Principal Investigators Association™

Executive Report:

Contact Grant Program Officers for Proposal Success

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A Note from the Publisher

Thank you for ordering *"Executive Report: Contact Grant Program Officers for Proposal Success"* from the Principal Investigators Association Library. This resource is designed to help you better understand — and make the most of — your communication strategies when contact grant program officers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

Robert Porter, PhD, served as co-author of this report. He has presented grant-writing and research development workshops at leading universities and medical schools nationwide. Currently Director of Research Development at the University of Tennessee, Dr. Porter has 30 years' experience as a tenured professor, private consultant and research administrator. His proposals have won more than $8 million in awards from government agencies and private foundations. A national leader in the growing field of research development, he has presented papers and workshops on grant writing at major conferences and has published prize-winning articles in the Journal of Research Administration and Research Management Review. Dr. Porter has previously taught at Virginia Tech, Swarthmore College, Susquehanna University and Eastern Washington University. He holds graduate degrees in Speech Communications from the University of Michigan.

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We are always on the lookout for interesting topics, researcher needs, and ways we can be of service to you. If you have a success story you would like to share with your colleagues, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be delighted to hear from you, and I look forward to serving you and your organization with the best advice and information available in the future.

Best Regards,

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Overview

Contacting program officers (POs) prior to submitting grant proposals can mean the difference between winning the grant funding and receiving an unscored proposal. POs have so much information to offer, but some PIs resist contacting them. Investigators usually worry about whether their inquiries are welcome, that they'll sound naïve or that discussing the project before writing the proposal isn't legitimate.

Experts agree that communicating with a PO is the best possible use of a PI's time. In fact, some argue that communicating with them is equally as important as the researchers' grant-writing skills.

Although scholarly expertise is a key indicator for success in sponsored research, being able to communicate and work well with others is less appreciated but more critical than grant-writing skills to getting funding. PIs should never write a grant proposal before first communicating with the PO.

Keep in mind that many good proposals receive rejections simply because they don't land on the right desk. Contacting a PO before submitting a proposal ensures that you're sending it to the right grant program.

Also, what you see in request for proposal (RFP) program solicitations is just the "tip of the iceberg":

- Program priorities change from year to year, but the printed materials, solicitations and RFPs don't — the published material is the "official line"
- Review panels and POs develop unspoken preferences over time
- RFPs and solicitations don't always reflect the methodologies, emerging new technologies, and research already performed and reported in literature.

So you can see why talking with POs beforehand can yield crucial information and lead to a better chance of success when you submit grant proposals. ■

Chapter I:
Inside Scoop: What POs Can Offer

Although the PO doesn't vote or speak while the review panel discusses and scores each grant proposal, keep in mind that he is always taking notes. Therefore, he has an incredible amount of information about what review panels are looking for.

POs also develop a deep understanding of what review panels don't like, the characteristics of successful proposals and the reasons for proposal rejections. This means that they have a lot of information that often they will not publish or even speak about until asked.

A soothing factor for PIs who are apprehensive about contacting POs is that most welcome inquiries. Nine out of 10 POs are very receptive to contact and eager to give constructive help, experts say. Many federal granting agencies — particularly the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and National Science Foundation (NSF) — have developed a "customer service" culture among their POs.

In addition, if you're unsure which PO to contact, start with the most obvious choice based upon the Institute or Center likely to support your proposal. If this turns out to be the wrong PO, she most likely will be able to direct you to the right person.

But there are other reasons POs are open to discussions with researchers, including:

- They are typically former academics and researchers and talking with PIs allows them to keep up with new directions in the research field;
- Communicating with PIs allows POs to deflect weak proposals or redirect inappropriate ones to another granting office that's more suitable for the particular project;
- They can encourage and coach good research ideas to assist with proposal success; and
- POs are sometimes scouting for new grant reviewers, which they often find from the pool of researchers applying for grant funding.

Benefit From Insights on Program Track, Project Structure

Contacting POs before writing a proposal can also give your PIs the inside scoop on issues surrounding the program track, collaborations, project structure and budget. In fact, the officer's response to your project's core theme is the best predictor of its success.

During a discussion with a researcher, the PO may offer recommendations on the program track. For instance, the NSF has two new program tracks that younger PIs find attractive — the Early Concept Grants for Exploratory

Research (EAGER) and Rapid Response Research (RAPID) tracks. If the officer happens to invite the investigator to apply for such a program track, the PI will face much greater success rates — sometimes around 75 percent — and easier proposal writing because the required project description is much shorter.

Another key piece of information that you can get from a conversation with POs is what kind of budget you should include in your proposals. Often, the solicitation advertises a much larger budget ceiling than the average awards the agency makes.

Program officers can advise you on potential collaborations and the project's structure, with the aim to make the proposal more attractive to reviewers. These "suggestions" are really "buying signals" that you should take as "instructions."

Example: During the conversation, the PO asks, "Have you considered adding a statistician to your research group?" This is a buying signal, meaning that the PO is interested in the proposed project but wants to suggest changes to give the proposal a better chance of success.

Contacting POs can also give you insight into whether you have chosen the right program office for your specific project. Because the solicitation and agency website don't contact what the PO really wants, you must speak with the official to get this key feedback. If the project doesn't fit with the particular program's objectives, the PO will readily direct you to the right office. ■

Chapter II:
Follow a 6-Step Process

You can open up a beneficial dialogue with POs using a six-step process:

1. Find the best "fit."
2. Write a pre-abstract or "elevator speech."
3. Start with email.
4. Study the response.
5. Make the call.
6. Ask for a face-to-face meeting (if practical).

1. Search for the 'Right Desk'

First, you should do as much research as possible to find the right program for your specific project. This step will help to ensure that your proposal ends up on the right desk.

Ultimately, you should select two or three grant programs that fit your project idea:

- Use searchable grant funding databases like grants.gov and Community of Science (COS, www.cos.com)
- Study the agency websites to understand program objectives
- Review the program mission statement and announcement carefully
- Search recent program awards and read the abstracts
- Look up contacts in the staff directories.

The more you know about the program's mission and the agency's objectives, as well as what kinds of projects are already funded and how your research fits with all of these elements, the better your chances of success.

In some cases, you don't have to search hard to find the right contact person. For example, the NSF puts a hot link to the PO's email right below the grant program's title. At other agencies, the contact person's email and phone number are included in the RFP or program solicitation.

2. Create a 'Pre-Abstract'

A pre-abstract is a way of introducing your research project's basic nature. If you think of the pre-abstract as an "elevator speech," you may have an easier time keeping it brief and informative.

The pre-abstract will help you relax and focus on communicating the project's general idea. This should include:

- The proposal's goals, methods and outcomes
- Why the project is unique and how it will contribute to the field
- Concise and informal language
- No more than three paragraphs.

At the end of the pre-abstract, you should include a basic question: "Is this concept a suitable match for what your program wants to fund?"

In addition, rehearse and rewrite the pre-abstract so it's fine-tuned and easy to read. You should also practice speaking the pre-abstract aloud to become comfortable talking about your project.

3. Email the Inquiries

You can use this pre-abstract in the introductory email, which is the best and easiest way to initiate communication with POs. Keep the email brief — again, no more than two or three paragraphs — and conclude it with the question.

Strategy: Another key element to include in the email, if possible, is the language used in the program announcement or other materials. If the agency uses specific phrases or terminology to describe the goals and objectives, you should borrow this language for the email's text. Doing so will further illustrate that your project is a potential fit for the program.

If there are several POs listed as contacts for that program, you should send the email to each of them. They will typically see that you sent the email to several people and decide who should respond.

Although you can send the email to multiple POs for the same proposal, avoid sending out simultaneous messages to POs in study sections or review groups. Choose the best-fitting program for your project and start there. Deal with one at a time until you find the most appropriate for your idea.

Be prepared: Although you will usually see a response to your email within a few days, sometimes the PO will contact the investigator by phone right away. Make sure you are prepared for a phone call with key questions that you want to ask the PO and an easy, relaxed approach to talking with the agency representative.

4. Read Between the Lines to Study the Response

When you receive the PO's email, you should study it carefully for specific items, such as:

- **The tone** — Read the email several times to notice the tone, as well as any nuances or subtleties. Does the PO sound encouraging, discouraging or blasé about the submission topic?
- **Suggestions** — Look for any suggestions (which are actually instructions) in the PO's email. Take any such communication about the project's research design or structure as encouragement.
- **Buying signals** — Notice any "buying signals," such as the PO requesting more information. For example, a strong buying signal would be if he asks for a one- or two-page white paper on the research topic.

Although buying signals and other types of encouragement are the best possible results from sending an email to POs, another good result is a recommendation for a completely different program. This may seem like a form of rejection, but in fact it's excellent direction. Following the recommendation is a great way to get the proposal on the right desk.

Next step: If the PO's response offers any encouragement, you should plan to make a follow-up phone call.

5. Make the Call Successful

After receiving the PO's encouraging email, you should prepare for the phone call. Anticipation and anxiety may become intense during this time, but you can calm your nerves by writing out the questions you want to ask.

Some common questions are:

- Does my project fit your current objectives and priorities?
- What is the anticipated success ratio?
- Do you expect the average award amount to change this year from last year?
- What would you recommend to improve my funding chances?
- What are some of the common reasons proposals are rejected in your program?

When you make the call, open the conversation by reminding the PO of your project and the exchanged emails. In some cases, a quickly running through the pre-abstract might be necessary to jog the POs memory.

You then ask the key questions you wrote down in advance. Then, listen carefully for buying signals and encouragement. Just like in the email response, your PI should take all suggestions from the PO as instructions.

Also, you might mention that you're interested in serving on a review panel. POs are often looking for new people to join review panels, and getting onto a panel at some agencies is that easy.

6. Leave a Memorable Impression

After the phone call, follow-up with a thank you note, which is more than merely good professional courtesy. The thank you note should also contain four or five brief bullet points summarizing what you heard the PO say during the conversation. This will show him that you were listening carefully, and it also gives the PO an opportunity to expand upon or correct any information from the conversation.

If the traveling distance is practical, you might request a face-to-face meeting with the PO. Even if you can't get an in-person meeting, the two-way dialogue — through the emails and phone call — will ensure that the PO attaches a voice (if not a face) to your proposal, once it hits his desk. ■

Appendix:
Contacting Program Officers — FAQs

Are POs really open to communicating with a PI before she writes and submits the proposal?

In most cases, yes. POs have a vested interest in communicating with investigators because they want to encourage the good ideas and weed out the bad or inappropriate ones. Discouraging proposals that aren't likely to get funded is in the PO's interest.

Also, many program officers enjoy pre-proposal communications with researchers because they can keep abreast of new ideas and emerging research in the field.

The POs I've contacted in the past will never return my emails or phone calls. How do I get through?

If the PO isn't responding to your calls or emails, go to the staff directory and find another contact person. You can simply talk with another PO who is able to help you.

If there's only one PO who is appropriate to answer your questions and that individual isn't responding, you'll need to "go upstairs." Find out who he reports to. Then send your inquiry to that person and copy the PO, and you should get a response. The program officer doesn't want his boss to know that he isn't responding to emails or answering phone calls.

Can I contact POs in the same way for foundation grants rather than those from the government?

Approaching foundations is very different from federal agencies. You can follow this process for contacting people prior to applying for foundation grants:

1. Contact your university's foundation or development office to ask whether your institution has any contacts or pending projects with the foundation.
2. If your university does have a pending project with the foundation, you may need to make your inquiry through that contact person. But if not, you can proceed.
3. Go to the foundation website, and look up the specific instructions on the first contact.
4. Notice whether the website tells you to send an email or a letter by post.

Pay close attention to the foundation's instructions for sending an inquiry outlined on its website. In some cases, they will give you a detailed outline of how to frame the written inquiry. In others, the website will instruct you to send a one-page or three-paragraph inquiry. Follow these specific instructions for your initial contact.

How do program priorities affect funding for new investigators?

Usually, new investigators will experience variations in funding depending upon the program track, the PI's seniority and the investigator's prior track record for funding.

For example, the NIH R01 track is very difficult for junior investigators to obtain funding because nearly all such awards go to senior faculty members with past smaller exploratory grants from the agency. R03s, however, are targeted for young investigators. ■