

# 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](mailto:viff@schmidtfutures.com) with “EOI Question” in the subject line.

**Updated June 21, 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; see also new responses, under “Team Organization Questions,” added June 15)**

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; see also responses added June 15 under “Team Organization Questions”)**

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.

**The Request for EOIs states a preference for regional consortia. Does this preference extend to teams that may involve multiple geographic regions, but which leverage the wider range of feedstocks available across those regions to address heterogeneity? (added June 15; see also responses added June 15, under “Team Organization Questions”)**

VIFF aims to encourage the realization of centers of excellence to grow the knowledge and abilities critical to accelerating the adoption of future feedstocks in bioproduction. As a consequence, we welcome a broad range of team types, including projects focused on regionally available biomass; those that leverage regional talent or infrastructure to advance data, modeling, digital tools, and knowledge-sharing; and other innovative proposed research to achieve this overarching goal.

Some future feedstocks may be available only in limited geographic regions, while others - for example the organic fraction of municipal solid waste - are widely available, but remain

challenging to use due to their inherent heterogeneity and other factors. Innovative research may address combinations of feedstocks from different regions.

We look forward to EOIs that make the case for how the proposed work addresses the VIFF mission.

**Should the “collaborative teamwork approach, plan for within-team coordination across research methods and disciplines” mentioned in the Request for EOIs be included in the EOI? (added June 15)**

The EOI is a brief document that should provide reviewers with an understanding of how the proposed work aligns with the Request for EOIs. The EOI should include a mention of the anticipated plan for within-team coordination. This plan will be further elaborated in the invited proposal stage.

**Why are dedicated biomass crops excluded from this funding opportunity? (added June 15)**

We are especially interested in supporting research that is difficult to fund via other funders. We have developed VIFF project criteria that support this objective.

**The Request for EOIs excludes industrial gases as future feedstocks. Are waste gases from agricultural sources considered in-scope? (added June 15)**

Yes.

**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 Intent (EOI)?**

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.

**The Request for EOIs states that “demographic and disciplinary diversity within project teams is encouraged.” How will team diversity be evaluated during the review process? (added June 9)**

Schmidt Futures’ [BioFutures Program](#) aims to contribute to the creation of a future streamlined, circular U.S. bioeconomy where innovative ideas are fostered in an equitable and coordinated R&D ecosystem, and are successfully transitioned from the laboratory into the real world for public well-being, economic benefit, resilience, and sustainability. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the R&D ecosystem are essential to realizing this vision. At VIFF’s invited proposal stage, Schmidt Futures will elaborate criteria for evaluating each team’s integration of and contributions to DEIA.

**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.

**Can you clarify the distinctions between a regional consortium and a multi-institution team? (added June 15)**

VIFF aims to encourage the realization of centers of excellence to grow the knowledge and abilities critical to accelerating the adoption of future feedstocks in bioproduction. As a consequence, we welcome a broad range of team types, including projects focused on regionally available biomass; those that leverage regional talent or infrastructure to advance data, modeling, digital tools, and knowledge-sharing; and other innovative proposed research to achieve this overarching goal.

*Regional consortia* are unified by a geographically defined focus, challenge, or opportunity. They consist 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. Regional consortia may focus on future feedstocks available in their geographic region, or they may leverage the expertise and resources available to the geographic region.

*Multi-institution teams* include team members affiliated with more than one institution - for example team members affiliated with multiple universities or an academic research institution and an industry partner. Multi-institution teams do not necessarily address a challenge or opportunity particular to a geographic region of interest.

**For regional consortia, how do you define a region? (added June 15)**

The applicant should define the region. A region can include a geographic area that spans multiple jurisdictions, or even multiple U.S. states. The EOI should demonstrate the potential impact of the award on the region.

**Financial Questions**

**Should Schmidt Futures' cap of 10% for indirect costs be considered as part of the proposed budget total? (updated June 15; see also below response, updated June 15)**

Yes. Detailed budgets will not be included in the EOI stage. These will be elaborated in the invited proposal stage. More information on Schmidt Futures' policy on paying for grantees' indirect costs can be found [here](#).

**How will selected VIFF project teams be funded? (updated June 15)**

For VIFF, there are options for awarding funding, including gifts and grants. The Schmidt Futures team will work with the selected project teams to determine what funding mechanism would be appropriate for the selected project and recipient institution. We understand that some funding vehicles may provide more flexibility than others in terms of full cost recovery.

**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 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.

**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.

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

No.

**The EOI states that the Lead PI must be affiliated with a U.S.-based not-for-profit research institution. Can a for-profit business be listed as a Co-PI? (added June 15)**

It is our preference to provide awards to a single Lead PI's institution, which may in turn provide subawards to partner organizations. As such, the Lead PI must be affiliated with a U.S.-based not-for-profit research institution. Characteristics of sub-awardees must be consistent with the Lead PI's institutional requirements. Deviations from our preference to provide awards to a single lead institution may be discussed on a case-by-case basis.

## **Questions about Anonymous Review and Submitting an Anonymized EOI Document (added June 21)**

**There is seemingly contradictory guidance on whether or not the EOIs should identify individuals and partnering institutions by name. In some cases we have been told to explicitly provide this information, whereas in others we are told to leave this information out. How can we describe our team's capabilities and expertise if we cannot identify them by name? (added June 21)**

In the online EOI submission form, you will identify the members of your team as well as the organizations with which they are affiliated. The two-page EOI document - which you will upload as an attachment in the EOI submission form - should not include individually identifiable information. In the EOI document, you should be able to make the case that your team has the necessary skills, abilities, and expertise to implement the proposed work through the description of your proposed project - without including specific names or institutions.

Following the initial anonymous reviews and prior to making recommendations of EOIs to advance to the invited proposal stage, our selection team will be given access to the non-anonymized data from the EOI submission forms, allowing the selection team to verify any descriptions as necessary.

As noted in the example footnoted in the VIFF request for EOIs ([NASA's Dual-Anonymous Peer Review](#)), "the goal... is to not make it completely impossible to guess the identities of the investigators, but to shift the focus of the discussion away from the individuals and toward the proposed science."

### **Can we use the name of specific technologies in the EOI? (added June 21)**

If the technology is proprietary to a particular company, and thus including the name of the technology would identify you or your team, then we recommend referring to the technology in the EOI with a more generic description.

### **We are interested in collaborating with another team that is submitting an EOI for a potentially complementary project. How would I mention that in the EOI? (added June 21)**

You may identify that you are in discussions with potential collaborators who are submitting their own EOI on that complementary topic, without referring to that team by name.



## **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](#).

### **Will partnering institutions, companies, and individuals retain all intellectual property (IP) created through the project, or will it have to be shared with Schmidt Futures and/or VIFF? (added June 15)**

Consistent with precedents established in federal research awards of similar character, VIFF awards may contain provisions or provide general principles concerning patent rights, rights in technical data and computer software, data reporting requirements, and other terms and conditions which may be negotiated as part of the award process. Partner organizations are expected to work with the lead PI's institution to agree on IP issues.