

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) to Assist U.S. Department of Education (ED) Grantees to Appropriately Use Federal Funds for Food, Conferences, and Meetings¹

August 2024

Using Federal ED Grant (Discretionary and Formula) Funds for Food

1. May a grantee use its U.S. Department of Education (ED) grant funds for food, beverages, or snacks at an event related to its grant?

All grant expenditures, including those for food, beverages, or snacks, must be reasonable, necessary, allocable to the grant, and allowable. (Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) *Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards (Uniform Guidance)* at 2 CFR §§ 200.403 through 200.405).²

Generally, a grantee needs to substantiate with specificity the rationale for why paying for food and beverages with Department funds is necessary to meet the goals and objectives of a grant. When a grantee is hosting an event related to its ED grant, the grantee should first consider structuring the agenda for the meeting so that there is time for participants to bring or purchase their own food, beverages, and snacks. In addition, when planning a meeting, grantees may want to consider a location in which participants have easy access to food and beverages.

There may be limited circumstances under which providing food or beverages is reasonable and necessary to achieve the purpose of a particular grant. Because food and beverage costs are not of a type generally recognized as ordinary and necessary for the operation of the grantee or the proper and efficient performance of the Federal award (see 2 CFR § 200.404(a)), grantees must document their evidence and analysis that justify that the use of food or beverage is reasonable and necessary in each instance.

In determining reasonableness of a given cost, including those for food and drink, consideration must be given to:

- Whether the cost is generally recognized as ordinary and necessary for the grantee's operation or the proper and efficient performance of the Federal award;
- The restraints or requirements imposed by such factors as: sound business practices; arm's-length bargaining; Federal, State, local, Tribal, and other laws and regulations; and terms and conditions of the Federal award;
- Market prices for comparable costs for the geographic area;
- Whether the individuals concerned acted with prudence in the circumstances considering their responsibilities to the recipient or grantee, its employees, its students or membership (if applicable), the public at large, and the Federal Government; and

¹ Other than statutory and regulatory requirements included in the document, the contents of this FAQ document do not have the force and effect of law and are not meant to bind the public. This document is intended only to provide clarity to the public regarding existing requirements under the law or agency policies.

² Revisions to 2 CFR part 200, referred to as the "OMB Uniform Guidance," were published on April 22, 2024, and are generally effective on October 1, 2024. In general, the April 2024 revisions do not substantively affect the content in this FAQ document. While the OMB Uniform Guidance in 2 CFR § 200.1 defines recipient, this FAQ uses the term grantee to align with the definitions that apply to ED regulations in the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) in 34 CFR § 77.1.

- Whether the cost represents a deviation from the recipient or grantee’s established written policies and procedures for incurring (2 CFR § 200.404).

Please note that, in addition to determining whether the costs are necessary and reasonable, State grantees also must determine whether the same costs are allowable under State law for the use of State funds. Under 2 CFR § 200.302(a), States are required to expend and account for Federal funds in accordance with State laws and procedures for expending and accounting for their own State funds. In other words, if State laws or procedures would not permit the use of State funds for conferences or meals, then State grantees may not use their Federal grant funds to pay those costs either.

2. Are there examples of when food costs might be considered reasonable and necessary to the performance of a particular grant?

The question of whether a food cost is reasonable and necessary to the performance of a grant will depend on the ED grant, including any program-specific rules or requirements that may apply to that grant, as well as the unique circumstances of the food cost. The following are some examples of situations when a food cost might be considered reasonable and necessary:

- Food costs at a family engagement event: For some ED programs, family engagement is a critical part of the purpose of the program or of the success of a project. In such a program, if a family meeting would occur during a typical mealtime, or if the grantee has evidence that attendance at the event would be affected by the absence of food or snacks, the grantee may be able to justify that is reasonable and necessary to provide light refreshments or meals to participants.
- Food costs for a working lunch at a day-long meeting: A grantee may find that one critical component of its grant activities is hosting an onsite day-long training for professionals working in a field that is a central focus of the grant. If the grantee is able to demonstrate that the lunchtime session is necessary to achieve the goals of the project, attendance at the lunchtime session is necessary to achieve full participation by attendees, and the business carried out at the lunchtime session could not be carried out at another reasonable time, the grantee may be able to justify that it is reasonable and necessary to provide meals or a snack to attendees.
- Light refreshments at a series of regular after-hours meetings: A grantee may find that an important part of its grant activities is hosting meetings after the traditional working day so that professionals from within the field but across different employers have an opportunity to collaborate on focused topics. If the grantee can demonstrate that the sessions have planned agendas that are central to the grant, that engaging this group of people is necessary to achieve the purposes of the grant, and that there is evidence that attendance at the meetings would be affected by the absence of food, the grantee may be able to justify that it is reasonable and necessary to provide light refreshments to participants.
- Costs of light snacks at a day-long meeting: To achieve the purposes of its grant, a grantee may find that is necessary to host day-long meetings or training sessions so that involved individuals can collaborate. If the grantee has evidence that providing light snacks (e.g., granola bars and water) at the meeting will result in improved participation, such as more

time spent on grant activities and less time needed for breaks during the sessions, the grantee may be able to justify that is reasonable and necessary to provide light snacks to participants.

If an ED grantee has questions about a specific food cost, they should contact their ED program officer.

3. What are examples of situations when costs for food would not be considered reasonable and necessary?

There are some situations when food costs would not be considered reasonable and necessary to a grant or would otherwise be unallowable under the *Uniform Guidance* found at 2 CFR part 200.

- Food costs at networking sessions: In nearly all cases, using grant funds to pay for food and beverages for networking sessions with a purely social focus is not justified because participation in such activities is rarely necessary to achieve the purpose of the grant.
- Food costs at regular staff meetings: Food costs for recurring business meetings, staff meetings, or other day-to-day activities are generally not reasonable because participation in such activities is rarely necessary to achieve the purpose of the grant.
- Food costs for remote meetings: Food costs for meetings conducted remotely, such as sending food to individual meeting participants' locations, are generally not justified since participants' participation is less impacted by them attending the meeting remotely.
- Entertainment: Federal grant funds may not be used to pay for entertainment, which includes costs for amusement, diversion, and social activities, unless they have a specific and direct programmatic purpose and are included in the Federal award. 2 CFR § 200.438. Celebrations, receptions, banquets, and other social events generally are not events where purchasing food with ED grant funds is appropriate.
- Alcohol: In all cases, use of Federal funds for alcoholic beverages is unallowable. 2 CFR § 200.423.

Using ED Federal Grant (Discretionary and Formula) Funds to Host a Meeting or Conference

4. May a grantee receiving funds from ED use its Federal grant funds to host a meeting or conference?

Yes. Federal grant funds may be used to host a meeting or conference if doing so is:

- Consistent with its approved application or plan;
- For purposes that are directly relevant to the program and the operation of the grant, such as for conveying technical information related to the objectives of the grant; and
- Reasonable and necessary to achieve the goals and objectives of the approved grant.

The *Uniform Guidance* in 2 CFR § 200.432 describes costs associated with conferences that may be allowable.

5. What are examples of “technical information” that may be conveyed at a meeting or conference?

Examples of technical information include, but are not limited to, the following, each of which must be related to implementing the program or project funded by the grant:

- Specific programmatic, administrative, or fiscal accountability requirements;
- Best practices in a particular field;
- Theoretical, empirical, or methodological advances in a particular field;
- Effective methods of training or professional development; and
- Effective grant management and accountability.

6. What factors should a grantee consider when deciding whether to host a meeting or conference?

Grantees should consider whether a face-to-face meeting or conference is the most effective or efficient way to achieve the desired result and whether there are alternatives, such as webinars or video conferences, that would be equally or similarly effective and more efficient in terms of time and costs than a face-to-face meeting. In addition, grantees should consider how the meeting or conference will be perceived by the public; for example, will the meeting or conference be perceived as a good use of taxpayer dollars?

7. Are there conflict-of-interest rules that grantees should follow when selecting vendors, such as logistics contractors, to help with a meeting or conference?

As specified in 2 CFR § 200.317, States and Indian Tribes³ must comply with their own procurement policies and procedures, including any policies or procedures for ensuring that there are no conflicts of interest in the procurement process. In addition to its own policies and procedures, a State or Indian Tribe must also comply with the following procurement standards: 2 CFR §§ 200.321, 200.322, 200.323, and 200.327. If a State or Indian Tribe does not have its own procurement policies and procedures, it must follow the procurement standards in 2 CFR §§ 200.318 through 200.327.

Other grantees must follow procurement procedures that are consistent with their State, local, or Tribal laws and regulations, as appropriate, and that are also consistent with 2 CFR §§ 200.318 through 200.327, including the minimum requirements in 2 CFR § 200.318 related to conflict of interest rules.

8. When a meeting or conference is hosted by a grantee and charged to a Federal grant, may the meeting or conference be promoted as a U.S. Department of Education event?

No. Meetings and conferences hosted by grantees are directed by the grantee, not the U.S. Department of Education. Therefore, the meeting or conference may not be promoted as a U.S. Department of Education meeting or conference, and the seal of the U.S. Department of Education must not be used on conference materials or signage, without ED's written approval. In addition, all meeting or conference materials paid for with Federal grant funds must include appropriate disclaimers, such as the disclaimer provided in 34 CFR§ 75.620. That language reads:

³ Please note that "States" were the only entities listed under 2 CFR § 200.317 prior to the revisions announced in OMB's April 22, 2024, *Federal Register* notice.

The contents of this (insert type of publication; e.g., book, report, film) were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Please note that if a grantee charges a fee for attendance at a particular meeting or conference paid for with Federal grant funds, any income generated must be treated as program income under 2 CFR § 200.307 or specific program regulations addressing program income.

9. When a grantee is hosting a meeting or conference, may the grantee use Federal grant funds to pay for food, beverages, or snacks?

As detailed in questions #1-3 above, in general there is a need to substantiate with specificity the rationale for why paying for food and beverages with Department funds is necessary to meet the goals and objectives of a grant, but there may be circumstances when providing food or beverages at a conference is reasonable and necessary to achieve the purpose of the grant. Please see those questions for information about requirements and considerations related to food costs.

10. May a grantee contract with a hotel under which Federal grant funds will be used to provide meals, snacks, and beverages as part of the cost for meeting rooms and other allowable conference-related costs?

Federal grant funds may only be used for expenses that are reasonable and necessary. In planning a conference or meeting and negotiating with vendors for meeting space and other relevant goods and services, grantees may only pay for allowable costs. The fact that food and beverages are embedded in a contract for meeting space does not mean that the food and beverages are being provided at no cost to the grantee. Therefore, if the food and beverage cost is not an allowable cost, and a hotel vendor embeds food and beverage costs into a hotel contract for meeting space, the grantee should work with the hotel to have the food and beverage costs identified and removed from the contract, and have the price for the meeting space appropriately adjusted.

11. What if a hotel or other venue provides “complimentary” beverages (e.g., coffee, tea) and there is no charge to the grantee hosting the meeting?

The grantee has an obligation, under these circumstances, to confirm that the beverages are truly complimentary and will not be reflected as a charge to the grant in another area. For example, many hotels provide complimentary beverages to all guests who attend a meeting at their facility without reflecting the costs of those beverages in other items that their guests or, in this case, the grantee purchases. As noted above, it would not be acceptable for a vendor to embed the cost of beverages in other costs, such as meeting space, without those costs being separately allowable.

12. May indirect cost funds be used to pay for food and beverages?

No. The cost of food and beverages, which are related to meetings that are easily associated with a specific cost and grant objectives, are more appropriately treated as direct costs rather than indirect costs. As noted above, Federal grant funds cannot be used to pay for food and beverages unless doing so is reasonable and necessary.

13. May a grantee use non-Federal resources (e.g., State or local resources) to pay for food or beverages at a meeting or conference that is being held to meet the goals and objectives of its grant?

Grantees should follow their own policies and procedures and State and local law for using non-Federal resources to pay for food or beverages, including its policies and procedures for accepting gifts or in-kind contributions from third parties. Grantees should be sure that any food and beverages provided with non-Federal funds are appropriate for the grantee event, and do not detract from the event's purpose. Please note that, in general, any funds that a grantee contributes to a project as part of the program's matching or cost-sharing requirement would be subject to the same rules that govern the Federal funds; therefore, the non-Federal funds used to pay for food and beverages for a meeting or conference could only be eligible for use in meeting cost-share or match obligations if Federal funds would also be allowable to pay for the food and beverages.

14. May grantees provide meeting participants with the option of paying for food and beverages (e.g., could a grantee have boxed lunches provided at cost for participants)?

Yes. Grantees may offer meeting participants the option of paying for food (such as lunch, breakfast, or snacks) and beverages, and arrange for these items to be available at the meeting.

Using Federal Grant Funds to Pay for Costs of Attending a Meeting or Conference Sponsored by ED or a Third Party

15. May grantees use Federal grant funds to pay for the cost of attending a meeting or conference?

If attending a meeting or conference is necessary to achieve the goals and objectives of the grant, and if the expenses are reasonable (based on the grantee's own policies and procedures, and State and local laws), Federal grant funds may be used to pay for travel expenses of grantee employees, consultants, or experts to attend a meeting or conference. To determine whether a meeting or conference is "necessary," grantees should consider whether the goals and objectives of the grant can be achieved without the meeting or conference and whether there is an equally effective and more efficient way (in terms of time and money) to achieve the goals and objectives of the grant (see question #6). To determine whether the expenses are "reasonable," grantees should consider how the costs (e.g., lodging, travel, registration fees) compare with other similar events and whether the public would view the expenses as a worthwhile use of Federal funds.

16. What should a grantee consider when planning to use Federal grant funds for attending a meeting or conference?

Among other considerations, grantees should consider how many people should attend a meeting or conference on its behalf. The number of attendees should be reasonable and necessary to accomplish the goals and objectives of the grant. The grantee should also determine whether it is necessary to attend the entire meeting or conference, or whether attending only a portion of the meeting or conference is reasonable and necessary.

17. What travel expenses may be paid for with Federal grant funds?

Grantees may use Federal grant funds for travel expenses only to the extent such costs are reasonable and necessary and do not exceed charges normally allowed by the grantee in its regular operations consistent with its written travel policies. See 2 CFR § 200.475. Federal grant funds may be used to pay expenses for transportation, per diem, and lodging if the costs are reasonable and necessary. Federal grant funds may not be spent on alcohol. See 2 CFR § 200.423. Grantees should follow their own travel and per diem rules and costs when charging travel expenses to their Federal grant. In the absence of an acceptable written policy regarding travel costs, grantees must satisfy the requirements of 2 CFR § 200.475(d).

18. What should grantees consider when including Federal employees at a grantee-sponsored meeting or conference?

In some situations, a grantee may invite a Federal employee to participate in or present at a grantee-organized meeting or conference. Federal employees are subject to Federal ethics laws and regulations. This includes laws and regulations governing conflicts of interest and gifts (e.g., waiver of a registration fee, travel expenses, and meals). Grantees may be subject to their own ethics laws and regulations, and grantee employees should ensure that they comply with them.

Questions Regarding the Allowable Use of Federal Grant Funds

19. What resources are available to help grantees determine whether costs associated with meetings and conferences are reasonable and necessary?

Grantees must follow all applicable statutory and regulatory requirements in determining whether costs are reasonable, necessary, and allowable, especially the regulations found at 2 CFR part 200.

20. Is it allowable for a person whose travel costs are being paid with Federal grant funds to attend a conference in Washington, D.C., and lobby members of Congress while in town?

Appropriated funds may not, except under very limited circumstances, be used for expenses related to any activity designed to influence the enactment of legislation, appropriations, regulations, administrative actions, or Executive Orders proposed or pending before the Congress or the Administration. See 2 CFR § 200.450. To the extent that a portion of time at a conference is spent on lobbying activities, costs associated with the lobbying, including transportation to and from Washington, D.C., lodging, and per diem, may not be charged to the Federal grant. For example, if a meeting or conference lasts for two days and a visit to lobby a member of Congress requires an additional day of travel, it could be determined that one-third (1/3) of all costs involved in attending the meeting or conference, including travel to and from Washington, D.C., may not be charged to the grant.

On the other hand, educating members of Congress about facts relevant to a particular grant program would not, absent other facts, constitute lobbying. For example, it would not be considered a prohibited lobbying activity for a grantee to inform a member of Congress about its program, the services it provides, and the individuals it serves. It also would not be considered a prohibited lobbying activity to attend a presentation by members of Congress related to issues relevant to a grantee's program or the population it serves in general. However, such education-oriented

discussions could easily cross—or appear to cross—the thin line to prohibited lobbying activities. For example, a discussion about the challenges a grantee faces with respect to requirements governing matching funds could easily expand to a discussion about the need for more appropriated funds or legislative changes, which would constitute prohibited lobbying activities. Given that Congress frequently considers the reauthorization of ED programs, a grantee’s interactions with members of Congress on such topics could meet the definition of lobbying, which is prohibited. In that case, the costs associated with those interactions could not be supported with Federal funds.

21. What are the consequences of using Federal grant funds on unallowable expenses?

ED may seek to recover any Federal grant funds identified, in an audit or through program monitoring, as having been used for unallowable costs, including unallowable conference expenses.

22. Whom should grantees call if they have specific questions about the allowable use of Federal grant funds?

ED grantees are encouraged to contact their ED program officer to discuss the allowable use of Federal grant funds, including the allowable use of Federal grant funds for meetings and conferences.