



REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP)

Investigating Progression Pathways Across the Water Workforce (5307)

Date Posted

Friday, September 20, 2024

Due Date

Proposals must be received by 3:00 pm Mountain Time on Thursday, November 21, 2024

WRF Project Contact

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Project Sponsors

This project is funded by The Water Research Foundation (WRF) as part of WRF's Research Priority Program.

Project Objectives

- Develop a baseline understanding for career movement across disciplines, organizations, and skillsets
- Identify potential catalysts and barriers for career progression in the water sector
- Identify progression programs, models, and key factors for successful implementation

Budget

Applicants may request up to \$200,000 in WRF funds for this project.

Background and Project Rationale

Progression pathways are one resource for successful recruitment and retention in the water sector. Moving beyond a job into a potential career is a crucial benefit that employers in the water sector can offer. However, this information is typically kept at the organizational level. An opportunity exists to expand the sector's understanding for how career progression can be framed for water professionals. A hallmark of the One Water approach is "partnerships for progress" or recognizing that all sectors play a role in management of our water resources. This same sentiment exists for the workforce. The water sector needs to equip professionals for engaging across the public and private sectors.

Historically, workforce research has emphasized career progression to fill the skill gap with evolving utility needs through training programs, but, even in the 1990s, research identified career path programs as a resource for retaining utility employees (Wade Miller Associates, Inc. 1993). Expectation of career growth and progress relates to retention for employees that were identified with 'exceptional potential' (Olstein et al. 2005). There is an indication that

progression is one approach to retention, however there is limited work on the variety of options available to implement such programs.

With this context, this RFP is soliciting proposals for research into progression pathways to focus on the career pathways themselves and the organizational progression programs used to facilitate promotion and individual growth.

Research Approach

In order to meet the objectives listed above, this RFP has organized the research approach into two major tasks, as described below. Proposals should include both tasks in the research approach; however, there is some flexibility with specific elements to be included to encourage creativity and originality from proposers. The following approach is intended as a starting point:

Task 1: Compiling and analyzing progression programs across the water sector.

This task aims to gather and synthesize types of progression programs currently used across the water sector. Recognizing the opportunity to learn from different models, this task is intentionally bridging the gap between the public and private sectors.

Activities might include gathering information on different types of programs and analyzing them for the following:

- Key aspects to how programs are structured
- Where the programs exist in an organization's structure
- Resources (e.g., financial, staff, etc.) needed to start and maintain the program
- Considerations that might affect program performance (e.g., organization size, organization type, etc.)

Understanding these aspects aims to help workforce professionals assess what needs to be considered when implementing or evaluating their own programs. Water professionals should be able to use the findings to identify different types of progression programs currently utilized in the water sector. Proposers should demonstrate an ability to capture a representative sample across the water sector. While proposals should demonstrate an initial ability to identify programs and an ability to execute the proposed scope successfully, it should be noted that WRF staff will also be able to help provide some support in identifying potential case studies.

Task 2: Expanding awareness of diverse careers in the water sector.

Existing initiatives have begun to document the domain knowledge, responsibilities, and educational/training requirements necessary for key technical occupations in the sector, including (AWWA 2024):

- Electrician/Mechanic
- Engineer
- Green Infrastructure Worker
- Laboratory Technician
- Operator

- Pretreatment/Industrial Coordinator
- Utility Leadership

To achieve a realistic and impactful outcome, this RFP asks proposers to select 7-10 critical positions and/or occupations that represent the innovation, financial, administrative, and communications-oriented aspects of the water sector to build on these existing career categories. Information should include knowledge, skills, abilities, education, and training to align with existing resources.

Task 3: Develop career “maps” for key occupations in the water sector.

Career shifts are not always linear and can take place across disciplines, sectors (e.g., private, public, nonprofit), and organizations. As such, this RFP asks proposers to identify a means to develop career “maps” rather than career “ladders” to show what transitioning cross-directionally (across a domain of knowledge as well as in directions to other disciplines [e.g., finance, communications, data science]) looks like. Proposals should identify which occupations these maps will cover.

Data to support these career maps should represent diverse experiences and potentially cover the following considerations:

- Addressing how organizational size might affect movement
- Adjacent and related occupations that allow for transitions
- Identifying key inflection points to assist transitions from entry-level to management pathways
- Identifying key policies that restrict or accelerate progression
- Skillsets for professional growth (e.g., licenses, certifications, etc.) and the balance between education and experience in career development
- Understanding how organizational structure impacts the ability to progress internally

Expected Deliverables

The deliverables for this proposal are intentionally flexible to encourage creativity and originality from proposers. However, proposals should be clear on how deliverables are relevant and the appropriate mechanism for communicating research findings to the target audience. Potential deliverables may include (but are not limited to):

- Research report (must use WRF’s [Research Report Template](#))
- Literature review
- Guidance manual
- Peer-reviewed journal article
- Infographic
- Fact sheet, case study, white paper, etc.
- Technology Deliverables (must follow the [Technology Deliverables Guidance](#))

Please note that conference presentations, workshops, and webcasts may be included as part of the Communication Plan but are not necessarily considered as stand-alone deliverables for this work.

Communication Plan

Please review WRF's [Project Deliverable Guidelines](#) for information on preparing a communication plan. Conference presentations, webcasts, peer-reviewed publication submissions, and other forms of project information dissemination are typically encouraged.

Project Duration

The anticipated period of performance for this project is 18–24 months from the contract start date.

References and Resources

The following list includes examples of research reports, tools, and other resources that may be helpful to proposers. It is not intended to be comprehensive, nor is it a required list for consideration.

- Wade Miller Associates, Inc. 1993. Meeting the Management, Organizational, and Staffing Challenges of the 1990s. Project 705. Denver, CO: AWWA Research Foundation; American Water Works Association
- Olstein, M. A., D. L. Marden, J. G. Voeller, J. D. Jennings, P. M. Hannan, and D. Brinkman. 2005. Succession Planning for a Vital Workforce in the Information Age. Project 2850. Denver, CO: AWWA Research Foundation.
- American Water Works Association (AWWA). 2024. Careers in Water. Work for Water. <https://www.workforwater.org/careers-in-water/>
- Kane, J., A. Tomer. 2018. *Renewing the Water Workforce*. Project 4751. Washington DC: Brookings Institute. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/water-workforce/>.
- Manning, A., T. Brueck, M. Isbell, and P. Brink. 2008. *Workforce Planning for Water Utilities – Successful Recruiting, Training, and Retaining of Operators and Engineers*. Project 4005. Denver, CO: AWWA Research Foundation; Washington DC: United States Environmental Protection Agency.

- **Proposal Evaluation Criteria**

The following criteria will be used to evaluate proposals:

- Understanding the Problem and Responsiveness to RFP (maximum 20 points)
- Technical and Scientific Merit (maximum 30 points)
- Qualifications, Capabilities, and Management (maximum 15 points)
- Communication Plan, Deliverables, and Applicability (maximum 20 points)
- Budget and Schedule (maximum 15 points)

PROPOSAL PREPARATION INSTRUCTIONS

Proposals submitted in response to this RFP must be prepared in accordance with WRF's [Guidelines for Research Priority Program Proposals](#) and [Instructions for Budget Preparation](#). These guidelines contain instructions for the technical aspects, financial statements, indirect costs, and administrative requirements that the applicant must follow when preparing a proposal.

Proposals that include the production of web- or software-based tools, such as websites, Excel spreadsheets, Access databases, etc., must follow the criteria outlined for web tools presented in the [Technology Deliverables Guidance](#).

Eligibility to Submit Proposals

Proposals will be accepted from both U.S.-based and non-U.S.-based entities, including educational institutions, research organizations, governmental agencies, and consultants or other for-profit entities.

WRF's Board of Directors has established a [Timeliness Policy](#) that addresses researcher adherence to the project schedule. Researchers who are late on any ongoing WRF-sponsored studies without approved no-cost extensions are not eligible to be named participants in any proposals. Direct any questions about eligibility to the WRF project contact listed at the top of this RFP.

Administrative, Cost, and Audit Standards

WRF's research program standards for administrative, cost, and audit compliance are based upon, and comply with, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Uniform Grants Guidance (UGG), 2 CFR Part 200 Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, and 48 CFR 31.2 Contracts with Commercial Organizations. These standards are referenced in WRF's [Guidelines for Research Priority Program Proposals](#) and include specific guidelines outlining the requirements for indirect cost negotiation agreements, financial statements, and the Statement of Direct Labor, Fringe Benefits, and General Overhead. Inclusion of indirect costs must be substantiated by a negotiated agreement or appropriate Statement of Direct Labor, Fringe Benefits, and General Overhead. Well in advance of preparing the proposal, your research and financial staff should review the detailed instructions included in WRF's [Guidelines for Research Priority Program Proposals](#) and consult the [Instructions for Budget Preparation](#).

Budget and Funding Information

The maximum funding available from WRF for this project is \$200,000. The applicant must contribute additional resources equivalent to at least 33% of the project award. For example, if an applicant requests \$100,000 from WRF, an additional \$33,000 or more must be contributed by the applicant. Acceptable forms of applicant contribution include cost share, applicant in-kind, or third-party in-kind that comply with 2 CFR Part 200.306 cost sharing or matching. The applicant may elect to contribute more than 33% to the project, but the maximum WRF funding

available remains fixed at \$200,000. Proposals that do not meet the minimum 33% of the project award will not be accepted. Consult the [Instructions for Budget Preparation](#) for more information and definitions of terms.

Period of Performance

It is WRF's policy to negotiate a reasonable schedule for each research project. Once this schedule is established, WRF and its sub-recipients have a contractual obligation to adhere to the agreed-upon schedule. Under WRF's [No-Cost Extension Policy](#), a project schedule cannot be extended more than nine months beyond the original contracted schedule, regardless of the number of extensions granted.

Utility and Organization Participation

WRF encourages participation from water utilities and other organizations in WRF research. Participation can occur in a variety of ways, including direct participation, in-kind contributions, or in-kind services. To facilitate their participation, WRF has provided contact information, on the last page of this RFP, of utilities and other organizations that have indicated an interest in this research. Proposers are responsible for negotiating utility and organization participation in their particular proposals. The listed utilities and organizations are under no obligation to participate, and the proposer is not obligated to include them in their particular proposal.

Application Procedure and Deadline

Proposals are accepted exclusively online in PDF format, and they must be fully submitted before 3:00 pm Mountain Time on Thursday, November 21, 2024.

The online proposal system allows submission of your documents until the date and time stated in this RFP. To avoid the risk of the system closing before you press the submit button, do not wait until the last minute to complete your submission. Submit your proposal at <https://forms.waterrf.org/cbruck/rfp-5307>.

Questions to clarify the intent of this RFP and WRF's administrative, cost, and financial requirements may be addressed to the WRF project contact, Miriam Hacker at 571.384.2116 or mhacker@waterrf.org. Questions related to proposal submittal through the online system may be addressed to Caroline Bruck at 303.347.6118 or cbruck@waterrf.org.

Utility and Organization Participants

The following utilities have indicated interest in possible participation in this research. This information is updated within 24 business hours after a utility or an interested organization submits a volunteer form, and this RFP will be re-posted with the new information. **(Depending on your settings, you may need to click refresh on your browser to load the latest file.)**

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