

RUDD FAMILY FOUNDATION

BIG IDEAS
@BERKELEY

**2025-2026
PRE-PROPOSAL
JUDGING
HANDBOOK**

BLUM CENTER FOR DEVELOPING ECONOMIES
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
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BIG IDEAS CONTEST

&

MASTERCARD FOUNDATION ALUMNI SCHOLARS' IMPACT FUND

JUDGING HANDBOOK

One of the greatest contributing factors to the success of Big Ideas is the amazing network of judges and mentors who support the Contest. Each year, hundreds of energetic and experienced industry leaders and professionals make it possible to identify and support the most promising ideas. Judges have the opportunity to get a first glance at the next generation of innovative ideas and provide feedback to help shape and improve them. They also become part of the Big Ideas network, which includes opportunities to connect with other industry leaders in the social innovation space.

On behalf of the hundreds of students who participate each year in the Big Ideas Contest and the Big Ideas staff, we thank you for your commitment to fostering student-led innovation. Your support is an invaluable resource that helps transform student ideas into real-world impact.

Questions / Support

This handbook will provide you with key information about the Big Ideas Contest, pre-proposal judging criteria, key dates, and FAQs.

The Big Ideas team is always happy to answer any questions you may have. You can contact our Contest Director, Phillip Denny (pdenny@berkeley.edu) at any point before, during or after the review process.

In addition to this handbook, judging resources are available at <http://bigideascontest.org/judges/>

Review Deadline:
December 19th, 2025

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About the Contest

BIG IDEAS CONTEST: Big Ideas is an annual, multi-campus, innovation contest aimed at providing funding, support, and recognition to interdisciplinary teams of undergraduate and graduate students who have “big ideas” aimed at addressing pressing social challenges. **Since its founding in 2006, Big Ideas has inspired hundreds of creative and high-impact student projects**, many of which continue long after winning the Contest. By seeking out novel proposals and providing resources and support to help them succeed, Big Ideas has assisted students in making a difference all over the world.

MASTERCARD FOUNDATION ALUMNI SCHOLARS’ IMPACT FUND (“Impact Fund”): In addition to the annual Big Ideas Contest, this year’s programming was extended to include The UC Berkeley Mastercard Foundation Alumni Scholars program, powered by Big Ideas. This program runs parallel to the Big Ideas Contest, with similar application requirements, but is reviewed separately. It supports projects anchored in African countries that focus on creating economic opportunities for both alumni of the UC Berkeley Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program and members of their communities. The Impact Fund is managed at UC Berkeley through the Center for African Studies.

Contest Structure

The Big Ideas Contest is split into a pre-proposal round in the fall and a full proposal round in the spring.

Round 1: Pre-Proposal

Eligible students submitted their three-page pre-proposals in early December. We estimate that 15-25 Big Ideas teams and 8-10 Impact Fund will be selected as finalists to participate in the full proposal round, based on judges’ scores and feedback. All pre-proposal teams receive detailed feedback from the judges, regardless of whether or not they are selected as finalists. All pre-proposal applicants will be notified in January regarding their status for the final round.

Round 2: Full Proposal

Finalist teams will have the opportunity to develop and refine their pre-proposals into eight-page full proposals due in April. In the full proposal round, finalists will expand on the ideas presented in their pre-proposals, edit their proposals based on judges’ feedback, and refine their project ideas through collaboration with a Big Ideas mentor (an industry professional matched with the team based on the mentor’s subject expertise and areas of strength). From the finalist pool, we estimate this year that 10 to 15 Big Ideas teams will receive awards ranging from \$5,000 to \$20,000, and 3-4 Impact Fund teams will receive awards ranging from \$10,000 to \$25,000.

Big Ideas Social Impact Tracks

Workforce Development

Identify a workforce solution that prepares individuals with the knowledge and skills required to secure employment and advance their careers.

Global Health

Develop an action-oriented, interdisciplinary project that would alleviate a global health concern among low-resource communities.

Food & Agriculture

Envision a solution to improve our agricultural and food systems by enhancing food security, agricultural sustainability, food access and nutrition.

Financial Inclusion

Create novel products, services, tools or mechanisms that either address unmet needs of the financially underserved.

Climate Change & Sustainability

Support the adoption of climate management strategies and/or resource alternatives that enhance sustainability and have the potential for broad impact.

Education & Literacy

Develop a technology, program or policy to promote inclusive and equitable education, improve literacy, or enhance lifelong learning opportunities

Cities & Communities

Design a novel solution that engages and enhances the well-being of campuses, communities, and cities.

Art & Social Change

Create an innovative arts project that meaningfully engages with issues of advocacy, justice, and empowerment.

(Note: Impact Fund teams were not required to select a Social Impact Track.)

Contest Rules

The Big Ideas team has vetted the pre-proposals to ensure they meet the following Contest rules and eligibility criteria.

1. **Student-Led:** Projects must be initiated and led by an undergraduate or graduate student (or students) from an eligible campus. The project should not be an extension of faculty-guided research or led by a non-student established organization (i.e. non-profit or for-profit entity). Note: Impact Fund teams must be led and managed by a UC Berkeley Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program alum.
2. **Early-Stage:** Big Ideas supports early-stage projects. These can range from brand new ideas with a team just assembling, to projects that have formed recently (within 2 years).
3. **Social Impact:** Projects must have a clear social impact. The project should be centered around an innovation (technologies, services, programs) that produces a clear benefit with the potential for sustained improvement in the lives of groups or individuals.

Note: If you have questions about the eligibility of an application, please contact Phillip Denny (pdenny@berkeley.edu)

Pre-Proposal Application Requirements

Pre-proposals must be submitted as a single PDF file. The document can be no longer than 3 pages, with team bios permitted on the 4th page and references are excluded from the page limit requirements. The pre-proposal must contain the following content, but the specific structure of presentations are flexible.

Big Ideas recommends that applicants include the following critical components. However, students are allowed to modify the exact order and presentation of the information as needed to tell their story. Graphics, charts, and other visual or alternative formats are allowed within the three-page limit. The basic elements students are asked to include are:

1. Problem Statement

A description of the problem or need that the project will address. The description should communicate an understanding of relevant research/statistics on the problem. (Recommended length: ½ – 1 page.)

2. Landscape Analysis

An overview of any services, programs, or products that have already been designed or implemented to address this problem (both current competitors and past attempts). The team should discuss the strengths and limitations of these approaches, as well as the gaps that still exist. (Recommended length: ½ – 1 page.)

3. Proposed Innovation

A summary of the innovation (e.g., project, service, or product), how it works, and its potential for social impact. Applicants should provide a brief description of how the project will look in its first year of implementation, and why it is different from other solutions. Applicants should briefly explain how they will address challenges to implementation. (Recommended length: 1 page.) **Note: Judges are instructed to consider, above all, the degree to which the project idea is innovative and creative.**

3a. Progress to Date: Mastercard Foundation Alumni Scholars Impact Fund ONLY

Impact Fund teams (not Big Ideas applicants) should summarize any progress made to date (Milestones achieved, partnerships, funding, publicity, awards/achievements, etc.)

4. Team Bios:

A list of key team members with brief biographies that explain the team's capability to pursue the idea. If the team has not yet found members with the skill sets required for the project, they should identify those gaps, outline those roles, and note how they intend to fill the positions. Non-student advisors may also be listed in this section. **Team bios are permitted on the 4th page (but not beyond).**

Judging Timeline

The judges' review period will be: Friday,, December 5 - Friday, December 19, 2025

All reviews need to be completed no later than the designated end date. The entire review process should take approximately 4-6 hours over the review timeframe.

It is critical that judges complete their reviews within this timeframe. Finalists must be notified by mid-January to allow them sufficient time to complete their mentor-matching worksheets before the start of the Spring quarter/semester. The final round will begin in early February, when finalist teams are paired with a mentor and begin working toward their final proposals.

Judging Criteria

The emphasis in the pre-proposal round of the Contest is on innovation. Students who are invited to the final round will have an opportunity to incorporate judges' feedback, and work with a mentor to improve the implementation details of their plan with a focus on viability and sustainability. Thus, the Big Ideas pre-proposal judging scorecard strongly weights innovation / creativity (as seen below):

Big Ideas Contest Judging Criteria

1. **Innovation (40%):** The project presents a truly novel, innovative, or creative solution to the problem. Big Ideas defines “novel, innovative, or creative” as those solutions that a) propose a new idea, method, invention, or product, b) create a better or more effective product, process, service, technology, or idea, or c) improve upon or tailor an existing innovation to a new context.
2. **Social Impact (30%):** The proposed project addresses an important social challenge. The team provides the reviewer with sufficient statistics and research to understand the problem and makes a clear and compelling case that their project addresses this need.
3. **Long-Term Viability (20%):** The proposal includes team members’ expertise and skillsets and compelling evidence of the ability to implement the proposal. The team has identified implementation challenges and provided an initial strategy for addressing barriers. The team has thought through the partnerships and resources necessary to achieve its goals and objectives. **(Note: Teams are required to consider implementation for only the first year of their projects.)**
4. **Proposal Quality (10%):** The team has put thought and effort into creating a professional, persuasive, and well-organized proposal that effectively communicates an innovative and potentially transformative “big idea.” The overall quality of the proposal is high and convinces readers that the project is worth funding.

Impact Fund Judging Criteria

1. **Innovation (30%):** The project presents a truly novel, innovative, or creative solution to the problem. Big Ideas defines “novel, innovative, or creative” as those solutions that a) propose a new idea, method, invention, or product, b) create a better or more effective product, process, service, technology, or idea, or c) improve upon or tailor an existing innovation to a new context.
2. **Social Impact (30%):** The proposed project addresses an important social challenge. The team provides the reviewer with sufficient statistics and research to understand the problem and makes a clear and compelling case that their project addresses this need.
3. **Long-Term Viability (15%):** The proposal includes team members’ expertise and skillsets and compelling evidence of the ability to implement the proposal. The team has identified implementation challenges and provided an initial strategy for addressing barriers. The team has thought through the partnerships and resources necessary to achieve its goals and objectives. **(Note: Teams are required to consider implementation for only the first year of their projects.)**
4. **Presence in Africa (15%):** The extent to which the Scholar and/or project have a strong “in-country” presence. A goal of the Impact Fund is to encourage Alumni Scholars to create, manage and scale social ventures within their home regions in Africa, therefore applications should emphasize the Scholar’s commitment to this objective.
5. **Proposal Quality (10%):** The team has put thought and effort into creating a professional, persuasive, and well-organized proposal that effectively communicates an innovative and potentially transformative “big idea.” The overall quality of the proposal is high and convinces readers that the project is worth funding.

Emphasis on Qualitative Feedback

A critical goal of the Big Ideas Contest and Impact Fund is to provide encouragement and support to all applicants. Thus, **we ask that judges provide detailed and constructive feedback to every proposal that is reviewed.** Please provide applicants with critical insights into the strengths and weaknesses of their big idea. We know from conversations with past teams that **this feedback is one of the most valuable aspects of the competition** because it helps students refine and develop their innovations. Some teams that don't make it through to the final round this year will use the judges' feedback to reapply to Big Ideas next year or enter other student innovation competitions.

When completing your reviews, please be mindful of the following:

- Reviews should be written as though you are communicating directly with the applicants.
- Applicants will receive only qualitative feedback. Scores/ratings will not be shared with applicants and qualitative feedback will remain anonymous.
- This is a learning experience for students. Please maintain a respectful and constructive tone.

Privacy Policy

By serving as a Big Ideas and/or Impact Fund judge you agree to maintain the confidentiality of the proposals before, during and after the judging process. For the duration of the contest, any communications with applicants should be initiated through staff representatives of the Big Ideas Contest only. (Before you review each application, you will be prompted to acknowledge this confidentiality agreement by clicking a check box in the review form.).

Accessing Proposals and Submitting Feedback

1. Portal URL:

The Submittable judging portal can be accessed at: <https://bigideascontest.submittable.com/login>

2. Username and Password:

You have been sent an invitation to create a Submittable user profile. If you have not received this invitation from Submittable, please notify us and we resend this to you. **We cannot assign you any applications to review until this step is completed.**

By December 6th, everyone who has created a Submittable profile will receive an email letting you know you have been assigned projects to review. Click on the “View Submissions” and log into Submittable using the profile that you previously created.

Submittable 

Hi Phillip,

You have one or more assignments in Big Ideas Contest.

[VIEW SUBMISSIONS](#)

New assignments:



- [Mental Health Self-Help Groups in Rural India](#)
- [Students for Regulatory Reform: A Student-Led Nonpartisan Think Tank for Reforming Health Systems Policy in the Face of Crisis](#)

3. Landing Page:


Once you log in, you will be taken to a landing page that shows the title of the submission.

To begin reviewing pre-proposals, click on the name of proposal to open that submission.

Note: Each judge will be assigned to review a subset of pre-proposals (up to 8) in their assigned social impact track.




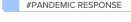
Submittable  Submissions More  [Explore Submissions](#)

Big Ideas Contest

Show Filters 

first prev page 1 of 1 (5 results) next last

☐ Label

	SCORE	STAGE	SUBMISSION	SUBMITTER	PROJECT	DATE	STATUS
<input type="checkbox"/>		Pre-proposal review	Jivo Health 	(blind)	Big Ideas Contest	11/20/2020	In-Progress
<input type="checkbox"/>		Pre-proposal review	Mental Health Self-Help Groups in Rural India 	(blind)	Big Ideas Contest	11/20/2020	In-Progress
<input type="checkbox"/>		Pre-proposal review	Students for Regulatory Reform: A Student-Led Nonpartisan Think Tank for Reforming Health Systems Policy in the Face of Crisis 	(blind)	Big Ideas Contest	11/20/2020	In-Progress
<input type="checkbox"/>		Pre-proposal review	The ICHI Telehealth Clinic 	(blind)	Big Ideas Contest	11/20/2020	In-Progress
<input type="checkbox"/>		Pre-proposal review	Signum (Test Submission)	(blind)	Big Ideas Contest	9/7/2020	In-Progress

3. Viewing Your Assigned Submissions:

Once you have clicked on a submission, on the left side of the page you will see the “Application” information which contains: 1. The submission title, 2. The 150-word project summary, and 3. The link to the three-page application.

From there, you can download/save the pre-proposal to your computer, print the file, or view it in that window. Once you are ready to begin reviewing the application, click the “Review” tab in the top left corner of the page.

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Signum (Test Submission)

In-Progress
Pre-proposal review
Info
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More

Project: Big Ideas Contest
Submitted on 09/07/2020
Pre-proposal Project Name
1
Signum (Test Submission)

Please provide a 150 word (or less) executive summary of your project idea that expands on the elevator pitch you provided above. This should be a synopsis of your pre-proposal, and MUST be written from a third-person point of view.

Unemployment and underemployment are problems which affect roughly 70% of all ASL speakers. Signum is a video chat platform created to solve this problem. Designed as a workforce development tool, Signum utilizes a machine learning model to translate video of ASL gestures to text, easing communication for people who can only communicate in ASL. Although several other startups are currently developing similar technologies, Signum distinguishes a gap in the market due to its emphasis on providing an inexpensive and non-intrusive means of communication targeted towards removing barriers in the workplace. Signum's current target market is "functionally deaf" ASL users in the workforce between 18-35 years old. In the long-term, Signum will be used in conjunction with popular workforce video chat platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, and Cisco WebEx to expand to a broader audience and impact millions of lives.
2

Written Pre-Proposal Upload

(Bind submission) File_id #87b02799-1779-45e7-909d-7c091346768c.pdf
3

Activity
Review
Messages

Back to Review List

Review of Big Ideas Contest

Thank you for providing your feedback! Your answers to the questions below will be used to determine which teams move forward in the Big Ideas Contest. If you have any questions, please contact the Big Ideas team at 510.666.9120, or bigideas@berkeley.edu.

Privacy Policy

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☒ I Agree to the Privacy Policy stated above *

Judging Criteria

Please rate and provide detailed and constructive comments in the section below. **Reviews should be written as though you are communicating directly with the applicants.** Applicants will receive only the qualitative feedback (not scores). Reviews will be kept anonymous.

Important Note: Big Ideas applicants, both finalists and non-finalists, regularly cite the judges' written feedback as the most valuable resource provided by the contest. Your **detailed** and **constructive** comments in the section below are truly critical to the success of these projects as they move forward.

Innovation (40%) *

Excellent

The project presents a truly novel, innovative, or creative solution to the problem. Big Ideas defines "novel, innovative, or creative" as those solutions that a) propose a new idea, method, invention, or product, b) create a better or more effective product, process, service, technology, or idea, or c) improve upon or tailor an existing innovation to a new context.

4. Adding your Review:

After clicking the "Review" button you will see the judging scorecard for that pre-proposal. It will contain a mix of dropdown menus and comment boxes, where you will provide your feedback on each section. Before you begin reviewing the submission, you must agree to the "Privacy Policy" at the top of the page.

Note that the proposal will be viewable on the left side of your screen for reference while you complete your review. (You can scale the size of the split review/application windows to make the review box larger or smaller depending on your preference.)

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Signum (Test Submission)

In-Progress
Pre-proposal review
Info
Labels
More

(Bind submission) File_id #87b02799-1779-45e7-909d-7c091346768c.pdf

File Options
Metadata

Activity
Review
Messages

Back to Review List

Review of Big Ideas Contest

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☒ I Agree to the Privacy Policy stated above *
1

Judging Criteria

Please rate and provide detailed and constructive comments in the section below. **Reviews should be written as though you are communicating directly with the applicants.** Applicants will receive only the qualitative feedback (not scores). Reviews will be kept anonymous.

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Innovation (40%) *

Excellent

Problem Statement and Product Overview

On average, people speak about 16,000 words per day - our education, employment, and socialization necessitate constant verbal communication [5]. For the approximately 1 million Americans who use American Sign Language (ASL) as their primary medium of communication in the U.S., this is tragically not an option [7]. When considering labor force statistics, unemployment and underemployment rates amongst deaf people are as high as 70% in the U.S. [5]. Furthermore, 1 in 4 deaf people decide to quit their jobs due to discrimination [1]. Due to a lack of accommodations and opportunities outside of low-income jobs, many people with hearing and speech impairments are discouraged to pursue employment and opt out of the labor force. Thus, approximately 43% of deaf people are not in the labor force, compared to 22% of the general population [3]. These people are restricted from equal opportunities to learn and rise in the workplace. Despite improvements in technology and accommodations that make it easier for deaf people to work, deaf job seekers say employers still do not believe they should be hired due to the difficulty in communication between employers and the deaf employees.

To bolster their opportunities and bridge the gap of communication, we are developing Signum, a video chat platform for people with hearing and speech impairments, using a machine learning model to translate video of American Sign Language (ASL) hand gestures to text. In the short-term, our video call platform would give 18-35-year old employees with speaking impairments the opportunity to communicate more effectively with their colleagues, and give them the chance to build their skills and succeed in the workplace. Rather than having to type or handwrite, employees with speaking impairments can use our platform to seamlessly communicate with ASL, which is twice as fast as typing on average, enabling a natural, comfortable conversation where ASL speakers can effectively collaborate in the workplace. In the long-term, we will implement Signum in conjunction with popular video chat platforms such as Skype, Zoom, and Cisco WebEx.

Landscape Analysis

ASL translation software currently exists but is limited by expensive hardware that has very specialized applications. MotionSavvy Inc. has developed UNI, a portable mobile device that tracks hand movement to translate ASL to text [6]. Researchers at Michigan State University are building Deep ASL, a wearable camera that translates ASL gestures to text [4]. These products have the potential to improve the lives of

To return to your list of assigned proposals, you can click on the “Back to List” button at the top of the scorecard, or you can move to the next submission by clicking on the arrows next to “Back to list.”

5. Saving Drafts and Submitting Reviews:

If you’re in the middle of a review and would like to finish entering your feedback later, click “Save Draft” at the bottom of the review scorecard. This will allow you to begin where you left off or make any changes the next time you log in. If you do not wish to save your progress, you can simply click “Cancel” to exit. Once you have finished your review, click “Submit Review” and you can navigate to other pre-proposals or logout.

The screenshot shows a web application for reviewing proposals. The top navigation bar includes "Back to list", "3 of 5", "Signum (Test Submission)", "In-Progress", "Pre-proposal review", "Info", "Labels", and "More". The main content area is divided into two panes. The left pane displays the proposal text, which includes sections like "Problem Statement and Product Overview", "Landscape Analysis", and "To bolster their opportunities and bridge the gap of communication...". The right pane is the review form, titled "Review". It contains two text input areas for comments. The first section is labeled "1. Do you have any additional general comments about this proposal that you would like to share with the applicants?" and the second is labeled "Do you think there are other similar ideas/projects that the team should investigate or organizations you think the team should pursue partnerships with?". At the bottom of the review form, there are two buttons: "Save Draft" and "Submit Review". Red arrows labeled "1" and "2" point to these buttons respectively.

1. Tracking Progress

Once you’ve submitted a review, in the list of your assignments you will see 1. a score for the proposal on the left side of the submission, and 2. a green check button to the right side of the submission.

Once all of your assigned submissions are marked with a score and a green check, you have officially completed your reviews! Note: You may go back and edit any of your reviews (even completed ones) up until the December 19th deadline. To do so, just click on the submission and click the editing button under the “Review” tab.

Submittable Submissions More

Explore Submittable's plans for organizations ? PD

Big Ideas Contest

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first prev page 1 of 1 (5 results) next last

☐ Label

SCORE	STAGE	SUBMISSION ↑	SUBMITTER	PROJECT	DATE	STATUS	ASSIGNED	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pre-proposal review #GLOBAL HEALTH	Jivo Health	(blind)	Big Ideas Contest	11/20/2020	In Progress	Phillip Denny	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pre-proposal review #GLOBAL HEALTH	Mental Health Self-Help Groups in Rural India	(blind)	Big Ideas Contest	11/20/2020	In Progress	Multiple Team Members	
<input type="checkbox"/> 85.0	Pre-proposal review	Signum (Test Submission)	(blind)	Big Ideas Contest	9/7/2020	In Progress	Phillip Denny	

FAQs

- When are my scores and feedback due?
December 19, 2025
- Is there an in-person judging requirement?
No. All judging is conducted using our online platform.
- How many judges read each proposal?
Each proposal will be read by at least 5 judges. Each judge will read up to 8 proposals. Upon request judges may receive via email short (50 word) summaries of all projects in the social impact track that they are assigned to review proposals in.
- About how long should it take to read, score, and comment on one proposal?
We estimate that it will take judges approximately 30-45 minutes to read, score and comment on each proposal.
- Once I begin entering scores on the judging scorecard page on Submittable, can I save my work and return to the page later to finish scoring?
Yes. Click **"Save Draft"** at the bottom of the judging scorecard page to save your work. You can return at any time prior to the judging deadline to complete or edit your scores and feedback by clicking on the submission.
- How many finalists will be selected?
We expect that this year, between 20-30 finalists will be selected.
- How much financial support do winning teams receive and when will it be distributed?
Awards will range from a minimum of \$5000 to a maximum of \$20,000 for Big Ideas teams, and up to \$20,000 for Impact Fund Teams. Awards will be dispersed in Summer 2025.

8. What if I suspect issues related to plagiarism?

Please contact the Big Ideas team immediately. We will look into the matter.

9. What if I want to get in touch with, or serve as a mentor for a team?

The Big Ideas team is happy to connect judges and students. Send us an email and we will facilitate an introduction if both parties indicate an interest in connecting.

10. How can I connect with other judges and mentors in the Big Ideas network?

You can connect with the Big Ideas network online by joining the [LinkedIn Group](#). If you are based in the Bay Area, we would encourage you to attend our Grand Prize Pitch Day and Awards Celebration to meet other judges and mentors, as well as students, in person.

11. Who can I contact if I have questions during the judging phase?

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Big Ideas Contest Director, Phillip Denny (pdenny@berkeley.edu) at any point before, during or after the review process.