

## Responding to Government RFPs

Gina Schmidt-Phillips  
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At the time I joined Maryland in 1968, it was offering liberal arts programs on military bases without much (if any) competition from other academic institutions. If an ESO felt the need for different academic programs at his/her assigned education center, he/she could invite another institution to offer the program on a specific base through a memorandum of agreement. Maryland offered different programs on specific bases by memorandum of agreement. One such instance was the counseling program offered in conjunction with UMCP at a base in the UK. However, this state of affairs was to change in the 1980s. At the beginning of that decade, the Department of Defense started to use a competitive-bidding process for post-secondary education programs. While I was not involved in this process in any significant way until I became responsible for institutional research in 1989, I was aware of how it worked.

Starting with the U.S. Air Forces, Europe (USAFE), the education branches of the military would issue a long and complex Request for Proposal (RFP), which detailed the requirements for the academic institutions that wanted to offer the desired programs. The proposals written in response to the RFPs usually required several volumes, presenting the institution's past performance, its technical competence, a quality control plan (QCP), and the price. Each academic program was assigned a Government Contract Line Item (CLIN). A separate proposal was to be submitted for each CLIN although it was possible to combine CLINs in a specific proposal. The contracts awarded to the winning institutions usually covered an initial year followed by four option (extension) years.

The European Division's early proposals were produced using what is now very outdated technology. We used a line editor called "TDP," which ran on the operating system of our HP3000 computer. If you have never used a line editor, let me briefly explain that it was exactly that. If we wanted to modify some text, we retrieved the specific line of text and used operating system commands to modify it. This was reasonably functional if the only modification was to correct a typing error. However, if the text change made the line so long that it wrapped to a new line, it became a challenge to format the document.

For the USAFE proposal in the early 1980s, none of the chief writers had the computer skills to use TDP or any other data processing program. The European Division (ED) conference room, therefore, was converted into a production center for the many weeks it took to prepare and print the several proposals submitted. The chief writers would produce their first drafts either typed or hand-written and these drafts were rushed to the Conference Room where a data-entry team, led by Penelope Roberts and Denise Sokolowski, word-processed the text into TDP. By the time of the next proposal the chief writers had acquired enough computer skills for Denise Sokolowski to single-handedly format, index, and manage the layout of long documents...and the early proposals were very long documents indeed.

The proposal teams were huge: most of the senior staff were involved in writing; institutional research provided statistics and research data for the various tables and figures needed to back up the text; the publications department provided copies of all marketing materials provided to the education centers and students for the appendix; senior administrators came from our stateside offices to help direct strategy; the print shop was involved in printing the volumes; a special group worked on price; and lastly, a number of other staff helped assemble the final volumes, which, in the early days, consisted of huge Leitz binders for each volume plus several for the enormous appendix. Usually the RFP called for 10 or more copies to be submitted, so the production was not a trivial task.

In 1997 the Government issued a joint RFP for all military bases in the European Command for the academic years running from 1998/9 - 2002/3. As it had done in 1992 Maryland used an "economy of scale" approach and, instead of bidding only on the liberal arts programs, also formed alliances with other Maryland academic institutions to offer certain graduate and career/technical programs. This

entailed, not just three whole proposal submissions (lower-level and upper-level liberal arts programs and the residential campus (which had moved from Munich to Augsburg in the 80s and soon would have to move again to Mannheim Turley Barracks) but also one for graduate and one for career/technical programs.

This proposal team was the largest ever, including input from Bowie State University (graduate programs) and the two Maryland community colleges (Charles County CC and Montgomery CC). Information coming from the new partners was dilatory to put it in the kindest way and progress was consequently slow. We were now working on personal computers, using MsDOS applications. Back then, integration between different programs was unwieldy and included many steps. Word Perfect for DOS was a big improvement over the TDP line editor we had used in the past but it still was challenged by the complex long documents we were attempting to create. My chief memory, as I worked on the Price volume, was waiting, while a blue screen blinked at me informing me that WordPerfect was loading the document. During the five minutes that took, I glanced out of the window and saw dawn was breaking. I don't know how many of us worked through the entire night but it must have been 15 to 20. As it happened that was the only proposal, where we were seriously in danger of not meeting the deadline.

My husband and I had planned to spend a few days in our house in Hungary to rest and recover after proposal submission. He finally tired of waiting for me to come home and announced he would come to collect me in Heidelberg on our way to Hungary. I slept most of the way. When we arrived at the Hungarian border, the border guard looked at the passports my husband gave him and shook his head. My husband had brought my youngest daughter's passport instead on mine. So, I spent the night in Austria, while my husband delivered his car load to our house in Hungary. I was not amused.

In 2000, John Golembe had assumed the position of Associate Dean, which essentially meant he had to assume several responsibilities usually associated with the Office of the Director. At that time we had an ex-general as Director, who saw his role primarily to enhance military relationships. He did not understand that, until his advent, the Director of an overseas division actually worked and contributed to the functioning of the organisation. Because he had never worked as faculty or at an education center or in the administration, he did not understand what he was leading. A new RFP was posted (very attractive because after the initial year (2002/2003) there were nine option years. This meant that unless an institution made huge mistakes it would stay in place for the length of the contract terms. John and I girded our loins and started to get the proposal team together.

The provost from Adelphi came to help us. After parrying his first ideas to be super creative he finally accepted that we understood what we were doing. Several years before, John along with Mike Maurer, Director of the Business Office, had worked with a contracting consultant to learn how to effectively respond to Government RFPs. Typically, the stateside senior administrators did not understand the process and the first few weeks of preparation were spent educating them. It is actually quite straightforward. There is an RFP section that describes what services are required, another that explains how the proposal will be evaluated, and, in the case of the education contracts which have an initial period followed by extension years, a section which describes how the institution will be evaluated for suitability for contract continuation. This particular RFP had a maximum page limit for each section and required CD-ROMs to be submitted with the electronic text as well as binders, which simplified the production but not necessarily the writing. It required a great deal of creativity to fit a description of our academic programs and our quality control into the format of the Government's Performance Work statement.

One day during the planning period, I was chatting with our contracting officer's representative about the RFP and asked a question about the past performance section. She looked at me in a confused way and finally responded, "Oh, that part is for contracting. We never see it." And it was at that time that we realized we had been agonising over writing a whole volume that was only used by the contracting officer to verify that an institution met the basic requirements to qualify for contract award. In fact, we had probably reduced its clarity by including too much information.

We started to work on the proposals with the main focus on the liberal arts programs (upper- and lower-level). As usual “the Proposal” was actually several proposals, including Mannheim Campus and several graduate programs. We were using quite powerful PCs and modern software tools for the first time: the Microsoft Office suite on Windows. We had an additional team writer, an ex-publications employee named Martine, who was a fantastic support. But the tendency of our writers to refine and perfect our text ad infinitum was thwarted for the first time by the Provost who came to me towards the end and said, “It is good enough. Don’t make any more changes and don’t let John make any more.” I have to admit, my immediate response was to introduce an error just to see how serious he was. On the organization chart, I changed his name to “Lalso Body”. His name was Laslo Boyd. But on the following day, I decided we all had enough stress and I shouldn’t introduce any more, so I corrected it before printing the final proofs. For the first time, we finished the proposal production before the submission date and made no last-minute changes.

I have two clear memories from the time immediately following proposal submission. The first was receiving a completely unexpected check for \$3,000 with a nice letter of appreciation from the Provost. This was apparently a result of an employee appreciation program, which was a policy in stateside offices but completely unknown overseas. The second, was standing in John’s office as we were congratulating each other that we would never have to do another proposal, both of us anticipating retirement within the 10 year period of the contract.

John became Director shortly afterwards and actually did retire within a couple of years and his successor was an Area Director in Europe, who had experience as an administrator and faculty member in the Asia Division. After he had been in position for a few months, he called me into his office one day and asked me, “Gina, what is this?”, as he pushed a sheaf of papers across the desk. With a sinking heart I recognised the familiar format of the Government’s RFPs for educational programs. It was an RFP for the CENTCOM contract — a five year contract for education services in the Middle East areas, including combat zones in Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern and African countries as well as a number of other countries in Central Asia, referred to as « the Stans » by our University President. By this she meant Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and so on. So, I had a long meeting with the director and explained all I knew about proposal production. He was extraordinarily grateful and devoted some time to thanking me for my generosity in sharing my knowledge, which I found quite odd. For me it was normal and expected behaviour for colleagues to share information. It also gave me a clue to his mindset.

Because I was the remaining staff member with the most experience in proposal preparation, I was to play a key role again in this proposal. We had a much smaller team. The Associate Dean, Director and I were the main writers, with sections assigned to others to draft, for example, details on HR rules input from the Finance Director on tuition calculations, which were complicated by expensive insurance being required for all staff assigned to the war zones. But again, the Provost (a different one) came to help. He was a misogynistic type, who seemed to think that as I was a woman and maintaining the computer files, I didn’t have a brain. We initially had a few tussles over his misinterpretation (for example, assuming only online instruction was requested) of the PWS. Eventually everything settled down and we submitted the proposal in good time.

By this time, we had so much experience that, when the next European theater-wide RFP came out for liberal arts and graduate programs, we had templates for large portions of proposal text. Naturally, policies and practices change over time and these sections have to be reviewed. But over the years, we had streamlined the writing and production of proposals so that these tasks started to fit into the rhythm of routine administration life. Unlike the last ten-year contract, this one was only for a five-year period. We continued with the small team, and this time, no Provost came from Maryland to help.

I retired during the course of the resulting contract period, and, I believe, all RFPs are now handled by the stateside offices.

