

# Funding Forward: Navigating the Competitive Landscape of Limited Submissions

Webinar Session: January 15, 2026

## Key Takeaways

### Limited Submissions 101

- **What “limited submissions” means:** Sponsors restrict how many proposals an institution may submit, triggering an internal selection process before any external submission.
- **Why they matter:** These opportunities are often prestigious, highly competitive, and particularly relevant for early-career investigators.

**Columbia’s Limited Submission Process** *Speaker: Greg Culler, Executive Director of Research Partnerships/Initiatives, Research Compliance*

- **Scale of activity:** ORID announces ~80–90 limited opportunities/year; manages ~250 proposals/year.
- **How nominees are selected:**
  - Uses ad hoc faculty peer review (voluntary + confidential) to rank internal applications.
  - Review emphasizes fit with sponsor goals and likelihood of external success—not a full NIH-style critique.
- **Common evaluation criteria:**
  - Impact, quality, novelty (often high-risk/high-reward for foundations)
  - Investigator track record (some programs expect evidence of productivity)
  - Clarity on use of **funds** and how it advances your program
  - **Alignment with sponsor priorities + award history** (crucial)
- **Operational realities and challenges:**
  - Some foundations have tight timelines that don’t align well with university internal review.
  - Reviewer recruitment can be difficult for large, multi-investigator proposals due to conflicts.
- Feedback from review panels is sometimes limited; when available, it tends to be about **alignment, publication/track record comparisons**, or “this is better suited to NIH/federal mechanisms.”

### Best Practices for Limited Submissions

*Speaker: Dimitra Koutsantoni, PhD, Executive Director of University Corporate and Foundation Relations*

- **Start with fit and eligibility—read the RFP closely.** Foundations have specific priorities; use the foundation’s own language to show alignment.
- **Study award history (and how it evolves):**
  - Check what they’ve funded recently and ensure your idea is **distinct** from close look-alikes.
  - Priorities can change quickly (example raised: programs that became topic-specific after years of broad scope).
- **Foundation proposals ≠ federal proposals:**
  - Don’t recycle a rejected NIH/NSF proposal unchanged. Foundations may prefer **unconventional, riskier, or more catalytic** work.
- **Write for a broader audience:**
  - Reviewers and boards may be **non-specialists**; reduce jargon and make the story accessible.
- **Leverage institutional relationships:**
  - Connect with Dimitra/ORID to understand sponsor priorities, relationship context, and evolving nuances (including what foundations may share off-website).
- **Learn from previous winners:**
  - Speak with prior awardees and request examples of successful proposals (with permission).
- **Stay informed:** Following foundations on LinkedIn can surface what they’re proud to fund and where priorities are headed.

### Panel: Practical Strategies From Recent Winners

*Speakers: Samuel Sternberg, PhD, Assc. Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics and Ishmail Abdus-Saboor, PhD, Assc. Professor of Biological Sciences*

- **Build a proactive funding plan:** Limited-submission announcements shouldn’t be a surprise—track what’s coming and prepare early.
- **Use the “CV method” to identify targets:** Look at CVs of successful peers (5–7 years ahead) to spot awards that may fit your trajectory.
- **Tip: collect successful examples**

- o Maintain a library of funded applications; request examples from colleagues (including outside Columbia).
- o Review titles, structure, and narrative style to learn what “a winning application” looks like.
- **Write for intelligent non-experts:**
  - o Assume reviewers may not know your field; keep the first page readable and jargon-light.
  - o Avoid front-loading specialized gene/pathway language or hyper-technical framing.
- **Ask foundations when it matters (eligibility can be flexible):**
  - o Example shared: reaching out about an eligibility edge case resulted in permission to reapply.
- **Avoid inadvertent overlap/double-dipping:**
  - o Foundations may withdraw support if they perceive the work is already “NIH-ready” or funded elsewhere.
  - o Even titles and phrasing can raise flags—plan overlap carefully and differentiate aims/
- **See many funded examples before you submit:** Aim for multiple exemplars (shared: “I don’t submit until I’ve seen several funded examples”).
- **“Insider context” can change everything:**
  - o Conversations with prior awardees/review-panel insiders can reshape how you pitch—especially around what outcomes the sponsor values.
- **Strategize which science fits foundations:**
  - o Foundations often want work that’s **too early, too risky, or too unconventional** for standard federal routes—but potentially transformative if it works.
- **Stagger submissions when possible:**
  - o Multiple wins in the same period can reduce chances with another foundation if committees learn your funding status changed or perceive overlap.
- **Expect rejection and keep moving:**
  - o Rejections outnumber awards; outcomes can hinge on factors outside your control (panel composition, priorities, timing).
  - o Internal non-selection is also common at a place with many strong candidates—track eligibility windows and reapply strategically.

## “Do This Next” Checklist

- **Get on the limited submissions listserv** and actually read the announcements.
- **Plan by eligibility window** (years since independent position/PhD—varies by program).
- **Confirm sponsor fit** using RFP language + award history + current priorities.
- **Collect winning examples** (Columbia and external) and model your structure accordingly.
- **Write for broad scientific readers**—clarity > jargon.
- **Differentiate projects** across federal/foundation submissions; watch overlap rules and sequencing.
- **Use ORID/OAD relationships** to help with any questions about the process.
- If you’re not receiving limited submission announcements: look for messages from **MC Research / lists.columbia.edu**; if missing, email **limitedsubmissions@columbia.edu** to troubleshoot and confirm enrollment.

## Final Advice

Limited submissions can feel overwhelming—but the most successful applicants treat them as an opportunity to tell a clear, compelling story about why their idea matters now, and why this sponsor is the right partner to help it happen. Anchor your proposal in fit, write for the intelligent non-expert, learn from those who’ve won before you, and keep going—because persistence isn’t just part of the process; it’s often the deciding factor.

Key takeaways from Funding Forward: Navigating the Competitive Landscape of Limited Submissions webinar. Hosted by the Office of Research Initiatives and Development in partnership with Dimitra Koutsantoni, PhD, Executive Director of University Corporate and Foundation Relations, Office of Alumni Development.