

Governors State University

DETERMINING ALLOWABILITY OF COSTS

Policy Statement

The concepts of allowability, allocability, and reasonableness of costs directly address the legitimacy of a cost charged against a specific sponsored research award. Determination of allowability, allocability, and reasonableness of a given expense is based on specific guidelines of the sponsor and federal cost principles.

Allowability, allocability and reasonableness are defined and determined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the sponsor's requirements and/or University policy. [OMB Circular A-21](#), Section C covers this topic by defining what these areas truly constitute. Each financial transaction charged against a sponsored research award should be evaluated against these three concepts.

Allowability: Expenses charged to a sponsored research award must meet the following allowability criteria:

- The costs must be treated consistently through application of applicable generally accepted accounting principles appropriate to the circumstances.
- The costs must conform to any limitations or exclusions set forth in the sponsored agreement or in Federal Cost Principles ([OMB Circular A-21](#)).

Allocability: Once allowability criteria have been met, the cost must be evaluated against the criterion of allocability. That is, has the cost been incurred solely to support or advance the work of a specific sponsored research award? It also means the process of assigning a cost, or a group of costs, to one or more cost objectives, in realistic proportion to the benefit provided or other equitable relationship. A cost objective may be a major function of the institution, a particular service or project, a sponsored agreement, or Facilities and Administration Cost activity.

Reasonableness: The cost must be able to withstand public scrutiny, i.e. objective individuals not affiliated with the institution would agree that a cost is appropriate on a sponsored research award or as a component in its Facilities and Administration Cost proposal. Once a determination of allowability, allocability, and reasonableness has been made, it is important that all grant expenses be charged to the appropriate expenditure type. Budget and expenditure information recorded in the accounting system serves the basis for: (a) the preparation of yearly financial statements for the University; (b) departmental-level planning and reporting; (c) project/account specific planning and reporting; (d) Facilities and Administration Cost proposal preparation and rate calculation; and (e) audit reviews and many other uses.

Please use the following as a quick reference guide as it pertains to these topics:

For a charge to be allowable, consideration should be given to:

- Terms and conditions of the agreement
- [OMB Circular A-21](#) (federal and state awards)
- University Policy

For a charge to be allocable, consideration should be given to:

- Consistency

- Sound allocation methodology
- Appropriate documentation

For a charge to be reasonable, consideration should be given to:

- Necessity of expenditure
- Advancement of Scope
- Consistency with established institutional policies and practices
- External review by a prudent individual

Unallowable Costs

Federal regulations identify specific costs and categories of costs that cannot be charged, directly or indirectly to federally sponsored agreements. These costs are never allowed on federally sponsored awards nor can they be charged to general administrative or other grant funds that will be treated as a part of the indirect cost pools. Unallowable costs are generally defined the federal government in Office of Management and Budget ([OMB Circular A-21](#)). Section J of the Circular addresses certain cost categories and defines whether they are allowable charges on grants.

1. Unallowable Costs include, but are not limited to:
 - a. Advertising and public relations
 - i. Expenditures to promote the University are not allowable.
 - ii. Advertising for recruitment of employees or human subjects is allowable.
 - b. Alcoholic beverages
 - c. Alumni/ae activities
 - d. Bad debts
 - e. Commencement or convocation costs
 - f. Contingency provisions
 - g. Office supplies
 - h. General-use equipment
 - i. Computers not solely designated for research purposes
 - j. Charitable contributions, donations, remembrances – However the value of donated services may be used to meet cost sharing or matching obligations
 - k. Commerical air travel costs in excess of the lowest available commercial discount airfare, Federal government contract airfare (where authorized and available), or customary standard (coach or equivalent) airfare
 - l. Development/fundraising costs
 - m. Entertainment costs: Costs of entertainment, including amusement diversion, and social activities and any costs directly associated with such costs (such as tickets to shows or sporting events, meals, lodging, rentals, transportation, and gratuities)
 - n. Fines and penalties
 - o. Goods or services for personal use of employees (including gifts)
 - p. Housing and personal living expenses of University officers
 - q. Investment and management costs
 - r. Lobbying
 - s. Losses on other sponsored agreements or contracts (cost overruns) or contract of any nature is unallowable. This includes, but is not limited to; the institutions contributed portion by reason of cost-sharing agreements or any under-recoveries through negotiation of flat amounts for indirect costs.

- t. Pre-award costs, unless approved by the sponsoring agency or permitted under expanded authorities
 - u. Selling and marketing costs of any products or services of the institution
 - v. Student activity costs incurred for intramural activities, student publications, student clubs, etc.
 - w. Interest expense – However, interest paid to external parties that is associated with the acquisition of equipment or other capital assets is generally allowable.
2. Unallowable Directly Associated Costs
 - a. In addition to unallowable costs per se, charges to federally sponsored agreements must also exclude costs that are directly associated with the unallowable costs. A directly associated cost is defined in federal regulations as any cost which is generated solely as a result of the incidence of another cost, and which would not have been incurred had the other cost not been incurred.
 - b. An example of a cost that is directly associated with an unallowable cost is the cost of airfare to go to another city for the purpose of entertaining business associates, or for fundraising. Since entertainment and fundraising costs are expressly unallowable under [OMB Circular A-21](#), and the airfare would not have been incurred had the unallowable costs not been incurred, the airfare is an unallowable directly associated costs.
 3. Indirect Cost Rate Calculation
 - a. All costs are classified by account categories. Accounts are screened for allowability by the Financial Services Office. Accounts identified as unallowable costs are excluded from the indirect rate calculation.
 - b. GSU accounting staff prepares worksheets which are used by an external contractor to prepare the GSU indirect cost rate calculations. GSU accounting staff verifies that unallowable indirect costs are not included in the indirect cost schedules provided to the external contractor.

Disallowed Costs

While this policy addresses certain costing concepts, the following practices would generally indicate charges which should be disallowed:

- Rotating charges among sponsored projects by month without establishing that the rotation schedule reflects the relative benefit to each grant.
- Assigning charges to the sponsored project with the largest remaining balance.
- Charging an amount based on the approved project budget versus the actual costs.
- Assigning charges to sponsored projects before the cost is incurred.
- Identifying a cost inappropriately.
- Charging expenses exclusively to sponsored projects when the expense also has supported non-sponsored project activities.
- Assigning charges that are part of the normal administrative support for contracts and grants which are included in indirect costs (e.g., proposal preparation, accounting, payroll, etc.)
- Charging costs to substantially complete sponsored projects to expend remaining funds, without regard to the appropriateness of the costs.