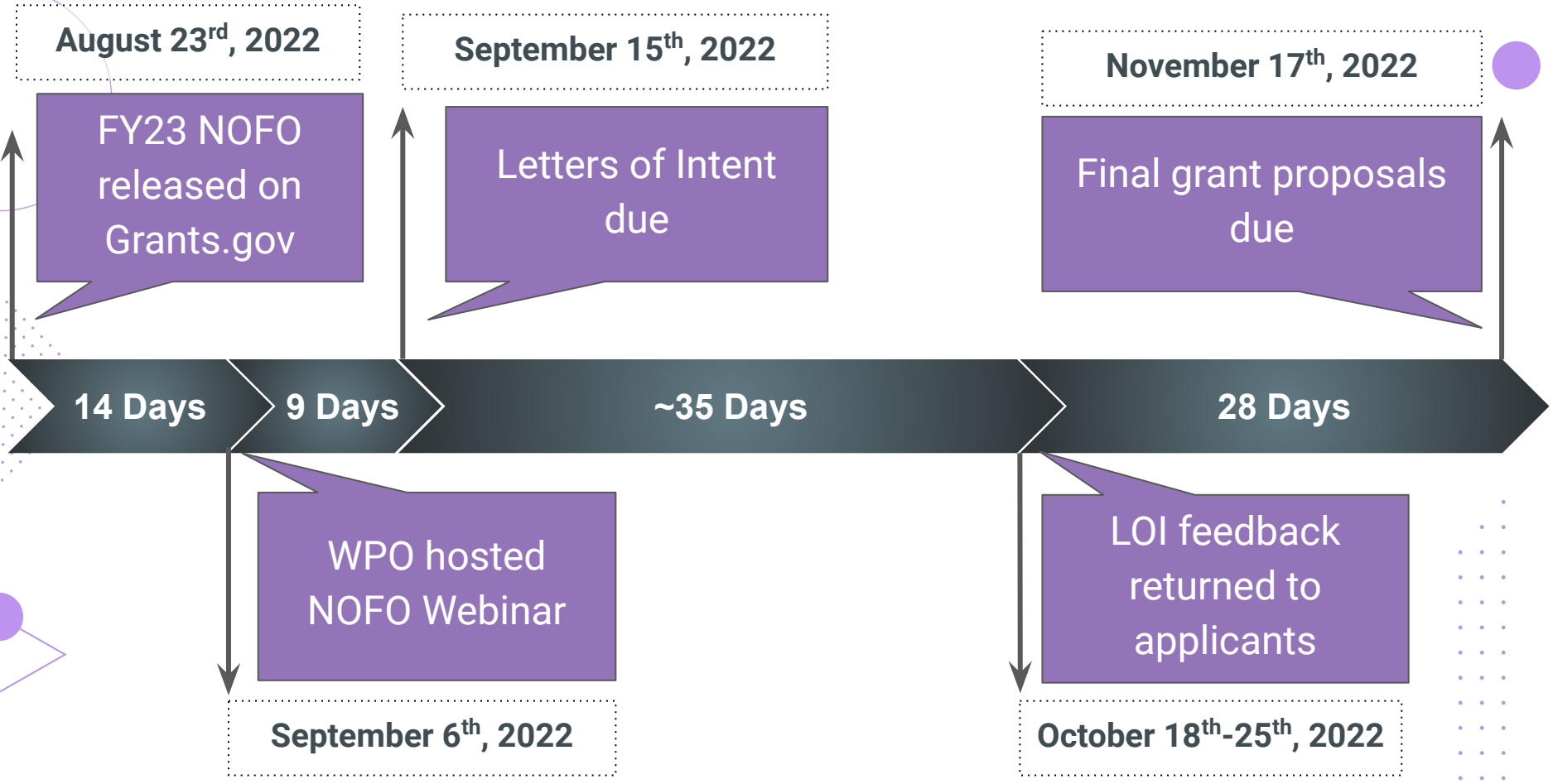
FY23 NOFO Timeline



What does the WPO NOFO process look like?



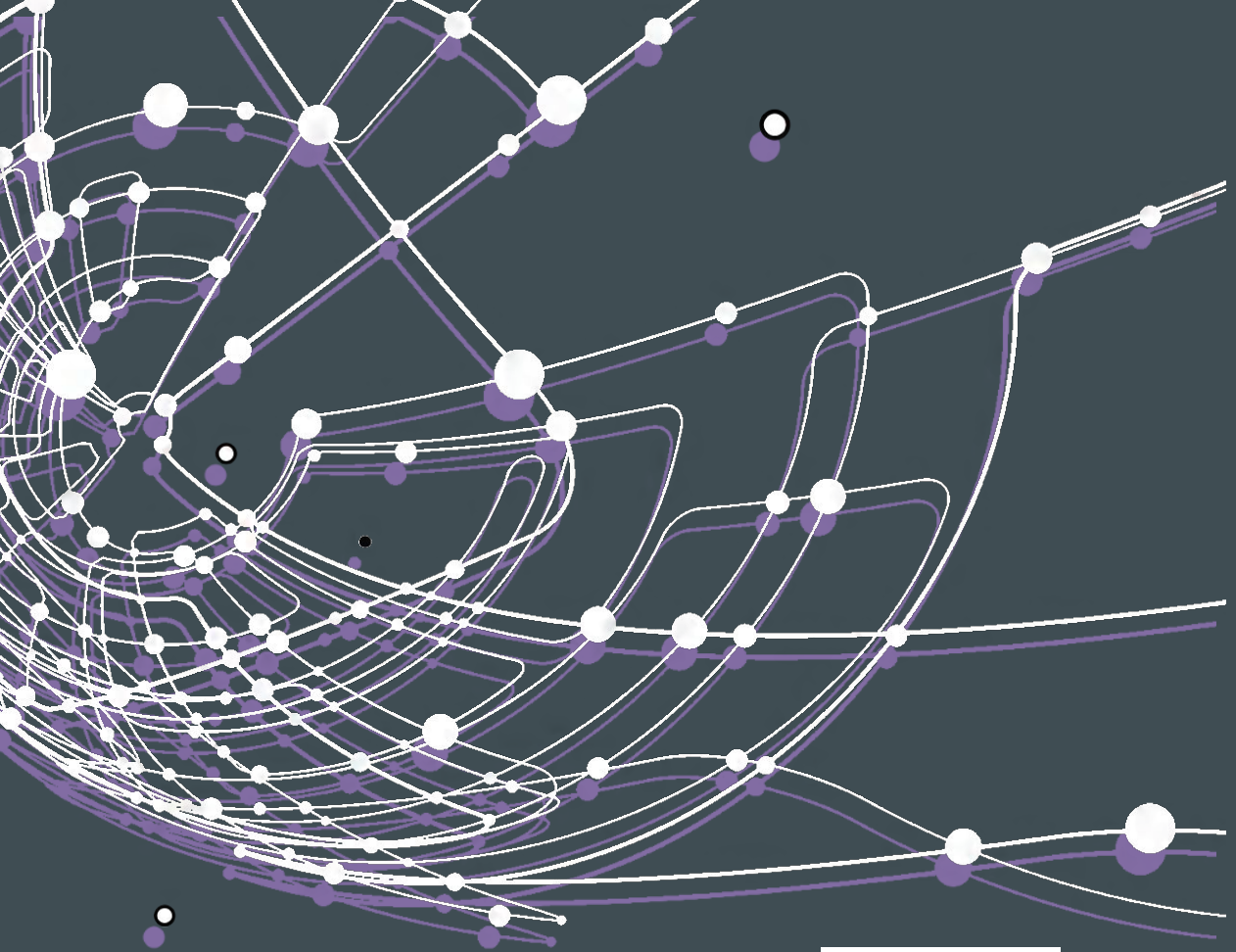
FY23 NOFO Timeline



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.



02

All About ACES

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**.

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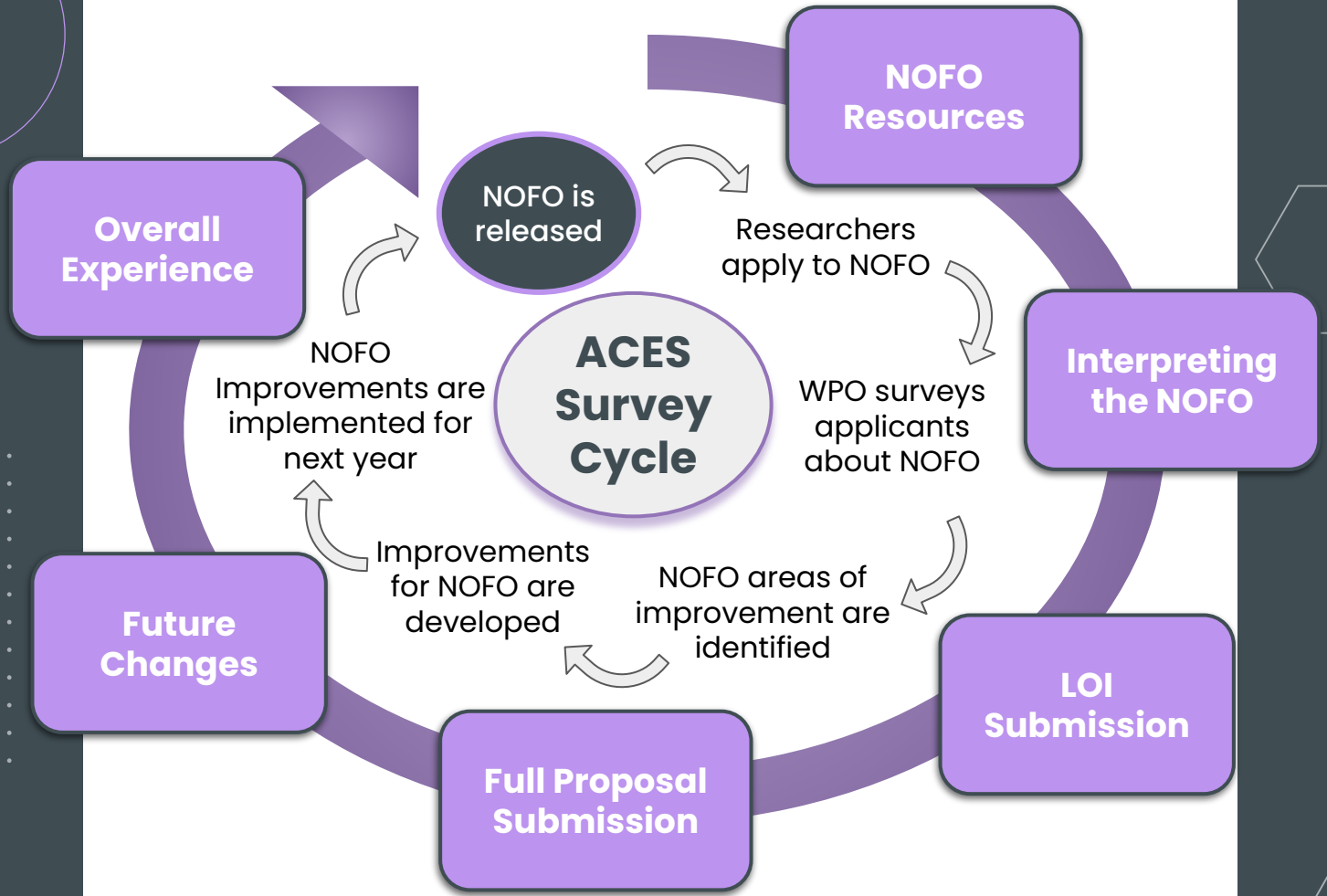
Contents of the ACES Survey:



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Research Questions & Data Analyses

How did I analyze the data?

Research/Focus Questions

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**

Data Analysis Process

Google Forms

Excel

PSPP

Quantitative Data

NVivo

Qualitative Data

04

Survey Findings

What did the ACES Survey reveal?

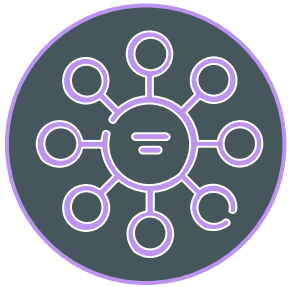
04

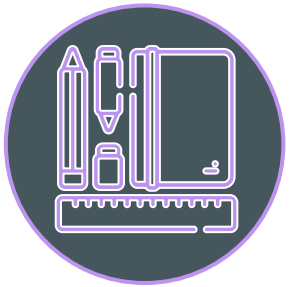
Findings and Recommendations

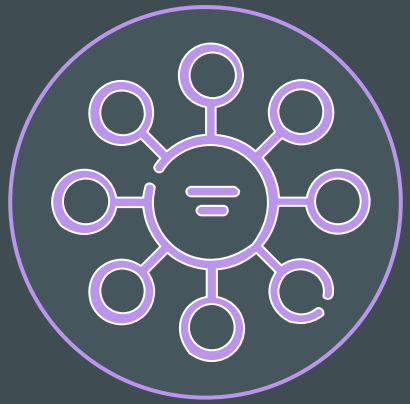
How do we improve the NOFO for the future?

What were the most common themes found across the ACES data?

1. Outreach	2. LOI Feedback	3. Formatting
Expanding and diversifying applicant demographics	The timeliness, usefulness, and clarity of LOI feedback	Understanding what a full grant proposal should look like



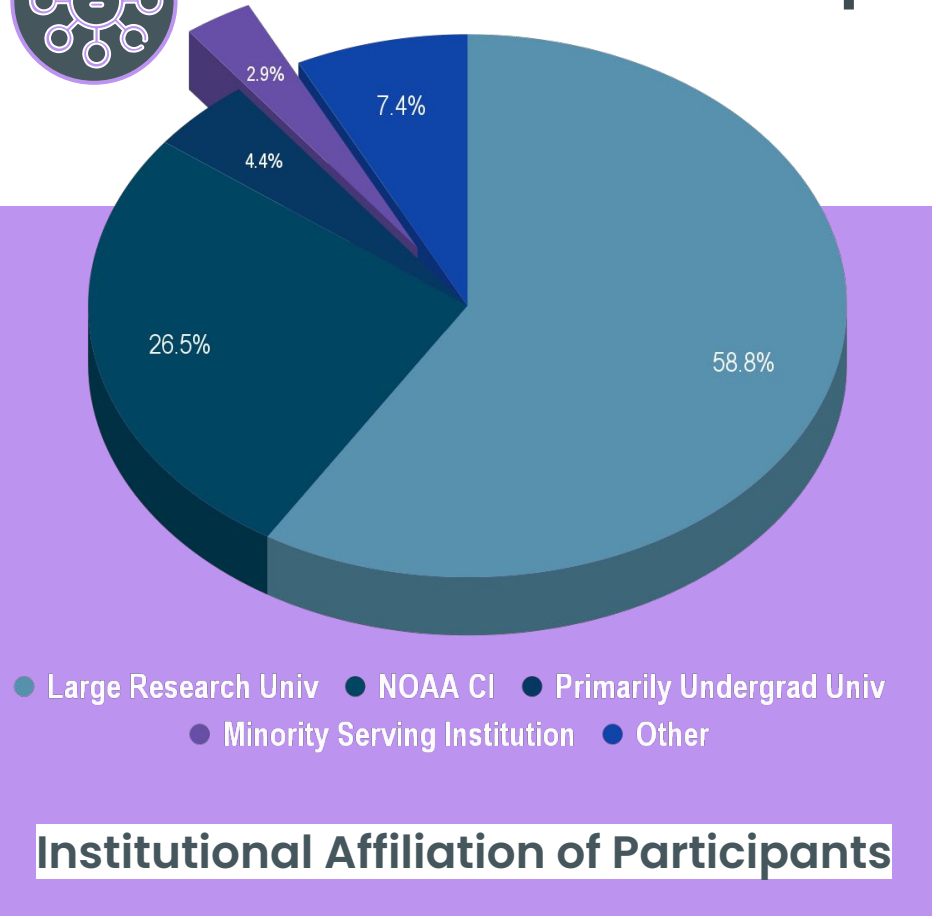




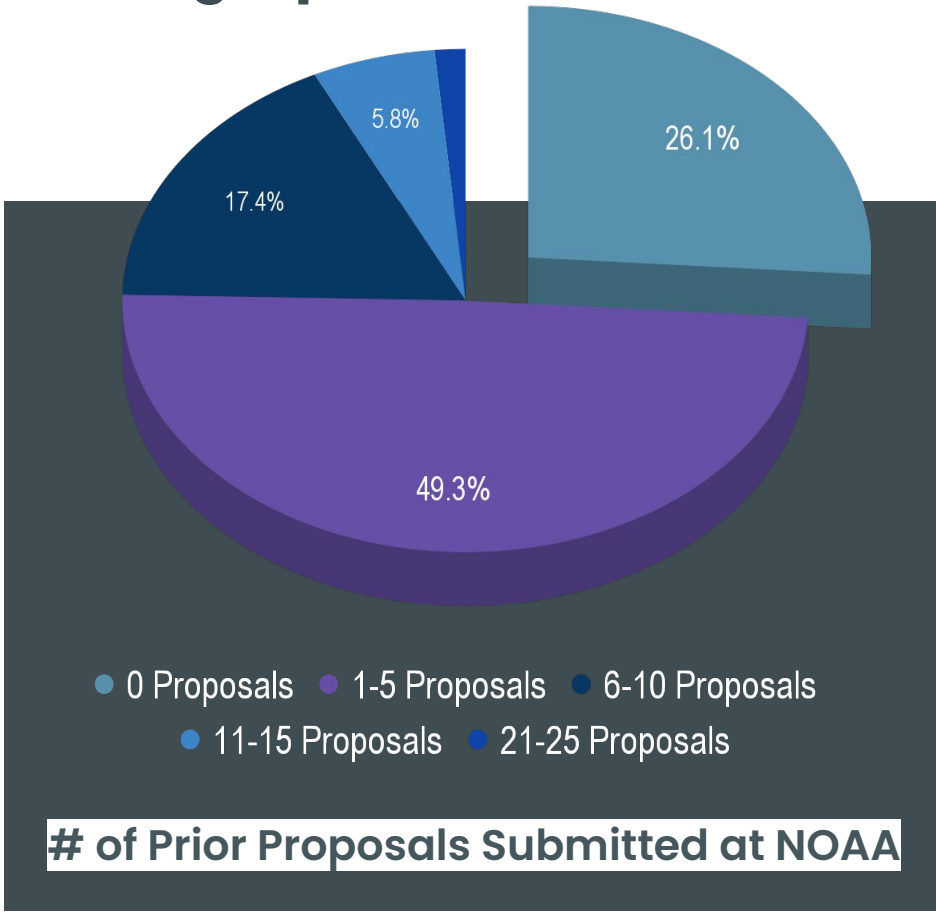
Finding One: Outreach

Expanding and diversifying applicant demographics

ACES Participant Demographics



Institutional Affiliation of Participants



of Prior Proposals Submitted at NOAA

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:

Competition:	On a scale of 1-5, rate your agreement with the following statements: My LOI feedback was _____.		
	Constructive	**Clear**	**Returned in a Timely Manner**
Observations	2.67	4.56	4.67
Innovations in Community Modeling	3.61	3.89	2.78
Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences	2.92	3.25	3.17
VORTEX-USA	3.88	3.88	3.5
Combined LOI Feedback Average	**3.28**	**3.70**	**3.14**

Rating is below combined average

Potential Reasons for Lower Ratings

- **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**."

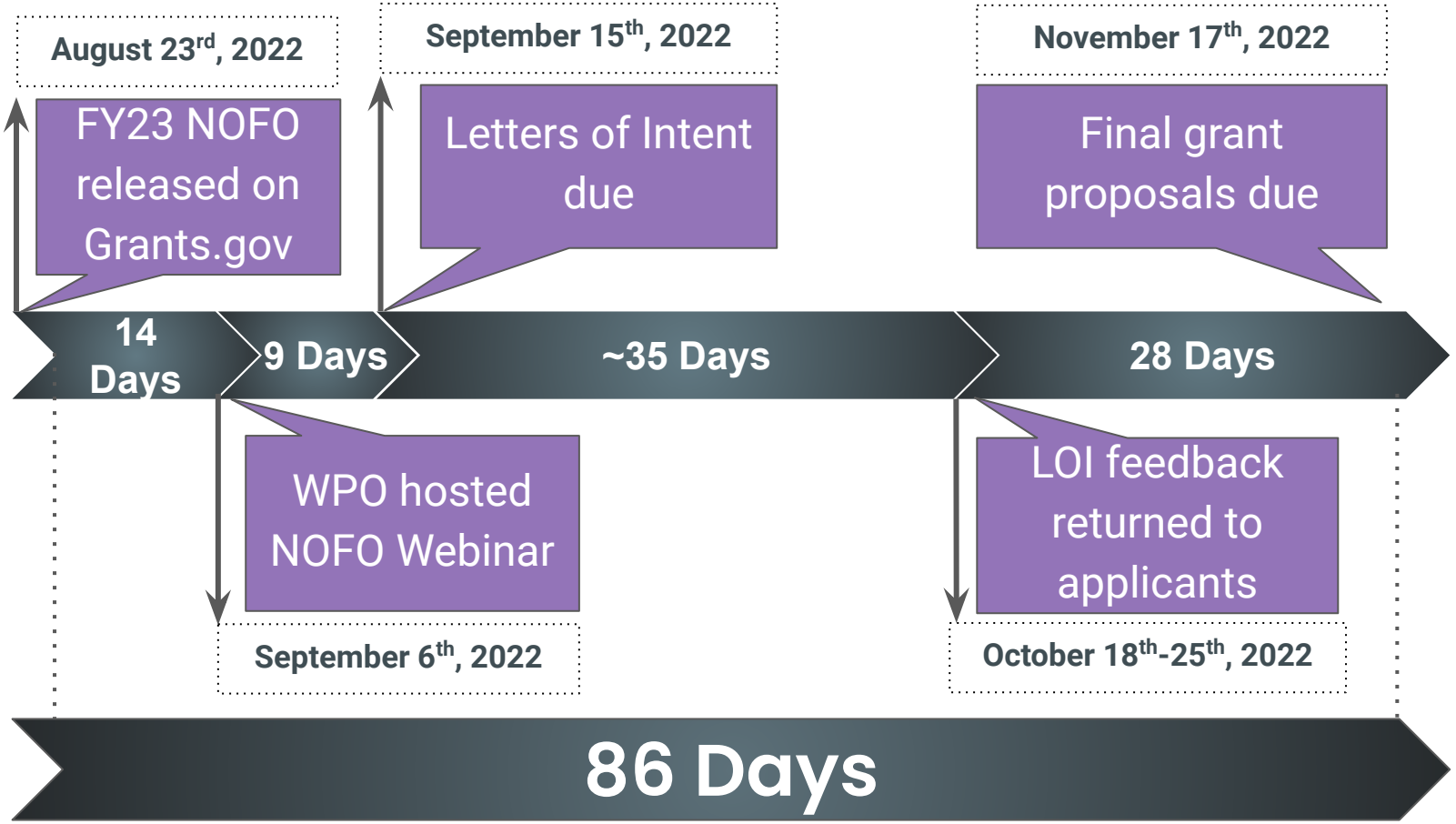
"The LOI feedback was **unhelpful**, **nonspecific**, and directly contradicted what was written in [my] LOI."

Recommendation:

Create a feedback system to address LOI submissions across all competitions in a consistent manner.

- 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

But wait – there's more (concerns)!



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."

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

"**More time is a must.**"

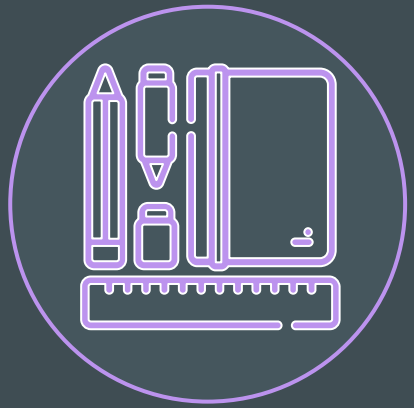
"**More time is needed** (a) **to prepare quality proposals** and (b) given other commitments/ things on one's plate that co-occurred with the timing of this proposal (and the timing of any proposal, really)."

"**Four weeks is really fast** given institutional deadlines to have the final packet for review about 5 days before the due date."

Recommendation:

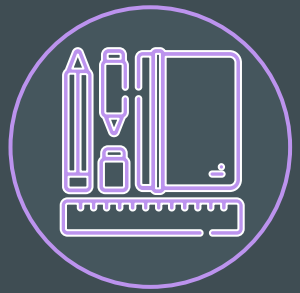
Reschedule key dates in the application process timeline to allot applicants at least two more weeks to complete their full proposal after receiving LOI feedback.

- 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)



Finding Three: Formatting

Understanding what a full grant proposal should look like



Formatting Issues

- 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)

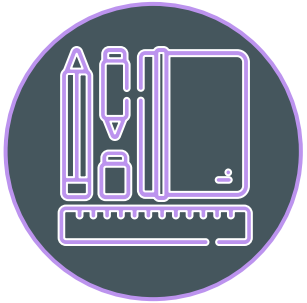
This issue is particularly prominent among applicants from smaller research institutions or first time applicants of a WPO NOFO (26.1% of survey participants).

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

I’d like to thank the following people for their guidance and mentorship during the course of my internship:

-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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