

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

FAQ – VIFF Request for EOIs

Note: This FAQ for the Schmidt Futures [Virtual Institute on Feedstocks of the Future](#) (VIFF) and its associated [Request for Expressions of Intent](#) (EOIs) will be updated during the submission period. If you have any questions not listed here, please contact viff@schmidtfutures.com with “EOI Question” in the subject line.

Updated June 9, 2023.

Programmatic Questions

What is a Virtual Institute?

A Schmidt Futures Virtual Institute of Science is a distributed network of carefully selected scientific and technical talent that aims to solve scientific challenges with societal relevance by working across institutions and disciplines. Virtual Institutes take high-risk bets that apply advanced computing and innovative technologies to STEM research and development. They are designed to attract, excite, and retain the most talented researchers and students in a field. Supported projects are typically multi-institutional with one lead institution, a small number of supporting host institutions (2-3 max), and a wider network of partner institutions. Schmidt Futures aims to assist the Virtual Institutes by leveraging our existing talent network, and to maximize their impact through various community and knowledge-sharing activities, thus disseminating new knowledge, spurring new innovation, and further extending the Schmidt Futures talent network.

VIFF is one of several Schmidt Futures Virtual Institutes of Science working across institutions and disciplines. Examples of other Virtual Institutes can be found on the Schmidt Futures [website](#).

May the roadmap outlined for proposed work identified in the EOI be modified at the invited proposal stage? (added June 5)

Yes. However, we urge project teams to put forward a well-developed EOI. The EOI stage is critical to our evaluation of the importance and relevance of the grand challenge being addressed, project teams' approaches to driving cross-cutting collaborations, and what teams may contribute to the VI network in order to tackle technological, cultural, and logistical challenges that are pervasive in this field.

What project start and end dates should we plan for? (updated June 9)

We aim to start projects about six months after EOI submission: approximately December 2023/January 2024 assuming that execution of the awards is straightforward. Projects are expected to run for five years, with anticipated end dates in December 2028/January 2029. However, there is some flexibility in this timeframe. Shorter project periods are also acceptable.

Must the proposed research be fundamental research? For example, is process development considered within scope? (added June 9)

We are interested in a range of research opportunities that serve the VIFF mission. Proposing teams can make the case for why their proposed work is innovative and potentially transformative.

The Request for EOIs indicates that regional consortia will receive preference. What qualifies as “regional”? (added June 9)

Regional consortia are composed of interdisciplinary researchers focused on advancing the use of future feedstocks available in a particular U.S. region through scientific research and/or tools and technology development.

Will EOIs without a regional focus - but which may provide tools of value across many regions - be considered? (added June 9)

Yes. During EOI review, we will consider the potential complementarity of multiple projects. While regional consortia will receive preference, funded awards may include a mix of regional consortia and other project types. Additional guidance on consideration of project integration across the future VI will be provided at the invited proposal stage.

Team Organization Questions

Are we able to replace team members if they need to drop off the bid?

Yes.

Can we make additions or changes to the team beyond those listed in the expression of interest?

Yes, there is flexibility in how teams come together. We will provide more information on team restructuring or merging after the EOI stage.

Can scientists who don't have a permanent position at the time of submission still act as PI for their institution (assuming that their salary is guaranteed for the project duration)?

Yes.

Can one institution submit multiple EOIs?

Yes.

Is there any limit on the number of EOIs an individual can be involved in?

No. An individual PI of one project can be a partner or co-PI on another proposal and serve on multiple EOIs. If a co-PI or other team member is not planning to manage the other proposed project(s) and is only a contributor or local organizer, that is also okay. Prior experience suggests that Lead PI duties are not to be taken lightly.

Do proposals need to be led/coordinated by U.S.-based research centers?

Yes.

Can the team include partners from industry?

Yes. For-profit companies are eligible to apply as part of a consortium of researchers led by a not-for-profit research institution.

How will project teams be integrated in the Virtual Institute? (added June 5)

Funded VIFF project teams will be integrated with support from VIFF program staff and a Scientific Advisory Board. Once projects are selected, the Scientific Advisory Board and VIFF program staff will work with project teams to determine specific integration activities that could benefit the VI.

Project integration activities may include:

- Sharing of personnel, expertise, equipment, and data
- Codesign, development, and sharing of common data platforms and protocols
- Collaboration on research and analytical design and activities
- Development of joint publications
- Joint evaluation of progress towards program goals

Schmidt Futures' VIFF program team aspires to facilitate Virtual Institute integration across funded VIFF project teams via activities that may include:

- In-person and virtual convenings
- Open-access data sharing
- Early career researcher and community engagement

We anticipate that the Schmidt Futures' VIFF program team will play an active role in integrating funded project teams throughout the program's duration. We plan to ensure team alignment in terms of topic area, sharing resources and personnel, and facilitating collaborations. Additional information about project integration will be provided at the invited proposal stage.

The Request for EOIs indicates that up to five proposals will ultimately be selected. Will each funded proposal be a Virtual Institute into itself, or will they collectively form a VI? Stated otherwise, will the selection team be looking for synergies among the selected proposals? (added June 5)

Project teams selected to join VIFF will collectively form the Virtual Institute. While projects may have different objectives and address different challenges, we expect that they will collaborate. We will consider potential synergies among selected proposals, and will provide additional information on project collaboration and integration at the invited proposal stage.

Can the Lead PI be an early career researcher (rank of Assistant Professor or equivalent)? Is previous experience managing large projects a requirement, or can the project team argue for the capacity to do so without prior experience? (updated June 9)

Yes, the Lead PI can be an early career researcher assuming the host institution provides appropriate support for the work. Collectively, teams should demonstrate that the PIs and partner institutions have the scientific ability, relevant expertise, scientific project management experience, and capacity to implement a large project. We are looking for teams with the relevant expertise to advance the proposed work. Including individuals with such experience can help demonstrate that your team has this capacity. Keep in mind that EOIs will undergo an initial blinded review, and that it is possible to make additions and changes to the team identified in the EOI at the invited proposal stage.

Can team members be affiliated with non-U.S. institutions? (added June 9)

VIFF projects must be led by a U.S.-based not-for-profit research institution, and projects must serve VIFF's overarching mission to "support U.S.-based science and technology research towards the use of underutilized biomass carbon sources as alternative feedstocks for biomanufacturing." Within this framework, there are flexibilities. For example, the Lead PI(s) for a proposing team must be based at a U.S. institution. However, other members of the project team may be based at other institutions which could include non-U.S. institutions. Awardees may provide subawards to team members at other institutions.

Financial Questions

Should Schmidt Futures' cap of 10% for indirect costs be considered as part of the proposed budget total?

Yes. Detailed budgets will not be included in the EOI stage. These will be elaborated in the invited proposal stage.

Are there any restrictions we should be aware of regarding what we can use the funding for?

Restrictions include those limited by law, regulations, or scientific collaborations with those in sanctioned nations. Beyond that, one of the intentions of VIFF is to provide research awards with relatively flexible funds over an extended period (five years). VIFF awards are intended to help break down artificial walls to support the best scientific research and interdisciplinary collaborations to advance the scientific mission and scope of VIFF.

Previous awardees of Schmidt Futures Virtual Institutes have used these flexible funds to support graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and other scientists; support to facilitate conferences, meetings, and exchanges among personnel at collaborating institutions; secure software engineering support and cloud computing infrastructure; and other standard research expenses.

Can you elaborate on funding totals for the solicitation? (added June 5)

We anticipate funding up to five projects, over five years, that will collectively form the Virtual Institute. Each individual project may propose a total project budget of up to \$10M. The ultimate number of projects and individual project funding levels will depend on a number of factors.

Can funds be used to purchase equipment? (added June 5)

Yes. So long as the equipment is necessary for the research activity proposed in the EOI, and is not otherwise available to the project team, equipment purchases are largely acceptable.

Does Schmidt Futures require project teams to identify matching funds? (added June 5)

No.

How will selected VIFF project teams be funded? (added June 9)

There are several options for awarding funding, including gifts and grants. Schmidt Futures' VIFF program team will work with the selected project teams to determine what funding mechanism would be appropriate for the selected project.

Other Questions

Where can I find more information about Schmidt Futures?

Please see common questions about Schmidt Futures, a philanthropic initiative of Eric and Wendy Schmidt, [here](#).