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November 24, 2026

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RE: University of California System Comments on NSF's Revised Draft Guidance on Financial Assistance; OMB Control No. 3145-0058; ICR Reference No. 202610-3145-004

On behalf of the University of California system (UC), we submit these comments to the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) on NSF's revised draft of the Guidance on Financial Assistance (GFA) intended to replace NSF's Proposal and Award Policies and Procedures Guide (PAPPG). The October 28 notice reports 3,277 responses during the initial 60-day comment period (June 24 through August 23). UC commented on the initial draft on August 21. This letter identifies provisions that remain unclear or need revision and states UC's requests.

UC is California's public research university system, with ten campuses, six academic health centers, and UC Agriculture and Natural Resources. Its public mission of teaching, research, and service is carried out in close partnership with NSF. UC administrative data current as of July 10, 2026, show that in federal fiscal years 2021 through 2025 UC submitted 13,093 proposals and received 6,034 NSF awards totaling approximately $2.79 billion. In FY 2025, UC submitted 2,742 proposals and received 994 awards totaling approximately $560.2 million. The GFA, therefore, has broad effects on UC's researchers, students, and administration.

The GFA is an operating framework, not simply a reorganization of the PAPPG: it governs proposal review, collaborations, research-security duties, costs, public access, research materials, award continuity, and institutional workload. UC appreciates NSF's revisions following public comment, including removing provisions based solely on proposed changes to 2 CFR part 200 and the proposed former-employee disclosure; clarifying certifications and MFTRP language; restoring publication-cost and fixed-amount-award language; removing specimens and core samples from property examples; and clarifying some personnel-effort rules. The comments below address issues that remain unresolved or need clarification. Each identifies the relevant GFA provision and states UC's request.

Detailed Comments on Selected Material GFA Provisions

[Summary of Changes; Guides 1, 3, 4, 12, 23, and 25] Changes tied to proposed OMB rules (largely addressed; future applicability remains to be clarified)

The initial GFA draft said NSF was aligning its policy with OMB's proposed revisions to 2 CFR part 200. It proposed changes before OMB had finalized that rule, including removing references that created uncertainty about fixed-amount awards, adding a two-year disclosure about certain former NSF employees, stating that publication costs would be disallowed, and revising suspension and termination provisions.

NSF's response materials now say it removed changes based solely on the proposed rule, restored or revised language on fixed-amount awards and publication costs, removed the former-employee disclosure, and tied suspension and termination to the currently effective Uniform Guidance. UC appreciates these changes. NSF should continue to base the GFA on requirements in effect and identify the applicability and transition of any rules before implementing any future changes that follow a final government-wide rule. NSF should also restore a clear rule for direct conflicts: 2 CFR part 200 takes precedence over conflicting GFA requirements, except where a GFA requirement is required by statute or authorized under 2 CFR § 200.102, as described in 2 CFR § 200.105.

[G3.B.4] Accessibility standards for proposal materials (clarification needed)

NSF's response explains that it did not identify a single standard because multiple accessibility standards are available. The revised GFA still does not explain which standards or methods proposers may use to satisfy the requirement or what practical steps are expected. NSF should provide examples of acceptable standards or methods and practical guidance for determining compliance. NSF should also ensure that its own submission systems, forms, templates, and required materials meet applicable accessibility requirements.

[G4.B.1; G4.B, Procedures 1(c), 2(b)] Salary-support reporting across existing awards (clarification needed)

Guide 4 requires recipients to provide updated salary-support information across a Principal Investigator's existing NSF awards when NSF considers a new award, including changes resulting from post-award rebudgeting. The GFA does not specify what information NSF needs or how it will use it. NSF should remove this requirement and its related procedures. If retained, NSF should explain its purpose, identify the minimum information required, explain why existing reporting is insufficient, and gather further input from the research community before implementing it.

[G5.C.4; G5.D, Procedures 1(a)] Consulting disclosures and COA formatting (clarification needed)

Guide 5 identifies circumstances that trigger consulting disclosures but does not state where covered activities must be reported in the common form, as the PAPPG did. The procedures also require COA tables to be alphabetized by last name, although NSF's COA FAQ says alphabetical order is not required. NSF should restore the PAPPG direction on where to report covered consulting and remove the alphabetical-order requirement.

[G8.F] Merit review and funding approvals (partly addressed)

The initial GFA required an award recommendation to be approved by an undefined "NSF leadership official." UC was concerned that this could add a decisional layer with unclear authority or criteria after

expert merit review. The revised GFA identifies Section Heads, Deputy Directorate or Office Heads, and Directorate or Office Heads who can commit program funds and describes the path from program recommendation to leadership review and Grants Officer review.

NSF's response reaffirms its established merit-review process and says programmatic considerations will be consistent with NSF policy and the applicable funding opportunity. This clarifies who approves recommendations. The GFA itself should also state that approving officials apply the criteria and program priorities disclosed in the funding opportunity and do not introduce unpublished selection standards. UC asks NSF to add that safeguard.

[G13.D] Gold Standard Science expectations (clarification needed)

The revised GFA says NSF expects proposals to adhere to Gold Standard Science tenets, as appropriate to the field and research modality, and refers readers to NSF's implementation plan. NSF's response likewise points to that plan, but the GFA does not state whether the expectation is a review criterion, a certification, a monitoring requirement, or a basis for an adverse award action.

UC supports rigor, transparency, and unbiased peer review. NSF should specify how this provision operates and state that it does not create an additional unpublished proposal criterion or certification. Any additional program-specific review factors should appear in the funding opportunity before proposal submission.

[G2.C.4] International participation (concern remains)

The initial GFA required proposers seeking funds for a foreign organization or individual to justify the participation in the national interest and explain why the work could not be done with resources in the United States. The revised GFA retains that test and requires the foreign site to perform the work "more effectively than a domestic recipient performing similar activities." This is more demanding than the initial draft's "comparable" standard and may exclude a scientifically necessary partner even when the partner offers unique expertise, data, facilities, populations, or field access.

UC asks NSF to evaluate foreign participation by whether it is scientifically or programmatically justified and materially advances the project. If NSF retains a domestic-resource comparison, it should define objective criteria and remove the requirement that the foreign site perform the work more effectively than a domestic recipient.

[G6.C; G20.A] Human-subjects review and Federalwide Assurance (clarification needed)

Guide 6.C's definition of Federalwide Assurance (FWA) does not reflect the HHS definition's focus on an institution being engaged in human-subjects research. The guidance also does not address exempt research categories that require limited IRB review under 45 CFR § 690.104(d). For international research, it does not clearly state that the non-U.S. institution where the research takes place can have *either* IRB *or* ethics-committee review and an FWA. The proposal procedures also do not explain how to document exemptions requiring limited review or clarify which international institution must maintain the required documentation.

NSF should mirror the FWA definition with the HHS definition and clarify that the assurance commits an institution to comply with the applicable human subjects regulations when it becomes engaged in covered research. NSF should add references to limited IRB review wherever the guidance discusses exemption or exempt research. For international research, NSF should specify that the non-U.S. institution where the research is conducted must have IRB or ethics-committee review and an FWA. It should also clarify that

the proposal procedures apply to that institution and identify what documentation must be available there and what the U.S. recipient must obtain and provide to NSF.

[G6.D; G20.B] Live vertebrate animals (clarification needed)

Guides 6.D and 20.B describe an Animal Welfare Assurance as an agreement or contract with the federal government and define an IACUC generally, without tying either definition to the Public Health Service's *Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals*. Guide 6.D also says that every project using live vertebrate animals must comply with the Animal Welfare Act, although the Act applies only to animals and activities within its statutory and regulatory scope. Guide 20.B should identify the National Research Council of the National Academies as the source of the *Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals*.

UC asks NSF to align the Animal Welfare Assurance and IACUC definitions in Guides 6 and 20 with the Public Health Service Policy, clarifying that the Animal Welfare Act requirement applies to animals as defined in 9 CFR § 1.1 and the applicable regulations at 9 CFR §§ 1.1–4.11, and correct the source attribution in Guide 20.B.

[G6.E; G14.A.7–8, A.11–12; G20.D] DGOF and IROC requirements (clarification needed)

These provisions appear across Guides 6, 14, and 20, but the GFA does not consistently tie its terminology to the U.S. Government Policy for Stopping High-Risk Life Sciences Research ("Stopping Policy"). The procedures also do not identify who conducts the required risk-based assessments or clarify when an independent third-party review body (ITPRB) is required and what process governs that review. In addition, it is unclear why the procedures refer to research "with DGOF" when federal funding of DGOF research is prohibited.

NSF should align the definitions and procedures across Guides 6, 14, and 20 with the Stopping Policy. Because the provisions cannot be fully evaluated until federal funding agencies develop the resources and issue the oversight procedures described in Section 4 of the Stopping Policy, NSF should defer finalizing them until that work is complete. Rather than restating definitions, NSF should add: "The terms used in this section are defined as set forth in the USG Policy for Stopping High-Risk Life Sciences Research." NSF should apply this approach to Guide 20, Section D, and other GFA provisions addressing DGOF. It should also identify who is responsible for the risk-based assessments, specify when independent third-party review is required and the procedures that govern it, and clarify that the procedures concern "potential DGOF" research.

[G14.A.9-10] Restricted-entity requirements (partly addressed)

The revised GFA adds the federal lists that identify restricted entities and examples of activities that generally do and do not constitute collaboration. NSF's response says it improved access to the lists. These additions make the prohibition more concrete than the initial draft.

The GFA still does not explain how recipients should respond when a restricted-entity list changes during an award, what screening is reasonable, or how an institution may rely on current official lists and good-faith disclosures when it cannot know about an undisclosed relationship. The exception provision also requires a showing that the restricted entity can perform more effectively than a reasonably available alternative. That comparative test may rule out a scientifically valuable partner even when the partner offers unique expertise, data, facilities, or access to a location and the risks can be managed. NSF should publish dated, version-controlled lists and change procedures; allow reasonable reliance on official sources and established institutional processes; provide a prospective transition or cure period for new

restrictions; and permit exceptions when the collaboration materially advances the project and its risks can be reasonably mitigated, without requiring the restricted entity to outperform an alternative. NSF should define "substantive engagement" for purposes of the collaboration prohibition and cross-reference the examples in Guide 14.A.9. It should also clarify that preparing a manuscript for publication without sharing research data does not, by itself, constitute collaboration.

[G14; G26.B.2] TRUST assessments and procedural safeguards (partly addressed)

The initial GFA allowed NSF to return a proposal without merit review solely because of a potential research-security concern based on credible national-security information. NSF removed that language. The revised GFA still authorizes NSF to use analytical tools to assess nondisclosures and identify security risks. NSF's response says TRUST assessments are separate from merit review, but it provides no further details about the framework's criteria or how institutions and investigators may respond to a finding.

The revised GFA's statement that NSF will follow the Privacy Act and other applicable laws is useful, but it does not explain how a person or institution can learn of a material concern, see or correct relevant facts, or challenge a decision based on an assessment. This matters because the GFA excludes specific award conditions and several other consequential decisions from its dispute process. UC asks NSF to publish the assessment standards, require human verification, provide notice and a reasonable opportunity to respond, give written reasons for consequential action, and establish a reconsideration route. Any additional award condition based on an assessment should be grounded in documented, objective, award-specific risk; be proportionate to that risk; and be removed once the underlying concern is resolved.

[G3.C; G3.G; G14.A.6] Institutional certifications and MFTRP definition (partly addressed; clarification needed)

The initial GFA raised two related certification concerns. Its current-and-pending-support certification could be read to make the Authorized Organizational Representative (AOR) attest to the accuracy of information known principally by each individual. Its MFTRP provisions also used inconsistent language: one could be read to require the institution to certify that a researcher was not participating, while another focused on the researcher's own certification. UC asked NSF to assign personal facts to the individual and limit institutional certification to matters the institution can verify.

The revised GFA now has the AOR certify that senior/key personnel were informed of their current-and-pending-support disclosure and update obligations. For MFTRP, the AOR confirms that personnel were made aware of, and complied with, their individual certification responsibility; each individual certifies their own status. NSF also uses the fuller statutory MFTRP definition and preserves exceptions for scholarly presentations and publications, open and reciprocal scientific exchange, international conferences, and advising foreign students. These changes address the specific inconsistencies and better align institutional attestations with information an institution can know.

NSF should preserve this division of responsibility across related certifications and clarify that the AOR's process certification does not make the institution a guarantor of the substantive accuracy of facts known only to an individual. For the restricted-entity certification in Guide 14.A.9, NSF should clarify that the AOR confirms senior/key personnel have been informed of the prohibition and their certification responsibility, rather than attesting to undisclosed relationships outside the institution's knowledge.

[G13.B; G14.A.5; G14.A.Procedures 1] Research-security training and reporting (partly addressed)

The revised GFA requires research-security training certifications and expands responsible-conduct-of-research training to cover overlapping topics such as security awareness, export controls, disclosure, and

federal reporting. It also requires an AOR, within 30 calendar days after becoming aware of a failure to disclose, to update current-and-pending-support or in-kind-contribution information; organizations must report research-security violations within 30 calendar days of identification. NSF clarified some terminology, including removing "other" before "research security violations," but the GFA does not explain whether one qualifying training program can satisfy overlapping requirements, what level of fact-finding triggers each reporting deadline, or how the two reporting obligations differ.

NSF should identify minimum training outcomes and allow equivalent training that covers them. It should distinguish the deadline for updating or reporting omitted support from the deadline for reporting research-security violations, define what starts each 30-day clock, and allow reasonable fact-finding before a report is due. An unverified allegation alone should not trigger a violation report. NSF should also allow a prime recipient to rely on a subrecipient AOR's training certification for those subrecipient's personnel. Finally, NSF should clarify whether "or equivalent" in the definition of "Faculty Associate" means an equivalent faculty position at an institution without faculty, or provide examples, because that definition affects who is treated as senior/key personnel for training, disclosure, and certification purposes.

[G14.A.4; G18.D] Foreign agreements and supporting records (clarification needed)

The revised GFA requires proposers and recipients to maintain agreements and other supporting documentation concerning foreign appointments, employment, talent programs, and current and pending support for senior/key personnel. It also expects organizations to review requested documents for compliance and make them available to NSF on request. The GFA does not define the scope of the institution's review or address agreements and facts that an individual does not provide.

UC asks NSF to state that the institution's duty is based on reasonable, good-faith processes and documents it receives or can reasonably access. NSF should also cross-reference Guide 18's foreign financial disclosure instructions and clarify how the related reporting thresholds, periods, and records fit together.

[G12.B.9.1; G12.C.8; G12.C.10] Negotiated indirect-cost rates (partly addressed)

NSF removed the statement that indirect-cost recovery is always subject to available funds and clarified that the 15-percent de minimis rate applies to eligible organizations without a current negotiated indirect-cost rate agreement. The revised GFA also says that program staff may not request that PIs reduce or waive indirect costs and that, for institutions of higher education subject to applicable federal requirements, the rate in effect at the initial award must be used throughout the award's life.

Guide 12.C.8 nevertheless allows NSF, in rare circumstances involving limited funding, to set an award-specific rate at a Grants Officer's discretion without expressly limiting that authority to organizations that lack a current negotiated indirect-cost rate agreement. This appears to conflict with Guide 12.B.9.1 and Guide 12.C.10. NSF should reconcile these provisions and state that an award-specific rate cannot displace the rate under an applicable negotiated indirect-cost rate agreement or require an organization to accept less than the rate under that agreement because NSF funds are limited. NSF should clarify that any voluntary reduction from an applicable negotiated F&A rate constitutes voluntary committed cost sharing and may not be requested or required as a condition of award. If available funds cannot support the proposed scope and its allocable costs, NSF should address scope and budget rather than displace negotiated rates to fit a funding ceiling.

[G4.B.6; G5.H; G11.I.1; G21] Publication, data-sharing, and repository costs (substantially addressed; clarification requested)

The initial GFA summary said publication costs would be disallowed, despite the GFA's public-access and data-sharing requirements. NSF restored publication-cost language. The revised GFA permits data documentation, storage, cleaning, indexing, preservation, deposit, and curation costs. It also states that depositing an author's accepted manuscript in NSF's Public Access Repository satisfies the publication requirement without a special publisher fee; fees to make the published version of record public are allowable but not required. NSF clarified that justified changes to a Data Management and Sharing Plan may be discussed with the Program Director.

Separately, some details requested in the proposal-stage Data Management and Sharing Plan may not be known until data are generated, IRB determinations are made, or data-use agreements and repository arrangements are finalized. NSF should clarify that proposers may describe the approach reasonably anticipated at submission, allow applicable legal, privacy, consent, confidentiality, and security limitations to be identified, and provide a practical process for updating the plan as research circumstances develop. NSF should align the Data Management and Sharing Plan amendment provisions in Guide 5.H and Guide 11.I with its Public Access FAQ and specify which changes require prior approval through Research.gov and which may be reported in annual or final project reports.

These revisions address the central concern. For consistent budgeting, NSF should confirm that reasonable repository-service, metadata, persistent-identifier, preservation, accessibility, privacy/security, and personnel costs needed to implement an approved plan are allowable. NSF should align the cost language in Guide 4 with the sharing and reporting requirements in Guides 5 and 21, and make clear that an accepted manuscript may be used where a publisher's version is unavailable or carries a substantial fee.

[G15.A.12-13] Property rules and research materials (largely addressed)

The initial GFA expressly listed biological specimens, core samples, and other physical research products as tangible personal property. UC was concerned that samples and materials generated or collected during research could then be treated like federally funded equipment, with inventory, maintenance, reporting, and disposition duties.

The revised GFA removes those examples and states that, unless an award provides otherwise, legal rights to tangible property collected or created during NSF-assisted research remain with the recipient or investigators. UC appreciates these changes. However, Guide 15 retains the separate term "Recipient Titled Property" and related trust, management, maintenance, reporting, and disposition provisions. NSF should clarify how that category relates to property acquired or improved under an award and to the standards in 2 CFR part 200. It should also confirm that ordinary research materials created or collected during research are not automatically subject to equipment-style property controls. Any additional retention, inventory, or sharing obligations should be identified in the award and account for applicable legal, ethical, safety, and research requirements. If NSF does not intend Recipient Titled Property to impose requirements distinct from 2 CFR part 200, it should remove the separate category and related detailed guidance and refer recipients to the applicable 2 CFR part 200 requirements, including § 200.316.

[G1.D-E; G11.B-D; G17.A] Fixed-amount awards and discontinued PAPPG mechanisms (partly addressed)

The initial GFA removed references to "fixed-price," creating uncertainty about whether fixed-amount awards and subawards would remain available. The revised GFA again defines a fixed-amount award,

addressing concern that the mechanism itself would disappear, but does not expressly confirm that fixed-amount subawards remain available where scope, milestones, and payment terms are defined. NSF should confirm that they remain an option when permitted by the Uniform Guidance.

NSF retained its removal of Special Creativity Extensions and Accomplishment-Based Renewals, explaining that it used them infrequently and considers no-cost extensions, supplements, and standard renewals adequate. These mechanisms served distinct purposes: Special Creativity Extensions supported promising directions that emerged during successful work, while Accomplishment-Based Renewals offered a renewal path for highly productive projects. UC asks NSF to restore these options or identify equivalent pathways and the criteria for using them.

[G4.B1; G11.C.1, C.3] Post-award project flexibility (partly addressed)

NSF clarified that recipients may approve some post-award changes in senior/key personnel effort without prior approval and that routine changes need not be treated as a change in scope. However, Guide 4.B1 says NSF approval is unnecessary unless project objectives or scope change, while Guide 11.C.3 requires approval for a reduction of 25 percent or more in PI/co-PI effort. NSF's response says the 25-percent threshold remains, but the two provisions are not clearly cross-referenced.

The revised Guide 11 also treats changes to the Facilities, Equipment, and Other Resources section as changes in scope. NSF's response says recipients should discuss proposed changes with the Program Director but does not provide a materiality standard. UC asks NSF to reconcile the effort provisions, preserve the established 25-percent threshold, and clarify that routine changes to resources or personnel effort do not require prior approval when project objectives and scope remain unchanged.

[G1.B; G17.B] Continuing awards and existing commitments (partly addressed)

The initial GFA expressly listed "new priorities" as a possible basis for reducing future continuing-grant increments. NSF removed that language and states that increments are normally funded at the award level, subject to satisfactory progress, available funds, and required reports. NSF also clarified that suspension and termination rely on the currently effective Uniform Guidance. These changes address concerns about reductions or termination based solely on shifting priorities.

The GFA applies the version effective at award issuance or specified in an amendment, including funding actions under an existing award. It does not explain how NSF will protect existing personnel appointments, subawards, equipment orders, approved foreign components, and other reasonable commitments when new terms apply to a funding action. NSF should state how those commitments will be considered, and how recipients may obtain transition or wind-down funding when changes interrupt approved work.

[G25.A; G26.B] Suspension, termination, and review rights (clarification needed)

The revised GFA relies on current Uniform Guidance suspension and termination grounds and provides written notice and a usual 30-day response period for noncompliance. It also permits NSF to act immediately when it believes action is needed to protect government interests. Guide 26 excludes specific award conditions, prior-approval decisions, budget or program-plan revisions, and decisions not to award a continuing increment or supplement from its dispute process.

UC asks NSF to define the circumstances that justify immediate action, provide written reasons and a reasonable response opportunity when circumstances permit, and create an independent reconsideration

route for specific conditions or other actions that materially affect an award. The GFA should also explain how recipients may recover reasonable wind-down and closeout costs when approved work is interrupted.

[G25.B] Research-misconduct definition and reporting (clarification needed)

Guide 25.B defines research misconduct and directs possible misconduct to the NSF Office of Inspector General, while the GFA also states that research-misconduct cases follow the separate regulation at 45 CFR part 689. NSF should align the GFA's definition and institutional reporting requirements with that regulation and distinguish required institutional reports from individuals' potential allegations of research misconduct, including where each type of report should be directed.

[G1.B; G10.A] Effective date, transition, and version control (partly addressed)

NSF says it will allow sufficient time for implementation and maintain dated, archived GFA versions. Those are useful responses to requests for a clear implementation period and stable records. The revised GFA does not set a minimum transition period or identify when complete guidance, system specifications, and training will be available.

NSF should provide at least 12 months after final guidance and supporting systems are complete, tested, and available before enforcing implementation of material new requirements. NSF should identify which requirements apply to proposals submitted before and after the effective date, new awards, amendments to existing awards, supplements and renewals, continuing-grant increments, and other funding actions under active awards, and ensure that substantive terms do not change through unannounced webpage revisions.

Conclusion

UC appreciates NSF's consideration of public comments and the changes made to the revised GFA. We ask OIRA, and in turn NSF, to ensure that our remaining concerns are addressed and clarifications made before finalizing the GFA. Clear criteria, reasonable institutional responsibilities, and predictable implementation will help NSF carry out its mission while allowing recipients to administer awards responsibly.

Thank you for considering UC's comments.

Sincerely,



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