

# **First in the World Program Guidance and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

## **FY 2014 Competition**



### **U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE)**

#### Purpose of this Guidance

The purpose of this guidance is to provide information about the First in the World (FITW) program. The guidance provides the U.S. Department of Education's interpretation of various statutory provisions and does not impose any requirements beyond those included in the FITW notice inviting applications (NIA) for the 2014 grant competition; and other applicable laws and regulations. In addition, it does not create or confer any rights for or on any person.

The Department will provide additional or updated program guidance as necessary on its FIPSE Web site: If you have further questions that are not answered here, please e-mail [OPEfirstintheworld@ed.gov](mailto:OPEfirstintheworld@ed.gov)

# **Table of Contents**

A. Overview

B. Eligibility

C. Priorities

D. Selection Criteria

E. Evaluation

F. Use of Funds

G. Other Matters

## **A. Overview**

### **A-1. What is the purpose of the FITW program?**

The President has set a clear goal for the Nation's education system. By 2020 the United States will once again lead the world in the proportion of its citizens holding college degrees or other postsecondary credentials. To support this national effort the Department of Education has outlined a comprehensive education agenda that includes expanding quality and opportunity at all levels of education from early learning programs through higher education. The FITW Program is a key part of this agenda.

Successful FITW projects will include the following characteristics: (1) a project design supported by Strong Theory; (2) a data collection plan; (3) a design and implementation plan for evaluation that will demonstrate whether the strategies implemented are showing Moderate Evidence of Effectiveness; (4) replicable and scalable reform strategies; (5) a strong focus on improved postsecondary access, affordability, and completion, with an emphasis on low-income students; and (6) a strategy for improvement of postsecondary productivity and effectiveness that holds cost stable or decreases costs.

### **A-2. How do you prepare a successful application?**

The best approach to writing a successful application is to carefully read all materials provided on the program. Materials include the NIA, the application package, the FIPSE website, and the FAQs. Also, attend the Pre-Application Webinars for the program. The dates for the webinars are listed at [www.ed.gov/fipse](http://www.ed.gov/fipse). If you cannot attend the webinars please check the FIPSE Web site for the posted MS PowerPoint files from the webinars.

### **A-3. What constitutes a competitive budget?**

Successful grant writing does not begin with the budget. Successful proposals begin with clearly written and persuasive narratives. Then and only then, is it time to construct a budget that is clear and supports the proposed activities. Budgets should clearly reflect the scale and scope of the project. For example, a budget for a single institution involving 500 students is substantially different from a three-institution consortium involving 9000 students. Similarly, there are differences in budgets that support one or two interventions and others that involve three or more interventions. In short, think carefully about what you need to successfully complete your project. Don't submit a budget that is excessive but also don't submit a budget that is inadequate. Budgets are assessed by the peer reviewers under the resources criterion for relevance and appropriateness to the proposed project and also by the FIPSE staff to ensure that proposed costs are allowable.

### **A-4. Are the FITW grant awards for the entire four-year project period?**

Yes. The estimated sizes of grant awards provided in the NIA are estimates of the total grant award and cover the entire four-year project period. The 2014 FITW grants will be forward funded. That means we will fund the total award at the beginning of the grant period. Grantees will receive specific instructions on budget management.

### **A-5. Are there limits on the number of applications that an institution of higher education may submit and the number of grants that a grantee may receive under the FITW program?**

Yes, an institution of higher education may submit only one application and may receive only one award in this competition.

**A-6. FITW has a set aside of up to \$20,000,000 for MSIs. How will an MSI be considered for that set aside?**

An applicant that wishes to be considered as an MSI for this set aside must indicate MSI eligibility on the Abstract and Information page in the application. To qualify as an eligible MSI under the FITW Program, an institution must meet one of two criteria. The first criterion includes: current eligibility approval as defined by the Department's FY 2014 eligibility process for Title III and/or Title V of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended; an open grant under one of the Department's Title III, Parts A and F and/or Title V programs; or a designation as a Historically Black College of University or a Tribally Controlled College. The second criterion includes: specific enrollment percentages for minority students served; and, if applicable, needy student and educational and general (E&G) expenditure criteria for determining income eligibility. More information on MSI eligibility is in the application package under the section entitled Eligibility. The Department will screen the applications to verify MSI eligibility based on these criteria and, if applicable, will use the most recent IPEDS data. In the event an application does not qualify for MSI eligibility, it will still be reviewed.

The FITW program has \$75,000,000 for funding. There is only one competition, one set of selection criteria, and one rank order for funding. It is at the point of funding decisions that the Department may fund highly rated proposals from general funds or from the MSI set aside. All highly ranked applicants, MSI and non-MSI, are funded based on a single rank order. There are no special programmatic considerations given to MSI applicants.

**A-7. May an organization or an IHE be a partner in more than one FITW project?**

Yes, the limit on the number of grant awards applies only to grantees and does not limit the number of projects in which a partner may participate. However, both applicants and partners should take into account institutional capacity to carry out responsibilities for more than one project.

**A-8. If two or more applications have the same score in the final rank order listing and there are insufficient funds to support both applications, how will the Department decide which grant(s) to award?**

The Department will consider an equitable distribution of grants among geographic locations. In all cases the Department reserves the right to make final grant award determinations.

**A-9. What review process will the Department follow after applications are submitted?**

The Department will select peer reviewers who will review and score applications against the established selection criteria. The peer reviewers will come from varied postsecondary backgrounds and professions, including college and university educators, researchers and evaluators, and others with evaluation expertise. All reviewers will be thoroughly screened for conflicts of interest to ensure a fair and competitive review process.

The Department will conduct a two-tier review process to review and score all eligible applications. Peer reviewers will review and score all eligible applications on the following four selection criteria: A. Significance; B. Quality of the Project Design; C. Adequacy of Resources; and D. Quality of Project Personnel. Eligible applications that score highly on these four selection criteria will have the remaining criterion, E. Quality of the Project Evaluation, reviewed and scored by a different panel of peer reviewers with evaluation expertise.

In addition, for top-ranked applications that were submitted under the Competitive Preference Priority (Using Evidence of Promise as the Application Evidence Standard), the studies cited to meet the requirements of the priority will be reviewed by staff and contractors for the

Department's Institute of Education Sciences(IES). IES will determine if those studies qualify under the criteria for the priority, including whether the design and implementation of the studies meet the Department's What Works Clearinghouse standards.

**A-10. How will the Secretary make final decisions to award grants under the FITW competition?**

For the FITW competition in FY 2014, a rank order of all applications will be developed based on the peer reviewers' evaluation of their quality according to the selection criteria. In accordance with 34 CFR 75.217 (c)(3), the Secretary will make final awards after considering the rank order and other information, including an applicant's performance, use of funds, and compliance history under previous awards under any Department program. See also A-6 above.

**A-11. Will an applicant receive its scores from the peer review process?**

Yes. Following the completion of the peer review process and after awards are made, each applicant will receive the reviewer comments and scores for its application.

**A-13. When will FITW awards be made, and what will be the start date for projects?**

All FITW grants will be awarded by September 30, 2014. The annual performance period for all FITW grants begins each year on October 1 and ends September 30 of the following year.

**A-14. Will grants only be awarded in the \$2-4 million budget range?**

No. The range of awards is simply an estimate. There are no advantages or extra points for submitting a proposal budget in this estimated range. Applications may not include a budget exceeding \$4 million. The range of awards is not meant to establish a minimum award amount. An applicant may submit a project with a budget below \$2 million and have the same chances for funding as anyone else.

**B. Eligibility**

**B-1. What is the standard of evidence that applies to all FITW applications?**

To be eligible for an award, an application must be supported by strong theory, as defined in the FITW NIA. Strong Theory means a rationale for the proposed process, product, strategy, or practice that includes a logic model.

**B-2. What types of entities are eligible to apply for a FITW award?**

Public and private non-profit institutions of higher education and consortia of such institutions are eligible to apply. Applicants are encouraged to partner with other public and private organizations and agencies. Consortia applications must include an applicant institution that submits the application.

**B-3. Does an application for a FITW grant need to meet all eligibility requirements?**

Yes. Applications for FITW grants must meet all program requirements. The NIA and application package provide instructions for all the required information, resumes, page formats, page limits, and standard forms for a complete application. Incomplete applications will not be reviewed.

**B-4. What does "partner" and "branch campus" mean in the FITW program?**

A partner is any organization, institution, or agency that collaborates with the lead applicant on a project. There is a wide range of potential partners that can be from various types of entities (public or private, nonprofit or for-profit, philanthropic organization or foundation, etc.).

A branch campus, the same as any IHE, may serve as an applicant institution or as a partner in a consortium. The EDGAR regulations at 34 CFR Part 606.7(b) and 34 CFR Part 607.7(e) define “branch campus” as a unit of a college or university that is geographically apart from the main campus and independent of that main campus. We consider a unit of a college or university to be independent of the main campus if the unit is permanent in nature; offers courses for credit and programs leading to an associate or bachelor’s degree; is autonomous to the extent that it has its own faculty and administrative or supervisory organization; and its own budgetary and hiring authority.

**B-5. Should all partners be identified in the application?**

Yes, all partners should be identified. A letter of commitment from a senior official is also strongly encouraged from each partner.

**B-6. Are for-profit entities eligible to apply for a FITW grant?**

No. For-profit institutions and organizations are not eligible as applicants. Although for-profit organizations may not be an eligible applicant and cannot receive federal funds, for-profit entities may be involved in projects as partners.

**B-7. Must FITW projects serve only underserved, underprepared, and low-income students?**

All grantees must implement practices that are designed to improve student access, persistence, and completion in higher education for underprepared, underserved, and low-income students. While proposed projects may benefit a wider definition of students, the scope of the competition should focus on underrepresented, underprepared, and low-income students.

**C. Priorities**

**C-1. Are there absolute priorities that an applicant must meet in order to receive a FITW grant?**

Yes. Five absolute priorities apply to the FY 2014 FITW grant competition. In order to receive a grant, an applicant must address one of these priorities. The absolute priorities are:

- (1) Increasing Access and Completion for Underrepresented, Underprepared, and Low-Income Students;
- (2) Increasing Community College Transfer Rates to Four-year Colleges for Underrepresented, Underprepared, and Low-Income Students;
- (3) Increasing Enrollment and Completion of Underrepresented, Underprepared, and Low-Income Students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Degree and Certificate Programs;
- (4) Reducing Time to Completion for Underrepresented, Underprepared, and Low-Income Students; and
- (5) Improving College Affordability, Especially for Underrepresented, Underprepared, and Low-Income Students.

See the full text of these priorities in the FITW NIA.

**C-2. Is there a competitive preference priority for the FY 2014 FITW competition for which an applicant may receive additional points?**

Yes. There is one competitive preference priority for the FY 2014 competition. It is worth two additional points. Under this competitive preference priority applicants must submit supporting evidence that meets the Evidence of Promise standard. The applicant may submit up to two cited studies with the application. Points will be awarded if at least one of the cited studies meets the Evidence of Promise standard and the cited studies are relevant to the proposal. Evidence of Promise, as defined in the FITW NIA, means there is empirical evidence to support the theoretical linkage between at least one critical component and at least one relevant outcome presented in the logic model for the proposed process, product, strategy, or practice. Specifically, evidence of promise means the following conditions are met:

- (a) There is at least one study that is either a:
  - (1) Correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias;
  - (2) Quasi-experimental study that meets the What Works Clearinghouse Evidence Standards with reservations<sup>1</sup>; or
  - (3) Randomized controlled trial that meets the What Works Clearinghouse Evidence Standards with or without reservations<sup>2</sup>;and
- (b) Such a study found a statistically significant or substantively important (defined as a difference of 0.25 standard deviations or larger), favorable association between at least one critical component and one relevant outcome presented in the logic model for the proposed process, product, strategy, or practice.

**C-3. Will an applicant receive more points for submitting the application under a particular absolute priority over another absolute priority?**

No. An applicant must identify one absolute priority under which it is submitting its application. An applicant will not receive more points, additional “credit,” or other advantage based on the absolute priority it identifies in its application. Peer reviewers will use the selection criteria to determine how well an applicant addresses the absolute priority it identifies.

**D. Selection Criteria**

**D-1. What selection criteria apply to the applications for a FITW grant?**

An application for a FITW grant may receive up to 100 points for addressing the selection criteria. A full explanation of the criteria may be found in the NIA and the application package. Five selection criteria apply to the competition:

- A. Significance (up to 20 points)
- B. Quality of the Project Design (up to 30 points)
- C. Adequacy of Resources (up to 15 points)
- D. Quality of Project Personnel (up to 15 points)
- E. Quality of Project Evaluation (up to 20 points)

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<sup>1</sup> See What Works Clearinghouse Procedures and Standards Handbook (Version 2.1, September 2011), which can currently be found at the following link: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/DocumentSum.aspx?sid=19>.

<sup>2</sup> See What Works Clearinghouse Procedures and Standards Handbook (Version 2.1, September 2011), which can currently be found at the following link: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/DocumentSum.aspx?sid=19>.

**D-2. Is there a definition for “novel and substantially different” under the Significance selection criterion?**

No. Although there is not an official definition for these words, the Department seeks projects that have not been implemented before or that do not represent a widely implemented approach for the priority being addressed. An approach could be novel and substantially different even if it has been tested out on a small scale in a few locations or on a small scale but not widely implemented at the applicant’s institution.

A practical way to know if the project is “novel and substantially different” is to ask three questions. Is the project not widely implemented at my institution and at any other institutions? Is the project long-term and sustainable without federal funds? Will the project transform the institution and involve all elements of the institution—faculty, staff, and administration?

**D-3. Must an applicant include a logic model to address the Quality of Project Design selection criterion?**

Yes. The reference to a logic model in the definition of Strong Theory and under Quality of Project Design is a constructive way to address the three sub-criteria, namely, the need to define the target population, the need to define an exceptional approach to the priority selected, and the use of a framework for the conceptual design of the entire project. Many variations of logic models exist. We encourage you to consider a logic model made of inputs, activities, outcomes, and includes a timeline.

**D-4. For Quality of the Project Evaluation, must an applicant respond to both selection factors (2) and (3)?**

Under the Quality of the Project Evaluation selection criterion, selection factors (2) and (3) read as follows (emphasis added):

(2) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will, if well implemented, produce evidence about the project’s effectiveness that would meet the What Works Clearinghouse Evidence Standards *without* reservations. The link for the What Works Clearinghouse Procedures and Standards Handbook (Version 2.1, September 2011), can be found at: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/references/idocviewer/doc.aspx?docid=19&tocid=1>.

(3) The extent to which the methods of evaluation will, if well implemented, produce evidence about the project’s effectiveness that would meet the What Works Clearinghouse Evidence Standards *with* reservations. The link for the What Works Clearinghouse Procedures and Standards Handbook (Version 2.1, September 2011), can be found at: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/references/idocviewer/doc.aspx?docid=19&tocid=1>.

Applicants need only respond to one of these selection factors. Applicants should note that selection factor (2) describes a more rigorous evaluation design than selection factor (3). Applicants who propose an evaluation design in response to selection factor (2) will not receive more points under this criterion than an applicant who proposes an evaluation design in response to selection factor (3).

**E. Evaluation**

**E-1. Must a grantee conduct an independent evaluation of its FITW project?**

Yes. A grantee must conduct an evaluation of its project by an independent evaluator. The evaluator must be independent of the grantee institution or may be from the institution but

independent of the project. This evaluation must analyze the impact of the entire FITW-supported process, product, strategy, or practice, or a key component, on a relevant outcome.

**E-2. What should applicants consider including in their evaluation plans?**

Applicants should present clear, detailed evaluation plans in their applications. In responding to Selection Criterion E: Quality of the Project Evaluation, applicants are encouraged to consider addressing the following to the fullest extent possible:

- the key questions to be addressed and the research methods for each, including a discussion of how treatment and control or comparison groups (for experimental and quasi-experimental studies) will be formed
- a justification of how the proposed sample will adequately represent implementation at the proposed scale (including in diverse settings and, where appropriate, focused on diverse student population groups);
- the determination of the proposed sample sizes and minimum detectable effect sizes, and analytic approaches for addressing the key questions;
- a summary of the proposed data sources and collection methods, including the measures used to describe the implementation of the FITW-supported project or its critical features (to facilitate replication or testing in other settings), the fidelity of implementation to the original model, the treatment-control contrast for key implementation variables, and the intended outcomes;
- the proposed resources to carry out the project evaluation effectively; and
- the qualifications of the proposed independent evaluation staff.

All FITW grantees must collect data and report on the FITW performance measures as established in the FY 2014 NIA.

**E-3. Must a grantee use a specified percentage of the grant award for the design and implementation of its project evaluation?**

No. The Department does not prescribe a percent or amount of funding that a grantee must use to design and implement its independent evaluation. Peer reviewers will use Selection Criterion E: Quality of the Project Evaluation to assess the extent to which the proposed project plan includes sufficient resources to carry out the project evaluation effectively.

**E-4. Must grantees make the results of evaluations widely available?**

Yes. All FITW grantees must make their results widely available through formal (e.g., peer-reviewed journals) or informal (e.g., newsletters) mechanisms, and in print or electronically, the results of any evaluations it conducts of its funded activities. Grantees must also ensure the data from their evaluations are made available to third-party researchers consistent with applicable privacy requirements. Specific requirements for citations are provided for all grantees.

**E-5. Must a grantee comply with the requirements of any evaluation of the FITW program conducted by the Department?**

Yes. A grantee must comply with the requirements of any evaluation of the FITW program conducted by the Department.

**E-6. Must a grantee cooperate with technical assistance provided by the Department or its contractor?**

Yes. Grantees, along with their independent evaluators, must cooperate with any technical assistance provided by the Department or its contractor. The purpose of this technical assistance is to ensure that evaluations are of the highest quality and to encourage commonality in evaluation approaches across funded projects where such commonality is feasible and useful.

**F. Use of Funds**

**F-1. What information should be included in the budget narrative?**

Each applicant must provide a line item budget (ED Standard Form 524) for the ED funds requested in section A and a budget narrative. No cost share or matching funds are required in the FITW program. Instructions for completing ED Standard Form 524 are included in the FITW application package, available on the Department's Web site at [www.ed.gov/fipse](http://www.ed.gov/fipse) and in [grants.gov](http://grants.gov).

**F-2. Should an applicant submit a separate budget for a partner?**

No. Each application should include only one budget and one budget narrative that includes the costs and justification of costs for the entire project. Explanations for partner costs may be included in the budget narrative.

**F-3. How does an applicant determine what expenditures are allowable or, alternatively, what expenditures are prohibited?**

The budget an applicant includes in its application should include only costs that are allowable, reasonable and necessary for carrying out the objectives of the FITW project. Rules about allowable costs are included both in EDGAR (see <http://www.ed.gov/policy/fund/reg/edgarReg/edgar.html>) and in the cost principles contained in CFR (formerly Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular: A-21 for institutions of higher education. see <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/granule/CFR-2012-title2-vol1/CFR-2012-title2-vol1-part220/content-detail.html>).

**F-4. Is the FITW program subject to a restricted indirect cost rate?**

Yes. FIPSE uses a general training program rate of 8% for the FITW program. For an explanation see the application package. This rate applies to the applicant institution and all partners because the FITW program does not include sub-grants. The applicant institution reimburses partners for allowable costs.

**F-5. May an applicant incur pre-award costs?**

Yes. Under 34 CFR 75.263 and 74.25, applicants may incur allowable, pre-award costs for up to 90 days prior to the beginning of the award period. However, applicants incur these costs at their own risk. If an applicant does not receive an award, the Department will not reimburse the applicant for pre-award costs. Pre-award costs may not be used to prepare the application.

**F-6. May students receive direct funding under this program?**

No, student financial assistance is not allowed under this program. That includes such things as stipends, tuition, and other forms of student financial assistance. Funds related to housing and food costs are also not allowed under this program.

**F-7. Will there be annual meetings of the project directors?**

Yes, you must budget for an annual two-day meeting in Washington, DC. The project director, the project evaluator, and one representative from each partner should attend. Travel and lodging costs for these meetings must be included in the budget.

**F-8. May grant funds be used for construction?**

No, the FITW program is classified as a non-construction program. Minor costs related to renovating or modifying an existing physical space for educational purposes directly related to the project is allowed. Such costs should be a minor part of the project.

**F-9. Are there restrictions on travel?**

Yes, travel is restricted to domestic travel and must be related to the project.

**G. Other Matters**

**G-1. Should an applicant include letters of support in its application?**

Yes. Peer reviewers will assess the letters to consider key responsibilities, commitment from partners, and broad support from faculty and staff.

**G-2. Must an applicant notify its State that it is applying for a FITW grant?**

Yes. This program is subject to Executive Order 12372 and 34 CFR part 79, which allow States that have chosen to participate in the intergovernmental review process the opportunity to review and comment on applications submitted to the Department for funding. An applicant should check with its appropriate State single point of contact (SPOC) to inquire if its State participates in the intergovernmental review process. For a list of States that have chosen to participate in the intergovernmental review process, see [http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/grants\\_spoc/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/grants_spoc/).

**G-3. Will my FITW application be made public?**

The Department may post the project narrative sections of funded FY 2014 FITW applications on the Department's Web site. Personal information will not be posted. Unfunded applications are not made public.

**G-4. Whom should applicants contact if they have additional questions?**

Questions pertaining to this program may be emailed to [OPEFirstintheWorld@ed.gov](mailto:OPEFirstintheWorld@ed.gov)