

All-Staff Meeting
Friday, May 20, 2005

Introductions

Arnold introduced the newest member of the OFTS staff, Amy Crawford. Amy is an accounting clerk who came on board April 11. Joan announced that a new program manager, Ann Smisko, is heading up new state initiative work. Ann is a former Texas Education Agency associate commissioner.

Wes reminded us that information related to real estate negotiations and upcoming competitions is confidential.

Headquarters Update

Negotiations on a tract of land outside the central business district are still underway. It is clear that if we pursue building a new facility, we won't be able to complete construction by August 2006. SEDL's lease with Highland Resources expires July 2006, so we are exploring options for a lease extension here at Southwest Tower. Wes explained that if we cannot extend our lease at the current rate, building a new facility might be unfeasible because funding plans for new construction included a lease extension at our existing rate. In the case that it is impossible to stay at Southwest Tower until construction is completed, we will begin looking at long-term lease options instead of building a new facility, as we don't want to move twice. Wes is still optimistic that negotiations will result in our building a new headquarters.

Appropriations Update

With regard to education appropriates, FY2006 is a tough year as Congress is trying to stick to the President's budget, which includes a 1 percent cut in education. Wes explained that the RELs currently are not on the list to be cut. We are encouraged that two Republican senators and one representative from our region have included REL funding on their "wish list." The Congressional "wish list" lists programs individual members of Congress are interested in seeing continue.

Another possibility remains to increase support of the labs—the "Dear Colleague" letters. During the last round of appropriations, Republican Senator Mike Enzi (Wyoming) and a Democratic colleague joined forces to send out a "Dear Colleague" letter, encouraging continued funding of the labs. This year Enzi is chair of the full committee and cannot lead such an effort.

Update on Upcoming CC, REL, and NIDRR Competitions

We currently don't have RFPs for the comprehensive assistance center (CC) or regional educational laboratory (REL) competitions. We are basing our planning on the 2002 reauthorization laws.

Comprehensive Assistance Centers

Currently we have a planning team of 6–7 people meeting frequently to discuss the CC competition. Based on the RFP, it is likely that we will bid on multiple CC contracts:

- Prime contractor in the southwestern region
- Prime contractor in any southwestern state that might be singled out for its own CC (e.g., Texas)
- Prime or subcontractor in the southeastern region
- Prime or subcontractor for a relevant content area that is singled out

Each of the contracts will be worth approximately \$2 million. Initially we heard the RFP for the CC competition would be released May 2. Now we have heard it will be released on June 3 with a 45-day writing period. That means we will be working on the CC proposal throughout June and into July. Also, we've heard that the current comprehensive assistance centers may be extended one month. Currently these centers are scheduled to end in August, but now it looks like they will operate through September.

The planning team is focusing on how we will likely operate on state, intermediate, and local levels in order to support No Child Left Behind. We have scheduled meetings with state departments of education to discuss how we would best be able to impact low-performing schools. We currently aren't aware of others who are making state visits, but we can't read too much into this as they might be waiting for the release of the RFPs.

Regional Educational Laboratory

We are in the process of identifying partners for the REL work. We don't have a timeline yet, but we've heard that Russ Whitehurst and his staff at the Institute of Education Sciences have prepared the RFP and it is currently in Contracts. We've also heard that it could be released at the same time as the RFP for the CCs. Another rumor is that the RELs might be extended one year. Right now, we are preparing for the worst-case scenario: We may be working on CC and REL proposals at the same time. Also, at this time we think the focus of the RELs will move to a stronger emphasis on research.

The Department of Education is gambling that Congress will appropriate money for the RELs. They could go through with a competition and announce the winners of REL contracts, but if there isn't an appropriations resolution in Congress, things could get complicated. The Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA) of 2002 reauthorized the CCs and RELs for 5 years.

Disability Research to Practice RFPs

John Westbrook's NCDDR project is currently in the sixth year of a 5-year award. The proposed priorities for NCDDR were announced May 5 with comments due June 6. There is another small RFP that has been released related to innovative knowledge dissemination and utilization. Proposals for that project are due July 5.

Planning for Summer Vacations

The management team acknowledges that down time is necessary and wants all of us to be able to take vacation time and spend time with our families, but Wes emphasized the importance of the upcoming competitions. We have a lot at stake right now, and we need everyone to be available to get us through this tough time. We have three goals to meet:

- We must finish up critical work that is due under the current contracts.

- We will need different staff members to write pieces of proposals and/or work on planning teams.
- We could have site visits announced at any time and will need staff available for those visits.

Managers will allow vacations but must be careful in making those decisions. It will depend on a staff member's position—senior-level staff especially might be needed during the proposal planning and writing process. Timing will be another factor in granting time off. We realize this complicates planning for staff members, but the later during the summer the vacation falls, the more difficult it might be to grant time off for it as we just don't know the schedule for proposal writing at this time. This will require all of us to be somewhat flexible. Also, a shorter vacation time will be easier to accommodate (e.g., taking a long weekend will be more easily granted than a weeklong vacation).

Bidding Staff

We placed the staff "bidding" process in context:

- We want to win competitions, and we want to put together the best team that will allow us to do so.
- We consider all of our staff to be quality employees, and we want to include them in our proposals for future work.
- We don't use bidding staff as an alternative to performance appraisals.

We also wanted to make it clear that staff members may opt out of being bid into a project. The management council will work under the assumption that every staff member is open to being bid.

Severance

Sometimes a loss of funding means we have to cut staff positions. Severance pay has been established to help support staff members affected by such cuts. If you leave your position at SEDL for due cause or if you voluntarily choose to leave your position at SEDL, you do not receive severance pay. If you do not receive a work assignment due to SEDL's decision or a funder's decision, then severance is offered.

Severance is generally 2 weeks' pay but may include a severance bonus of up to an additional 11 weeks' pay, depending on the staff member's years of employment at SEDL. Severance bonuses are discretionary and depend upon the funds available. The severance bonus generally is paid from program sources.

Procedures for Bidding Staff

We generally will not "double-bid" staff—in other words, staff members will not be placed at 100 percent time in multiple proposals under the same competition (i.e., we would not bid a staff member at 100 percent time in the proposal for the comprehensive assistance center in the southwest and also at 100 percent time for the comprehensive assistance center in the southeast). We may, however, bid the same staff member part time in multiple proposals. For example, a staff member might be bid at 25 percent time

in one proposal and 75 percent time in another. We want to show a low number of “to-be-hired” positions in the proposals. When the RFPs are finally released, management teams will look at the staffing required, and Wes will make the final decision about who to bid. A staff member may opt out of being bid into a contract, but when someone chooses to opt out, it is voluntary, so no severance would apply. The bidding process works in the following two ways:

1. A staff member accepts being bid into a proposal:
 - If the bid is successful and the staff person is assigned to the project, then the staff member will work on that project.
 - If the bid is successful and the decision is made not to make the assignment, then severance is offered.
 - If the bid is unsuccessful and no other assignment is offered to the employee, then severance is offered.
2. A staff member rejects being bid into a proposal:
 - The staff person could be offered a bid in another scope of work (if accepted, the above process applies).
 - If the staff person is not offered another bid and no new assignment is given, then there is no severance offered.

Once the management council has the critical information it needs—when we find out if we are successful in our bids for the comprehensive assistance centers and how the REL competition will play out—the management team will reevaluate assignments to positions. If SEDL wins a contract, it doesn’t guarantee that every employee will have a job, even if an employee is bid into a winning proposal. The management team must look at putting together the highest quality team for the delivery of the work, and that may mean shifting staff. Employees will receive letters from Wes regarding their assignment. The options might play out in the following ways:

1. If an employee is bid in a proposal and assigned a position:
 - The staff member accepts the position and continues on staff.
 - The staff member rejects the position and does not receive severance.
2. If an employee is bid in a proposal but not assigned a position, then severance is offered.
3. If an employee was not bid in a proposal, but assigned a position:
 - The staff member accepts the position and continues on staff.
 - The staff member rejects the position and does not receive severance.

Wes emphasized that he would like to give employees at least 20 working days’ notice or more, in the event of terminations. He will visit staff groups in the future to talk about these issues. The management council realizes that this uncertainty can be difficult for staff members. **Wes encouraged staff to speak with him or their managers if they have questions about the bidding process.**

Indirect Staff

Indirect staff positions are slightly different than those funded directly through programs. Positions in OFTS, OIC, OD, and OP are funded as a percentage of program dollars. Indirect staff positions depend upon the number of proposals we win and the level of funding. If we don't have a lot of direct money, then the amount of indirect funding will likely drop.

Conclusion

We ended the staff meeting by reiterating that he and the management council know it is a tough year, but we intend to win the competitions given our strong staff and strong relationships throughout the regions.