



National Sea Grant College Program

Program Status Policy for the Development and Advancement of Sea Grant Projects, Coherent Area Programs, Institutional Programs, and College Programs (Program Status Policy)

June 2024

I. Overview

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Sea Grant Office (NSGO), under the direction of the National Sea Grant College Program Director (Director), supports the development of Sea Grant projects and programs in the remaining geographic areas that are eligible for Sea Grant College Program designation. This policy guides the procedures and designation of resources to facilitate orderly development, per the National Sea Grant College Program Act, as amended in 2020, [33 U.S.C. 1121 et seq](#) (Sea Grant Act) and the U.S.Code of Federal Regulations [15 CFR 917](#) and [15 CFR 918](#) (Code of Regulations), which set forth the eligibility, qualifications, responsibilities and designation process for Sea Grant programs. Review procedures and the Sea Grant Standards of Excellence are outlined in the *National Sea Grant College Program Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation Policy (PIE) Policy*.

There are four Sea Grant status steps — Sea Grant Project, Coherent Area Program, Institutional Program and College Program. This sequential process occurs over time, typically a decade or more.



A Sea Grant Project supports priority needs through a geographical or topical scope. Topical Project awards may be supported at the discretion of the Director to advance national priorities. For the purpose of this policy, all Sea Grant Projects mentioned hereafter refer to geographical Sea Grant Projects.

Interested applicants may petition the NSGO for changes in status as defined below. It is NSGO policy to establish and fund only one Institutional or College Program in a state¹ as defined in the Sea Grant Act, except for those programs that attained Institutional status before fiscal year (FY) 2002.

Each step in this process typically has differing expectations, goals and levels of support, as outlined in the Code of Regulations, and is briefly described below, with further details on the process following.

Sea Grant Project

Generally, the first step in the process is an independent, geographically-based Sea Grant Project. This step permits applicants interested in developing a Sea Grant program to explore capabilities and needs in a state (geographic area). As stated in 15 CFR 917.42, "*Project funding is made generally for a single item of research, education and training, or advisory service, but may be renewed under certain conditions...*" As such, Projects should not aim to carry out the scope of a full program and should have a limited scope of work. A Project should have a topical focus relevant to the national focus areas outlined in the [National Sea Grant College Program Strategic Plan](#), and be executed through one or more of the Sea Grant functional areas of research, extension or education. A Project must be initiated and supported by an independent federal financial assistance award from the NSGO directly to the primary applicant. The purpose of this step is to ensure that a host applicant can carry out a project that aligns with the Sea Grant mission and provides a platform for the interested applicant to further develop the support needed to become a Sea Grant program.

Sea Grant Coherent Area Program

The second step of program status is a Coherent Area Program. Coherent Area Programs can be competitively awarded to one applicant, or a consortium of applicants, that has a Sea Grant Project. During Coherent Area Program status, the applicant should develop capabilities across all of the functional areas of a Sea Grant program, including research, education and extension programming. During this phase of development, it is expected that activities may still be limited in topical scope to cover only some of the national focus areas. Still, the work is expected to expand beyond a singular project award to include multiple projects across the functional areas. Typically, the Coherent Area Program status is a time of growth, during which the program will be fostering new partnerships, strengthening institutional relationships, exploring avenues to secure sustained match funding, and expanding work across the national focus areas

¹ The term "state" is used throughout this document as defined in the Sea Grant Act: "any State of the United States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Mariana Islands, or any other territory or possession of the United States."

and Sea Grant functional areas. A Coherent Area Program is the step at which the entity is first recognized as having status as a Sea Grant program.

Sea Grant Institutional Program

The third step of program status is the Sea Grant Institutional Program. Advancement to this status is a significant step that requires an applicant to have demonstrated an ability to administer multiple projects across various topical areas, and maintain a high-quality and balanced research, extension, and education program in fields related to ocean, Great Lakes and/or coastal resources. Institutional Programs are expected to expand the scope and impact of work and build long-term foundational support for the program. This is the step at which the program is subject to standardized review per the *PIE Policy* and eligible for merit funding (outlined in the *PIE Policy*).

Sea Grant College Program

The fourth step and highest program category is the Sea Grant College Program. College Programs have many of the same requirements as Institutional Programs, including the capacity to maintain a high-quality and balanced research, extension and education program in fields related to ocean, Great Lakes and/or coastal resources. College Programs have broad responsibilities for state/territorial, regional and national activities and are charged with engaging all of the institutions of higher learning in a geographic area.

II. Process for Achieving Sea Grant Status

Sea Grant Project

An interested applicant should reach out to the Director to inquire about the feasibility of starting a Sea Grant Project. If the Director determines that there is a need in the region/area for the request that is not currently being met by an existing Sea Grant program and there is availability of federal funding, then the NSGO will issue a competitive Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO).

Once a NOFO is issued, applicants submit an official application to the NSGO for consideration, following the guidelines and restrictions outlined in the NOFO. Successful applicants will be expected to meet all award terms and conditions. If there is continued need for the project then another NOFO may be issued at the discretion of the Director. There is no guarantee of continued funding to previously successful applicants.

Sea Grant Coherent Area Program

After successfully completing one or more Sea Grant Projects, an applicant may reach out to the Director to enquire about the feasibility of advancing to a Coherent Area

Program. If, after discussion, the Director determines that eligibility criteria have been met, then a competitive NOFO will be issued. The NSGO will only accept Coherent Area Program proposals from entities in geographical areas without existing Sea Grant Institutional or College Programs. After a competitive review, the NSGO may issue an award to the selected applicant.

Successful applicants will be expected to meet all award terms and conditions and undergo an evaluative review before the completion of an award cycle to demonstrate their progress towards the Sea Grant Standards of Excellence to be eligible for award renewal.

Sea Grant Institutional Program

After successfully completing three or more years as a Coherent Area Program, applicants may reach out to the Director to request consideration for Institutional Program status. If, after discussion, the Director determines that eligibility criteria have been met, the NSGO will solicit letters of intent from applicants in the geographic area. It is NSGO policy to establish and fund only one Institutional or College Program in a state, as defined in the Sea Grant Act, except for those programs that attained Institutional status before FY 2002.

Applicants who submit a letter of intent will be provided additional information on preparing and submitting a full package for consideration of Institutional Program status. The Director will subsequently charge the National Sea Grant Advisory Board (Advisory Board) with reviewing the applicant against the Sea Grant Standards of Excellence. Following review, the Advisory Board will make a recommendation to the Director regarding Institutional Program designation. The Director will provide recommendations on the designation of Institutional Programs to the Secretary of Commerce (as defined in the Sea Grant Act), who will make the final decision on Institutional Program designation. The entire Institutional Program designation process including soliciting of letters of intent, application review, panel review and approval, and official agency and congressional notification, can take a year or more.

The Sea Grant Act requires the Secretary of Commerce to notify Congress, in writing, 30 days before designating a Sea Grant College Program or Institutional Program. The NSGO will work with NOAA and the Department of Commerce (DOC) Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs to adhere to that requirement.

All Institutional Programs are subject to review per the *PIE Policy*. Additionally, applicants will be expected to meet all award terms and conditions. Upon successful completion, a renewal may be issued at the discretion of the NSGO if the quality and

relevance of the Institutional Programs are maintained. Institutional Programs are eligible for merit funding following a site visit (outlined in the *PIE Policy*).

Sea Grant College Program

Achieving Sea Grant College Program status is the final step in this process. Only Sea Grant Institutional Programs are eligible to advance to Sea Grant College Program status. Applicants must have demonstrated a capability to maintain a high-quality and balanced research, education, training, and extension program in fields related to ocean, Great Lakes and/or coastal resources, and have received financial assistance as a Sea Grant Institutional Program.

After successfully completing a minimum of three years as an Institutional Program, applicants may reach out to the Director to request consideration for College Program status. If, after discussion, the Director determines that eligibility criteria have been met, the NSGO will solicit letters of intent from applicants in the geographic area. It is NSGO policy to establish and fund only one Institution or College Program in a state, as defined in the Sea Grant Act, except for those programs that attained Institutional status before FY 2002.

Applicants who submit a letter of intent will be provided additional information on preparing and submitting a full package for consideration of College Program status. The Director will charge the Advisory Board with reviewing the applicant against the Sea Grant Standards of Excellence. Following review, the Advisory Board will make a recommendation to the Director regarding College Program designation. The Director will provide recommendations on the designation of College Programs to the Secretary of Commerce (as defined in the Sea Grant Act), who will make the final decision on College Program designation. The entire College Program designation process, soliciting letters of intent, application review, panel review and approval, and agency and congressional notification, can take a year or more.

The Sea Grant Act requires the Secretary of Commerce to notify Congress, in writing, 30 days before designating a Sea Grant College Program or Institutional Program. The NSGO will work with NOAA and DOC's Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs to adhere to that requirement.

All College Programs are subject to review per the *PIE Policy*. Additionally, applicants will be expected to meet all award terms and conditions. Upon successful completion, a renewal may be issued at the discretion of the NSGO if the quality and relevance of the College Program are maintained. College Programs are eligible for merit funding following a site visit (outlined in the *PIE Policy*).

III. Target Funding Levels

Generally, the first three steps in the process of becoming a Sea Grant program have differing categories of federal support, aimed at providing adequate resources to achieve the objectives of each status. Funding levels for Institutional and College Programs are currently set through the *National Sea Grant College Program Policy for the Allocation of Funds, FY 2024 and Beyond* ([Allocation Policy](#)).

Based on the availability of funding, past practice, scope of work for each step in the process and the current funding levels across the national program, the following target funding levels are provided as a general guideline for Sea Grant federal funding that may be available at each step in the process (based on 2024 dollars).

- Sea Grant Projects are eligible for up to \$300K per year for a four-year period.
- Sea Grant Coherent Area Programs are eligible for up to \$600K per year for a four-year period.
- Sea Grant Institutional and College Programs are eligible for a minimum base funding of \$1.2M per year for a four-year period, plus additional merit funding where applicable.

These target funding levels may change to accommodate needs at each step to ensure programs can achieve objectives and are subject to available appropriations. Under the Sea Grant Act, there is a required 50% non-federal match for all Sea Grant federal funding (waivers to non-federal match may be considered during the federal financial assistance application process, if applicable). There are also funding limitations for Sea Grant funding, as outlined in the Sea Grant Act (33 U.S.C. 1124(d)(2)), which states:

“No payment under any grant or contract under this section may be applied to: (A) the purchase or rental of any land; or (B) the purchase, rental, construction, preservation, or repair of any building, dock, or vessel; except that payment under any such grant or contract may be applied to the short-term rental of buildings or facilities for meetings which are in direct support of any Sea Grant program or project and may, if approved by the Secretary, be applied to the purchase, rental, construction, preservation, or repair of non-self-propelled habitats, buoys, platforms, and other similar devices or structures, or to the rental of any research vessel which is used in direct support of activities under any Sea Grant program or project.”

IV. Decertification

The *PIE Policy* describes the process by which all Sea Grant Institutional and College Programs are reviewed and recertified each funding cycle. A program may be decertified if it does not meet the Sea Grant Standards of Excellence. If a program is decertified, that geographic area becomes eligible for a new Sea Grant project or program.

V. Effective Date

This policy is effective upon release of this document and will continue indefinitely until superseded or revised.