

Washington University in St/ Louis Internal Competitions Program

[Internal selection for Federal and Foundation awards requiring a limit on proposals from one institution]

Many extramural grant programs allow only a limited number of applications per institution, whether by invitation-only submission (typically foundations, e.g. Pew, Searle, Mallinckrodt, Rita Allen) or an open call by a federal agency. The early career awards of prestigious foundations provide substantial career benefit, recognition and reputational value to faculty and to WUSTL. Federal programs in this category provide strategic funding for research instrumentation and center support. The process for communicating funding opportunities and selecting the faculty or programs to represent WUSTL as the external applicant(s) is referred to as “Internal competitions” or “limited competitions”.¹

The Chancellor and Provost charged the Vice Chancellor for Research (VCR) to evaluate and improve Washington University’s internal competitions program. Critical elements of this program were identified as: communication of opportunities and eligibility; selection committee formation; internal application adjudication and candidate(s) selection; and candidate mentoring. The dual aims are:

- (1) Creating clarity, consistency, transparency and trust in the process
- (2) Improving the success rate of Washington University candidates

This research function, as charged by the Chancellor, will be led by the Office of the VCR (OVCR).

The OVCR is committed to supporting the faculty, both as applicants and selection committee members, throughout the process, in conjunction with the **Office of Corporate and Foundation Relations**, an invaluable partner whose staff are recognized experts on foundations and their programs.

Key objectives of the new Internal Competition process:

- Maximize faculty awareness of and access to all research funding opportunities on both campuses
- Establish a single website where all information and announcements are available to all faculty
- Ensure that adjudication of limited internal competitions is representative across Schools and disciplines, equitable, bias-free, and selects the most qualified candidates with the greatest likelihood of competitive success
- Provide feedback to all internal competitors in the process
- Mentor selectees to craft applications customized to the target foundation, thereby maximizing quality and competitiveness
- Increase the success rates of WU applicants

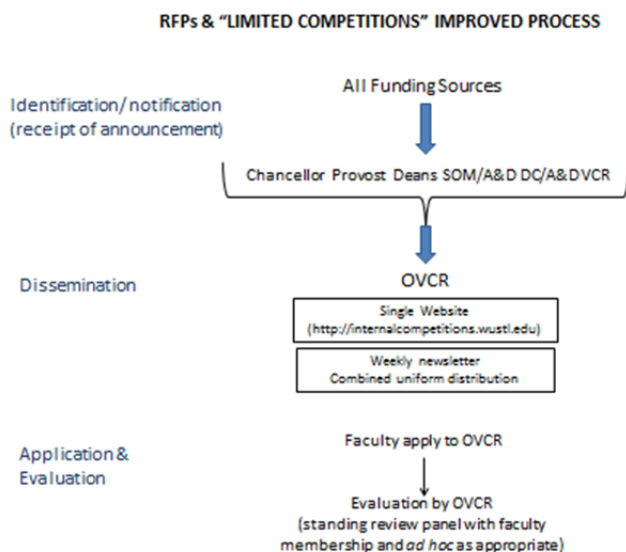
Internal competitions, a research function under the VCR, are best viewed by staff and faculty adjudicators as a strategic activity rather than administrative task. With that transformative change, the goals will be to:

- Communicate and market funding opportunities to the entire university research community
- Identify and encourage candidates
- Implement transparent, quality, accountable review with vigorous discussion whenever possible
- Enlist past winners to assist in mentoring and reviewing
- Preserve a time-line advantageous to the eventual nominee or PI
- Debrief applicants to record critical sponsor feedback for future years

¹ **Note:** Internal competitions outside the scope of this report include, but are not limited to, scholarships, buildings, professorships, and medical service proposals.

The challenge of communication

OVCR and Alumni and Development are enhancing their current collaboration to create a singular and integrated WUSTL effort to support both the federal and foundation internal competitions process. This partnership will include all campuses, all research domains and schools, and both Danforth and Medical School A&D, and operationally span the spectrum from information intake, identification, notification, dissemination, marketing and communication, adjudication, and mentoring. The revised process map is:



A single central, comprehensive portal for information will be created. This will include a single email listserv for announcements and a single website for both federal and foundations internal competitions. The website will be fully accessible; however, sensitive, foundation- or donor-specific information (“intel”), advantageous to Washington University faculty, will continue to be placed behind the WUSTL Key for controlled access.

NOTE: Foundation opportunities and invitations are often based on the critical relationships between WUSTL and the foundations. Knowledge of the “unwritten rules and cultures” of foundations is often a paramount factor in WUSTL being competitive for the awards. The creation, cultivation, and stewardship of foundation relationships, and the generation, storage and dissemination of the “unwritten rules and cultures” of foundations, is the expertise and domain of Alumni and Development, Corporate/Foundation Relations. They will continue to lead those efforts.

Early Career Awards (Foundations)

OVCR and Deans together will work to raise consciousness and communicate the importance of these awards to faculty development and to both faculty and institutional reputation and prestige.

Recruitment and Preparation of Candidate(s)

- Candidates should be alerted to (by Chairs) and aware of opportunities, and understand which programs for which they are best suited.
- WUSTL should anticipate foundation invitations and make announcements far in advance to enable time for application, adjudication, and mentoring

- A&D should coordinate and lead educational sessions to provide information about general and specific foundation opportunities, with guidance about the types of research and applicants that are being sought by the foundation.
- Identifying a winning candidate to represent WUSTL begins well before the review/adjudication process.
- Early career awards are often more about a person and his/her recommenders than the specifics of the science. Foundations have their own biases, politics and board personalities. WUSTL reviewers must be well informed about the foundation and think strategically to make the best match between a candidate and the current vision of the sponsor.
- Past winners are a) often enthusiastic and committed reviewers who b) know the culture and historical proclivities of a foundation, and what they are “looking for”, and c) potential mentees to coach the WUSTL candidate in preparing the best possible foundation-specific application.

Committee Formation and Operation

- A standing internal adjudication Committee for foundation awards will be established, with members and leadership from both campuses, advisory to the VCR. The Committee shall be called the ***Internal Competitions Committee for Non-federal Funding Opportunities***
- Life sciences and other research span both campuses. The committee must have appropriate representation for quality, breadth, and fairness, as well as sensitivity to diversity goals. The Committee must also have appropriate membership to prevent conflicts of interest in reviews. A prototype model engages members from the SoM ($\frac{2}{3}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$) and Danforth campus schools ($\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{3}$).
- Committee leadership must also represent both campuses. There will be a Chair and a Vice Chair, serving defined (3 yr) terms, whereby the Vice Chair succeeds the Chair after the specified term, and a new Vice-Chair is appointed by the VCR. At any given time, one of the two individuals would be a SoM faculty member and the other would be from a Danforth campus school. Committee Chair would alternate between SoM and Danforth schools.
- Committee membership should include concerned and dedicated faculty, willing to volunteer to serve WUSTL. Members should be senior, accomplished faculty and former foundation award winners. Members are appointed by the VCR, in consultation with Committee Chair and Vice-Chair, and Deans as appropriate. Committee membership is for a 4 yr term, renewable by the Committee Chair and Vice-Chair.
- Service on the Committee should be viewed favorably and prestigiously by members and Deans and Department Chairs, and as a mark of accomplishment and service. Deans and Chairs should understand that service on this committee will require several days per year, and work to identify and provide mechanisms, incentives and rewards for committee membership, through recognition as educational contribution, service contribution, or other means.
- Committee leadership and membership should be public, as a mark of distinction and towards scientific integrity and transparency. Similarly, the generalized review criteria for internal competitions should be public. These should be available on the Internal Competitions website.
- Committee process should include in-person discussion about internal applications, which are pre-ranked by the reviewers.
- The internal competitions process should be simplified. Pre-proposals should be as succinct as possible (e.g. 2-3 pages). The Committee may determine whether to forego a formal chair letter until the winner needs it for sponsor.
- After internal selections, committee members should serve as a source of mentors or identification of mentors who volunteer to help the committee’s selectee(s), to refine and tailor their applications to specific foundations.

Federal Internal Submission Proposals (typically research centers, major instrumentation grants)

Although many issues are shared between private and federal competitions, these large proposals have unique barriers for researchers. Faculty need to be recruited, reminded and encouraged long before the program deadline is announced;-successful center proposals take many months or more to prepare.

There currently exists a federal internal competition process, largely for federal major instrument awards, which is working well and will continue as currently implemented. There is a standing ***Internal Competitions Committee for Federal Funding Opportunities***. Committee structure and composition includes a base membership of nine faculty, all serving three-year terms, with the goal of at least five reviewers for any competition. The VCR or designee chairs the group. The current system is functional and well-accepted. There are no plans for major change.

There are opportunities for enhancement, which could include, resources permitting:

- Compiling histories of nominees and winners of federal internal competitions, as is done for the NSF Major Research Instrumentation grant program, using a TBD list of major programs of interest to the two campuses.
- Collecting and cataloging information and feedback about successful and unsuccessful applications for use as strategic data going forward.
- Supporting every PI authoring a proposal, even if there is no adjudication process necessary, providing strategic information, connecting to past winners, and reviewing drafts.