

**Mississippi State University  
Request for Proposals (RFP) 21-51  
University Virtual Assistant (Chatbot Platform)**

ISSUE DATE: May 25, 2021

ISSUING AGENCY: Office of Procurement and Contracts

Mississippi State University  
610 McArthur Hall  
245 Barr Avenue  
Mississippi State, MS 39762

Sealed Proposals, subject to the conditions made a part hereof, will be **received June 18, 2021 at 2:00 PM in the MSU Office of Procurement and Contracts, same address above**, for furnishing services and potentially, optional services as described herein.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Indicate firm name, and RFP number on the front of each sealed proposal envelope or package.

All inquiries concerning this RFP should be directed to:

Jennifer Mayfield  
Office of Procurement and Contracts, (Same address above)  
[jmayfield@procurement.msstate.edu](mailto:jmayfield@procurement.msstate.edu)  
662-325-2550

Any addendum associated with this RFP will be posted at <http://www.procurement.msstate.edu/procurement/bids/index.php> located under RFP 21-51. It is the respondent's responsibility to assure that all addenda have been reviewed and if applicable, signed and returned.

## **1. UNIVERSITY OVERVIEW**

Mississippi State University (MSU) is a comprehensive land grant university of 21,500+ students and approximately 5,000 faculty and staff. The main campus is located adjacent to the community of Starkville in northeast Mississippi, with a remote campus located in Meridian with an enrollment of around 700 students. Additionally, the university operates several remote agricultural experiment stations and has an Extension office located in each of the eighty-two Mississippi counties.

Additional information about MSU can be found at our website [www.msstate.edu](http://www.msstate.edu).

## **2. INVITATION TO SUBMIT PROPOSAL ON RFP**

Mississippi State University is seeking a vendor to provide a Virtual Assistant (Chatbot Platform) that simulates, and processes written human conversation allowing students to interact with the University as if they were communicating with a real staff member. The Chatbot needs to be designed as a virtual assistant to answer queries students generally ask related to services provided by the University including but not limited to Admissions, Financial Aid, Academics, Registration, Records, Counseling and Student Development. The Chatbot also needs to include a Live Chat escalation component for a live agent at the University to assist a student when the AI answer is not sufficient or when a student requires live service.

General minimum requirements are as follows:

- Have a proven platform designed for Higher Education.
- Have a web-base that allows remote access
- 24/7 AI Chatbot capabilities
- Live Chat Handoff capabilities to switch conversations to a live agent
- Ability to customize Live Chat hours by department
- Integration with Slate CRM
- Calendar integration with Office 365
- Provide Live Chat licensing capability to be utilized by various campus support offices with various permissions
- Be compatible with Mississippi State University current technology and adhere to strict data security standards.

The Chatbot solution needs to provide a virtual assistant to communicate with students on all aspects of services provided by Mississippi State University, creating a virtual "one-stop-shop" for student queries. The Chatbot solution will provide students with instant help 24/7 on general topics related to Admissions, Registration, Financial Aid and more. Students who require assistance from a live agent will have the option to connect with an agent during regular office

hours or leave a message for an agent to reply if it is during non-office hours. It is preferred that this solution would be accessible from our public website ([www.msstate.edu](http://www.msstate.edu)) as well as specific department subdomains (online.msstate.edu, career.msstate.edu/, grad.msstate.edu/)

### **3. SCOPE OF SERVICES REQUIRED**

#### **a) Technical Requirements**

Platform/System – minimum technical requirements:

- Integration with Slate CRM for Lead Capture
- Calendar integration with Office 365. Advanced routing rules, Visitor may select meeting time based off availability. Calendar appointments automatically created and emailed to both parties.
- Technical User application capability to be operated on mobile, PC's, and Mac devices.
- Live Chat capabilities with seamless handoff from chatbot. Customizable notifications, away messages, and fallback options during off hours. Chat transcripts, advanced routing rules, and internal note options. Mobile App capabilities.
- Targeted chatbot communication based off visitor's location (URL, demographics, geography, website behavior).
- Customized for institution branding (name, avatar, colors).
- Customized content flows, questions, answers and links.
- Ability to use with multiple departments, integrations and inboxes seamlessly
- Provide applicable certifications such as SOC2 documentation.
- System must be secure and meet all local, state and federal data security standards.
- Provide a statement stating whether your company is compliant with FERPA, GLBA, NACH and Red Flag Regulation requirements.
- Provide a completed Higher Education Cloud Vendor Assessment Tool (HECVAT) (lite version available at: <https://www.ren-isac.net/public-resources/hecvat.html>).
- Does the system support two-factor authentication? If so, describe solution options.
- System interfaces are compliant with WCAG 2.0 AA and provide VPAT if available.
- GDPR and Privacy Compliance
- Support single sign-on (CAS, Shibboleth, or SAML). Please specify which one.

#### **b) Users**

User permissions and accesses to various system functions must be role based with users allowed in multiple roles. Role-based permissions govern each user's rights to add, edit, and view information within the system. There must be capability to accommodate tiered access based on roles.

### c) Reporting/Forms, Custom Fields, Files

- Reporting and analytics must be available for review.
- Customizable dashboards for users
- Ability for visitors to provide feedback on conversations
- The system must have the ability to create custom fields by select users and system administrators
- The bidder should explain in detail the reporting function of the system.
- Capability to isolate monitoring/reporting by multiple factors for individualized monitoring as well as aggregating and summarizing monitoring activities.

### d) Functions

The system must use a tiered structure that allows authorized users to access data and reports for analysis or approval, while allowing any user to be able to submit documents. The system will need to be able to allow authorized users to monitor and approve/deny requests and offer commentary or feedback that is viewable by the requestee.

Documents and files submitted through the application must be easily downloadable by any user with required authorization. The system will allow for users to track reports and requests, monitor progress, and stay up-to-date on compliance and reporting requirements.

### e) System Maintenance and Support

Mississippi State University requests the bidder to provide installation, setup, and user training. Regular reporting and analytics analysis. Conversation mapping and building of the chatbot intelligence. Bidder provides unlimited strategic and technical support with a dedicated client specialist.

## 4. INQUIRIES ABOUT RFP

Prospective respondents may make written inquiries concerning this request for proposal to obtain clarification of requirements. **Questions should be submitted either via a Word document or plainly typed in the email itself.** Responses to these inquiries may be made by addendum to the Request for Proposal (RFP). Please send your inquiries to Jennifer Mayfield via electronic mail at [jmayfield@procurement.msstate.edu](mailto:jmayfield@procurement.msstate.edu).

All inquiries should be marked “URGENT INQUIRY. MSU RFP 21-51”

## 5. ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

### a) Issuing Office

This RFP is issued by the following office:

Office of Procurement and Contracts  
Mississippi State University  
245 Barr Avenue, 610 McArthur Hall  
Mississippi State, MS 39762

**b) Schedule of Critical Dates**

The following dates are for planning purposes only unless otherwise stated in this RFP progress towards their completion is at the sole discretion of the university.

<b>RFP Posted</b>	<b>May 25, 2021</b>
<b>Questions from Vendors Due</b>	<b>June 4, 2021</b>
<b>MSU Q&amp;A Response Due</b>	<b>June 11, 2021</b>
<b>Proposal Submission Deadline – 2:00 p.m.</b>	<b>June 18, 2021</b>
<b>Award Date (Estimated)</b>	<b>July 31, 2021</b>
<b>Contract Effective Date (Estimated)</b>	<b>September 1, 2021</b>

## **6. PROPOSAL CONTENTS**

This is a two-step RFP process. The technical proposals and the cost proposals are to be submitted in separate sealed envelopes. Indicate firm name, RFP# and word “Technical Proposal” on the front of the sealed technical proposal envelope or package. Indicate the firm name, RFP# and the word “Cost Proposal” on the front of the sealed proposal envelope or package.

At a minimum, the following items should be included in the contents of the Technical Proposal:

- Cover letter, indicating the scope of the proposal. The letter should include an overview of the services being offered. The letter should include a statement of exceptions to any of the terms and conditions outlined in this RFP. (Cover letter should be no more than 3 pages in length.)
- Corporate Structure and Credentials
  - Number of years of experience
  - Staffing levels and support proposed
  - Examples of similar previous work.

- Operations and Ability To Perform
  - Provide operation plan. This should include, but not be limited to, acknowledgement and agreement with all requirements as well as explanations, where applicable, of the intended plan to achieve the requirements.
  - Describe how services will be provided to MSU.

At a minimum, the following items should be included in the contents of the Cost Proposal:

- Fees for initial purchase of software/items/service (including all preparation, installation, rollout, training and first year maintenance and support)
- Annual Maintenance Costs after initial purchase.

## **7. DISCUSSIONS/EVALUATION CRITERIA/AWARD PROCESS**

MSU reserves the right to conduct discussions with any or all respondents, or to make an award of a contract without such discussions based only on evaluation of the written proposals. MSU reserves the right to contact and interview anyone connected with any past or present projects with which the respondent has been associated. MSU likewise reserves the right to designate a review committee to evaluate the proposals according to the criteria set forth under this section. MSU may make a written determination showing the basis upon which the award was made and such determination shall be included in the procurement file.

MSU reserves the right to award this contract in whole or in part depending on what is in the best interest of MSU with MSU being the sole judge thereof.

The evaluation factors set forth in this section are described as follows:

- The Vendor's ability to deliver an application meeting the overall objective and functions described in the RFP
- Competitive fees
- Availability and access technical support
- Vendor's experience with similar systems
- Compliance with applicable State and Federal laws and regulations
- The committee may invite finalists for interviews and/or presentations

Failure to attend a requested interview presentation before the committee may result in a proposal not being considered.

Upon award of contract(s), successful respondent(s) will be asked to provide a transition plan and timeline and obtain MSU's input and concurrence before moving forward.

Proposals will be scored based on the following weights (100 points total):

- Corporate Structure/Years of Experience/References – 25 pts
- Operation Plan/Ease of Use/Services Offered – 45 pts
- Fees – 30 pts.

## **8. PROPOSAL SUBMISSION**

Proposals shall be submitted in two packages (envelopes or boxes) as set forth in Section 7. Please make sure that the RFP number is clearly visible on the outside of the package.

**Technical Proposal** – One (1) original and one (1) electronic copy (of the complete technical proposal in one pdf file on a flash drive) of parts 7(b)(i) (Cover Letter), 7(b)(ii) (Corporate Structure and Credentials), and 7(b)(iii) (Operations and Ability to Perform) should be sealed in a package with “Technical Proposal” in the lower left hand corner. Each submitted package should be a complete copy. The original shall be marked on the first page “Original”.

**Cost Proposal** – One (1) original and one (1) electronic copy (of the complete cost proposal in one pdf file on a flash drive). Should be sealed in a package with “Cost Proposal” in the lower left-hand corner. Each submitted package should be a complete copy. The original shall be marked on the first page “Original”.

The proposal package must be received on or before **2:00 p.m. on June 18, 2021**. It is the responsibility of the respondent to ensure that the proposal package arrives in the Procurement and Contracts office on-time. The proposal package should be delivered or sent by mail to:

**Office of Procurement and Contracts  
Mississippi State University  
610 McArthur Hall  
245 Barr Avenue  
Mississippi State, MS 39762**

Your response must include the signature page included in this RFP (See Appendix A) and contain the signature of an authorized representative of the respondent’s organization. The signature on the “Original” signature page should be in blue ink

MSU reserves the right to reject any and all proposals and to waive informalities and minor irregularities in proposals received and to accept any portion of a proposal or all items bid if deemed in the best interest of the University to do so.

Proposals received after the stated due date and time will be returned unopened. Submission via facsimile or other electronic means will not be accepted.

## 9. PCI COMPLIANCE ISSUES (IF APPLICABLE)

The vendor must provide a PCI compliant processing environment using one of the approved options below. If the vendor is unable to fully adhere to one of these options, the proposal will be removed from consideration.

- **Option 1** – Integrate with MSU’s existing third-party solution (NelNet Business Solutions – Commerce Manager), because all hardware, software and back end processing have been vetted and credit/debit card payments are automatically posted to Banner.
- **Option 2** – Use alternative third-party solution. Use a different MSU Merchant ID but same bank account.
  - Work with members of MSU’s PCI Council and third-party PCI Compliance consultant to review business needs and proposed solution.
  - Ensure card transactions processed by university personnel are performed using a PCI-validated point to point encrypted (P2PE) solution. The solution must be listed on the PCI council’s website (<https://www.pcisecuritystandards.org>), must not be expired, and devices to be used with the solution must have a PIN transaction security (PTS) expiration date at least 3 years past the date of installation.
  - Obtain the following solution information
  - Attestation of compliance (AoC) from all parties involved in handling or that affect the security of cardholder data.
  - Verify that all devices have a current PTS certification and have an expiration date at least 3 years past the installation date of the solution.
  - Obtain a data flow diagram showing where payment card data will be introduced to the proposed solution and all steps/hops it will take until payment information is delivered to the merchant processing bank. This will determine all of the service providers that must provide an AoC.
  - Require specific reporting requirements and interfaces to support Banner integration and automatic posting of credit/debit card payments to the ERP. The exact file layout will be provided upon request.
- **Option 3** – Use alternative third-party solution. Use vendor’s Merchant ID.
  - Work with members of MSU’s PCI Council and third-party PCI Compliance consultant to review the solution.
  - Ensure card transactions processed by university personnel are performed using a PCI-validated point to point encrypted (P2PE) solution. The solution must be listed on the PCI council’s website (<https://www.pcisecuritystandards.org>), must not be expired, and devices to be used with the solution must have a PIN



transaction security (PTS) expiration date at least 3 years past the date of installation.

- Obtain the following solution information
- Attestation of compliance (AoC) from all parties involved in handling or that affect the security of cardholder data.
- Verify that all devices have a current PTS certification and have an expiration date at least 3 years past the installation date of the solution.
- Obtain a data flow diagram showing where payment card data will be introduced to the proposed solution and all steps/hops it will take until payment information is delivered to the merchant processing bank. This will determine all of the service providers that must provide an AoC.
- Payments due MSU will be remitted on a predetermined basis, net of all applicable fees and merchant discounts. Banner integration not required.

## **10. TWO-PHASE, BEST AND FINAL OFFER**

If the initial proposals do not provide MSU with a clear and convincing solution, or if MSU feels it is appropriate to offer the potential providers an opportunity to submit revised proposals, MSU reserves the right to use a two-phase approach and/or invite Best and Final Offers (BAFO). Based on the information obtained through the proposal submittals (Phase-One), MSU may choose a specific business model, and potential providers may be asked to submit revised proposals based upon that specific model.

The evaluation committee may develop, for distribution to the top-ranked firms, refined written terms with specific information on what is being requested as a result of information obtained through initial RFP submittal process. Proposers may be asked to reduce cost or provide additional clarification to specific sections of the RFP. Selected proposers are not required to submit a BAFO and may submit a written response notifying the solicitation evaluation committee that their response remains as originally submitted.

## **11. TERM OF CONTRACT**

It is MSU's intention to enter into a two (2) year contract, estimated to begin September 1, 2021.

MSU reserves the right to terminate this agreement with thirty (30) days-notice, by the Director of Procurement and Contracts via certified mail to the address listed on the signature page of this RFP (See Appendix A) if any of the terms of the proposal and/or contract are violated.

In the event the contractor fails to carry out and comply with any of the conditions and agreements to be performed under the specifications, MSU will notify the contractor, in writing, of such failure or default. In the event the necessary corrective action has not been

completed within a ten (10) day period, the contractor must submit, in writing, why such corrective action has not been performed. The University reserves the right to determine whether or not such noncompliance may be construed as a failure of performance of the contractor.

Termination of contract by contractor without cause can only occur with at least one-hundred and twenty (120) days-notice prior to the proposed termination of the contract.

In the event MSU employs attorneys or incurs other expenses it considers necessary to protect or enforce its rights under this contract, the contractor agrees to pay the attorney's fees and expenses so incurred by MSU.

## **12. ACCEPTANCE TIME**

Proposal shall be valid for one-hundred and eighty (180) days following the proposal due date.

## **13. RFP CANCELLATION**

This RFP in no manner obligates MSU to the eventual purchase of any services described, implied or which may be proposed until confirmed by a written contract. Progress towards this end is solely at the discretion of MSU and may be terminated without penalty or obligations at any time prior to the signing of a contract. MSU reserves the right to cancel this RFP at any time, for any reason, and to reject any or all proposals or any parts thereof.

## **14. INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR CLAUSE**

The contractor shall acknowledge that an independent contractor relationship is established and that the employees of the contractor are not, nor shall they be deemed employees of MSU and that employees of MSU are not, nor shall they be deemed employees of the contractor.

## **15. OTHER CONTRACT REQUIREMENTS**

**Award Terms:** This contract shall be awarded at the discretion of the University based on the capabilities and overall reputation of the Supplier, as well as the cost. Acceptance shall be confirmed by the issuance of a contract from the University.

**Standard Contract:** The awarded contractor(s) will be expected to enter into a contract that is in substantial compliance with MSU's standard contract

[http://www.procurement.msstate.edu/pdf/standard\\_rfp\\_contract.pdf](http://www.procurement.msstate.edu/pdf/standard_rfp_contract.pdf). Proposal should include any desired changes to the standard contract. It should be noted that there are many clauses which the MSU cannot change (see Standard Addendum

<http://www.procurement.msstate.edu/contracts/standardaddendum.pdf>) Significant changes to the standard contract may be cause for rejection of a proposal.

**The Procurement Process:** The following is a general description of the process by which a firm will be selected to fulfill this Request for Proposal.

- Request for Proposals (RFP) is issued to prospective suppliers.
- A deadline for written questions is set.
- Proposals will be received as set forth in Section 8.
- Unsigned proposals will not be considered.
- All proposals must be received by MSU no later than the date and time specified on the cover sheet of this RFP.
- At that date and time, the package containing the proposals from each responding firm will be opened publicly and the name of each respondent will be announced.
- Proposal evaluation: The University will review each proposal.
- At their option, the evaluators may request oral presentations or discussions for the purpose of clarification or to amplify the materials presented in the proposal
- Respondents are cautioned that this is a request for proposals, not a request to contract, and the MSU reserves the unqualified right to reject any and all proposals when such rejection is deemed to be in the best interest of the University.
- The proposals will be evaluated according to the criteria set forth in Section 7.

## APPENDIX A: SIGNATURE PAGE

Provide information requested, affix signature and return this page with your proposal:

NAME OF FIRM: \_\_\_\_\_

COMPLETE ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

AREA CODE/NUMBER

FACSIMILE NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

AREA CODE/NUMBER

E-MAIL ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

AUTHORIZED  
SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

PRINTED NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_