Computers and Laptops

General-purpose computers—especially laptops—can be used to support a variety of activities and are rarely dedicated to one specific purpose. As a result, general-purpose computers and laptops are typically F&A costs and are seldom proposed in budgets or directly charged to awards. To be considered as direct costs, computers must be:

- necessary to fulfill the project’s scope of work;
- fully described and justified in the proposed narrative and budget;
- approved by the sponsor; and
- specifically identified with and used exclusively on the project.

For example, computers that are attached to equipment necessary to analyze data pursuant to a project’s scope of work or laptops that are used to conduct tests/interviews with subjects in remote locations can be justified as direct charges on federal awards. Documentation supporting computer purchases must:

- describe how the computer directly benefits the project;
- describe how it is unlike a general-purpose item; and
- be retained for audit purposes.

To maintain its allowability, a computer must be used primarily (at least 95%) on the award. Incidental use should never cause the computer to be removed from the project location.

Software, upgrades, computer supplies, etc. purchased on federal awards must be likewise necessary for the conduct of the research and conform to these requirements. A computer may be allocated to one or more sponsored projects unless the sponsor’s terms and conditions prevent such an allocation.

As supplementary guidance, below are some policy statements about GENERAL PURPOSE EQUIPMENT and COMPUTERS excerpted from NSF, NIH, and NASA–federal agencies that fund research at Rensselaer. (Laptop and desktop computers are considered “general purpose equipment” even though they fall below Rensselaer’s equipment capitalization threshold).

**NSF Proposal and Award Policies and Procedures Guide**

GENERAL PURPOSE EQUIPMENT: Expenditures for general purpose equipment are unallowable unless the equipment is primarily or exclusively used in the actual conduct of the research.

**NIH Grants Policy Statement**

GENERAL PURPOSE EQUIPMENT: permanent equipment that is usable for other than research, medical, scientific or technical activities, whether or not special modifications are needed to make it suitable for a particular purpose. Examples of general purpose equipment include office equipment and
furnishings, air conditioning equipment, reproduction and printing equipment, motor vehicles and computer equipment.

DIRECT COSTS AND FACILITIES AND ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS

Project costs consist of the allowable direct costs directly related to the performance of the grant plus the allocable portion of the allowable F&A costs of the organization, less applicable credits (as described below and in the cost principles). A direct cost is any cost that can be specifically identified with a particular project, program, or activity or that can be directly assigned to such activities relatively easily and with a high degree of accuracy. Direct costs include, but are not limited to, salaries, travel, equipment, and supplies directly benefiting the grant supported project or activity.

NASA Guidebook for Proposers

GENERAL PURPOSE EQUIPMENT (i.e., personal computers and/or commercial software) is not allowable as a direct cost unless specifically approved by the NASA Award Officer. Any general purpose equipment purchase requested to be made as a direct charge under this award must include the equipment description, an explanation of how it will be used in the conduct of the research proposed, and a written certification that the equipment will be used exclusively for the proposed research activities. The need for general purpose items that typically can be used for research and nonresearch purposes should be explained.

PURCHASE OF PERSONAL COMPUTERS AND/OR SOFTWARE. Such items are usually considered by NASA to be general purpose equipment that must be purchased from general, organizational overhead budgets and not directly from the proposal budget unless it can be demonstrated that such items are to be used uniquely and only for the proposed research.